

Preambles

OF HOW WE WROTE A LETTER, WHICH,
UNUSUAL THOUGH IT MAY HAVE BEEN,
DESERVED A REPLY, WHICH IT DID NOT
RECEIVE, AND HOW IN LIGHT OF THIS, THE
MEMBERS OF THE EXPEDITION DECIDED TO
IGNORE SUCH UNSPEAKABLE BEHAVIOUR AND
BRING TO A SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION WHAT
WAS DESCRIBED THEREIN IN THE MOST
GALLANT AND DETAILED MANNER

Paris, 9 May, 1982

*Monsieur le Directeur
Public Highways Authority
41 bis, Avenue Bosquet
75007 Paris*

*Monsieur,
Some time ago, your organization requested authorization to publish some passages
from my story "The Southern Thruway" in one of your magazines. I, of course,
granted said authorization with great pleasure.*

*I am now writing to request in turn authorization of a quite different sort.
My wife, Carol Dunlop – who is also a writer – and I are studying the possibility
of a slightly madcap and quite surreal "expedition," which would consist of travel-
ling from Paris to Marseille on the autoroute aboard our Volkswagen Combi Van,*

equipped with everything necessary, stopping at each of the sixty-five rest areas at the rate of two per day; in other words, taking more than a month to complete the Paris–Marseille journey without ever leaving the freeway.

Apart from the small adventure involved, we intend to write a book in parallel with the trip that will describe in a literary, poetic and humorous way the varied phases, events and experiences such a strange journey will no doubt provide. The book might perhaps be called Paris to Marseille in Small Stages, and obviously the autoroute will be its main protagonist.

Such is our plan, which will be carried out with the support of some friends who will be entrusted with replenishing our supplies every ten days (apart from what we can find at the rest stops). The only problem is that, as far as we know, a vehicle is not allowed to stay on the autoroute for more than two days at a time, and for that reason we are writing to you to request the authorization that, when the time comes, would keep us from encountering difficulties at the various tollbooths.

If you think our idea of writing a book on the subject will not be disagreeable to your Authority, and there is no objection to authorizing us to “live” on the autoroute for a month, moving at the rate of two rest stops per day, I would be grateful to receive your reply as soon as possible, since we would like to depart around the 23rd of this month. It should be understood that under no circumstances do we wish our project to be made known to the media since we would not like to see our expeditionary solitude disturbed. When the time comes, our book will endeavour to tell the story to the public in general.

We thank you in advance for your good will with respect to this project, and I beg you to accept, dear sir, my sincere best wishes, as well as those of my wife.

Julio Cortázar

This letter was sent on May 9th, 1982. On the 23rd, after fruitlessly opening our mailbox one last time, we understood that two weeks had been more than enough time for a commercial organization, no matter how plagued with computers and cantankerous secretaries, to respond to our modest request. Looking one another in the eye, we energetically shook hands and said in unison:

“Co-expeditionary, tomorrow at four o’clock in the afternoon we set course for our destination!”

By which we meant that, leaving from Rue Martel, we’d take Rue Petites-Écuries towards République, from there to Austerlitz (good omen!) and after crossing the distance to the Porte d’Italie we would pull out, with characteristic determination, onto the Autoroute du Sud and make our first bivouac at Corbeil.

All of which happened with a precision that surprised even us, since we’re both specialists in taking wrong turns and wouldn’t have been too surprised to find ourselves on the Autoroute de l’Est or at Place des Victoires. But once heading in the right direction, who could have stopped us? Nobody. Now we could take out the first sandwich and tell each other that we were on our own, incredibly alone, on the first leg of an adventure the reader cannot even begin to imagine, just like us at that moment.



Corollary extracted from The Book of Marvels by Marco Polo, which will show the reader that in other times, explorers not only received replies to the letters they sent, but also that they were afforded the sort of treatment that our lamentably pallid and paltry times are no longer able to supply.

And when the Great Khan had charged the two brothers and the baron of the embassy with the commission he was sending to the Pope, he caused to be given them a golden tablet, engraved with the royal seal and signed in the custom of his State, in virtue of which, instead of a passport, the three bearers were emissaries of the Great Khan, entitled to be everywhere conveyed in safety through dangerous places, by the governors of provinces and cities, on pain of disgrace, throughout the whole empire, having their expenses everywhere defrayed, and should be furnished with whatever was needful for them and their attendants in all places, and for as long as they might have occasion to stay, just as if it were He himself who happened to pass that way.

A QUOTE THE EXPLORERS TAKE
FOR GOOD ADVICE WHEN THE TIME COMES
TO BEGIN THEIR TRAVEL LOG

Pierre, our Alpine guide,
who has recovered from his terrible nausea
and has gone back to writing
his memoirs, comes to ask me
to lend him “that which pushes the words
away.” It takes me a while to
realize that he’s talking about
an eraser.

Jean Charcot, *Around the South Pole*

WHERE THE PATIENT READER
SHALL BE INTRODUCED
TO THE PROTAGONISTS OF THE EXPEDITION,
AND COME TO KNOW THEIR MORE NOTABLE
CHARACTERISTICS AND FEATURES

1

The authors tend to speak among themselves or refer to each other throughout the account of this journey. Naturally they call each other by their first names but also, even more naturally, they frequently resort to their most private names, which they now confide to the reader since they consider it only fair to confide all that has to do with the expedition and the personal lives that sustain it. So it won't be long before references to la Osita, the Little Bear, and el Lobo, the Wolf, begin to appear, and in the case of the latter there is even a fragment of a *Pocket Guide to Lobos* that la Osita was preparing for her own pleasure but also so that el Lobo could be less silly than was his custom and find out a few things that only Little Bears truly know.

Our vehicle Fafner is frequently called the Dragon. Within these pages we will divulge details of his earthly nature, but here it's as well to say that our trio uses its wilderness names not only for reasons of affection and intimacy, but also because during the course of the expedition they identified increasingly with the woods, fields and animals of the freeway's most secret world. It was our fairy-tale side, our innocent ecology, our happiness in full technological clamour, which lovingly obliterated us.

2

*This brief but necessary chapter
is an auto-citation (particularly appropriate word
given the theme) extracted from
a text written years ago and entitled
“Correcting Proofs in Haute Provence”.*

And so, every once in a while I stop working and roam the streets, go into a bar, watch what’s happening in the city, talk to the old man who sells me sausages for lunch because the dragon – it’s about time I introduce him – is a kind of mobile home or snail shell on wheels that my obstinate Wagnerian predilections have designated the dragon, a red Volkswagen van containing a water tank, a seat that folds out into a bed, and to which I’ve added a radio, typewriter, books, red wine, tins of soup and paper cups, a bathing suit should the opportunity arise, a butane lamp and a camping stove thanks to which a can of something turns into lunch or dinner while we listen to Vivaldi or write these pages.

The dragon thing comes from a long-standing need: I’ve almost never accepted the names or labels things arrive with and I think that’s reflected in my books, I don’t see why we should invariably tolerate what comes before and from outside, and so I’ve given creatures I loved or love names that stem from an encounter, a contact between secret codes, and women became flowers, birds, little animals of the forest, and there are even friends whose names changed after a cycle was complete, the bear could turn into a monkey, like someone with blue eyes was a cloud and then a gazelle and one night turned into a mandrake, but to return to the dragon I’ll just say that two years ago as I saw him arriving for the first time, coming up the Rue Cambronne in Paris, fresh from the factory, with his wide red face, low-set sparkling eyes, and a likeable, unruly air, something in me went click and he became the dragon, and not just any old dragon but Fafner, guardian of the treasure of the Niebelungen, who according to legend and Wagner

had been evil and stupid, but always aroused a sneaking sympathy in me, if only for being doomed to die at the hand of Siegfried, as I can never forgive heroes for doing that kind of thing, just as thirty years ago I couldn't forgive Theseus for having killed the Minotaur. I have only just now made the connection between these two things; that afternoon I was too busy worrying about the problems the dragon was going to give me in terms of gearshift, height and width far greater than that of my former Renault, but it seems obvious I followed the same instinct to defend those the established order regards as monsters and exterminates as soon as it can. In two or three hours I made friends with the dragon. I told him that as far as I was concerned his name was no longer Volkswagen, and poetry was right on time as usual because when I went to the garage to have his number plate fastened on as well as the initial of the country where I live, all I needed was to see the mechanic screwing a large F on his backside to have my hunch confirmed; of course you can't tell a French mechanic that this letter didn't stand for France but for Fafner, but the dragon knew it and on our way home he demonstrated his delight by jumping up on the sidewalk to the particular fright of a housewife laden with groceries.

3

*Where it shall be seen that The Last but Not Least did not
participate personally in the expedition, but his
priceless contribution confirms, if it were still
necessary, that our trip, rich in wonders,
was also outside of both time and space.*

As soon as our steadfast epic was over – which still hasn't started for the reader whose patience we humbly implore – Fafner had a well-earned rest while la Osita and I left for Nicaragua where we would meet up with Carol's son, who lives in Montreal with his father. Fourteen years old, brimming with joy and his vocation for rock drumming, Stéphane Hébert's adolescent

grace added to our happiness during a tropical vacation with our expedition still lingering in our memory like a slightly nostalgic echo.

Stéphane thus discovered our drafts and negatives and contact sheets of the photos from the trip. Carol, familiar with his great talent for drawing, proposed that he become our *ex post facto* cartographer. Stéphane might not have understood the Latin phrase but he immediately took out his pencils and his sketch pad, and got down to imagining each and every one of the rest stops from our texts, explanations, anecdotes and photographs.

The explorers, whose stringency in the matter the reader can easily imagine, marveled at the scientific rigor this teenager brought to his work, and decided to incorporate his relief maps into the general documentation of the voyage. And so, although absent at the time, Stéphane Hébert is as much a presence here as Fafner or ourselves.