

So, Where Are You From?

I don't like to sit next to anyone on airplanes, and I especially don't like to chat while I am airborne. It's partly fear of flying, perhaps a touch of xenophobia, and mostly just craving the solitude I rarely get at home. All I really want, after I stash my carry-on, is to slap on a headset, savor my reading, or get into a deep meditative state. Then comes the beseeching words from the passenger beside me, "So, where are you from?"

The long answer flashes before me, in the fast forward images of one who is drowning. I have lived in New York City most of my adult life, but feel like a New Yorker through cultural piracy only. For me, being a New Yorker is sort of like when I identified myself as a hippie: a lot more fun in the trappings than the alternate choices.

The truth is I was born in Appalachia, reared in a one-room shack near the temperamental Lickin' River in Salyersville, Kentucky. It's the kind of place you see in a documentary made by one of the Kennedy kids, or a movie like *Coal Miner's Daughter*, and you think, "That's so sad." (And uplifting—as long as it isn't you.) In Kentucky, I didn't go to kindergarten, ran around barefoot, and stepped on more than one rusty nail. I was bathed in an anodized aluminum tub, and expected, each morning, to truck the slop bucket *over yonder* to the outhouse. There, I sneaked "smokes" with my cousin William and speculated about where babies come from, after hearing yet another newborn's cry (not a peep from Mama) in the shack. Most folks in Salyersville just wanted to get out, and my family did, in 1951, when I was six years old. All the kids, and what meager

belongings Mama had, were piled onto a battered old truck, migrant worker style, and supplanted to Bound Brook, New Jersey, where people had indoor flush toilets, real bathtubs and living structures with more than one room.

Bound Brook, New Jersey is the kind of town that always has a disabled Veteran hunched near the train tracks and one of those tattered MIA flags flapping above the station. It's the kind of place you visit after 20 years and everybody looks like someone you used to know, but then not really. Such a town will just ordinary itself into oblivion unless it becomes the focus of some natural disaster, or a most unnatural human one. Several times Bound Brook took a dousing from a notorious flood or hurricane, and was launched into national prominence: *a disaster, a disaster area*. Any attention paid the town then receded as quickly as the waters, until someone like my classmate Patrick Miranda attempted to hijack a plane from Newark to Poughkeepsie. There, in the crime report, you could spot the notation: *a resident of Bound Brook, New Jersey*.

Bound Brook is 50 miles from New York City, but for the majority of its residents that could well be 500 miles. It's a true *blue collar* town, one that had a great football team in the days when the "down and out" immigrants there were tagged *Micks* or *Pollacks* or *Guineas*. Now that those ethnic groups have been elevated, or decimated, it's the so-called *Spics* (mostly Dominicans and Mexicans) that dominate the welfare rolls in Bound Brook. So, American football languishes in ennui, while soccer rules. There are folks in Bound Brook who never got over the passing of football.

A town like Bound Brook is neither rich enough for self-pampering nor poor enough to be coddled by the government. There are no documentaries about such a town and the Kennedy's don't visit, but, after a while, because no one ever imagines (or bankrolls) change, the town attains a kind of quaintness, verging on character.

I left for college right after high school and never called Bound Brook, New Jersey, or Salyersville, Kentucky, my hometown again. I tried living in a couple of disenchanting places in north Jersey before *crashing* (in the vernacular of the day) in Berkeley, California. During the sixties, just *being there* was a political statement. When the *scene* in Berkeley started to get over-the-top drug-ugly, I finessed my escape by joining the Peace Corps and venturing to Thailand, a place that truly captivated my imagination and temporarily sated my wanderlust. Thailand afforded a teeming city, a dense jungle, and food that was as fiery as the weather. Had I not missed regular contact with my family and friends, I might still be soothing my tropical soul in Bangkok. Instead I traveled round the world for a while before settling in the West Village in New York City, almost by default.

There is definitely a massive energy vortex in New York City. It is also a global transportation hub, thereby assuring that everyone you ever knew will likely pass through. To establish yourself in Manhattan, as every old-timer will tell you, you need to *luck into* a decent apartment in a good locale, and just not move, ever. Fortunately, the City is ideal for many older people, because you don't need a car, there is a plethora of social and cultural events (many free), and almost anything can be delivered to your door.

Numerous friends who “flipped” their apartments 20 years ago are now deploying their retirement packages to return. I was not born or raised in New York City, but I am, obviously, a loyal resident.

My dilemma: how do you explain Salyersville, Kentucky in your blood, Bound Brook, New Jersey in your bones, Berkeley, California in your conscience, Bangkok, Thailand in your soul, and New York’s Greenwich Village in your heart?

Assuming a rather dazed and distracted expression, I shift toward the inquirer in the seat beside me on the plane, and respond, hopefully, definitively, “I’m from right here in New York.”

First Prize Essay Award for "So, Where Are You From?" in [New England Writers' Network](#), Vol. 11, No. 1(Spring 2004).