

# Ta-Ta, RaChaCha!!

## Fock 2: The Upstate Tour

So, where was I? Oh, yes, Blue Man and I headed east to Sacramento (have I mentioned that already), aiming for Massachusetts along the wonderful New York State Thruway.

Though this opening day of Roadrage2000 was not to be one of them, there had been a couple of instances when there was ample time for branching off the Thruway and exploring. Route 8 was great for that. Getting off the Thruway and opting for small and intimate Route 8 was such a release from the mundane highway. The road was freshly-paved, one lane each way, rolling and winding through serene farm country, and EMPTY!! The first time I met ol' number 8, I was on it for 100 miles and saw fewer than a dozen cars. At one point, I pulled over on the roadside, and walked down the bank to take a late afternoon bath in this cold clear stream. I lounged unclothed in the rushing water, resting comfortably on the worn-smooth rocks, sipping a beer or two, and not a car went by for a half-hour. Damn, I love shit like that!!! Can you tell????

Lea took a few days of her vacation one July and flew up to Rochester. Our plan was to do a little vanning, and take Blue Man on a little tour of the **official** Upstate Region. All kinds of highlights were on the Tour Planner: Niagara Falls ("slowly I turned..."), Lake George, Lake Placid, Adirondack State Park, Lake Champlain, and Burlington Vermont (yeah, I *know* it's not in NY).

I picked her up at R.I.A. -- Rochester *International* Airport (yes, they get flights all the way from *Canada*) -- early on Sunday afternoon, and brought her on a short tour of campus and my apartment.

Lea is a wonderfully garrulous woman. Some people are very talkative and they drive you up the damn wall. Lea will talk up a blue streak, but I just find myself wanting her to keep going. We used to joke about that sometimes in our bartending days, when she and I would stick around after work, and have a few tall Harpoon IPA's while we waited for the manager on duty to finish pulling his hair out upstairs over all the idiotic shit that the Uno's staff had messed up that night. The bar closed at the absurdly early hour of 11:30, but it was not unusual for Lea and I to still be sitting there at 3 a.m. She loved to talk, I loved to listen, and we both loved to drink. It was a mighty fine arrangement. I did my share of talking too, but we all always seemed to give Lea a little bit of shit for being verbal.

After we got the lay of the land of my little corner of Rochester, we cruised westward for the hour-and-a-half journey to Niagara Falls ("...step by step..."). It was a gorgeous, sunny, and fairly hot summer day, and we set off to wander into another country.

The pedestrian bridge into Canada was a toll bridge! They wanted money to let us *walk* into their country. And they wanted it in Canadian currency. That was a bargain, actually, reducing our net tollage to about \$0.32 each. Trouble was, we didn't have any Canadian currency.

There was a sign that said, "Ring bell for assistance," so we figured that making change must be part of their role. We pushed the button, but heard no bell. Maybe they were up for the Nobel Prize. HAHAHAAAA!

We knocked on the window a couple of times and a Canadian codger came out, looking quite bemused. He seemed irked that we had the temerity to summon him for assistance. Once he understood that the bell was not functioning, he softened his demeanor a bit, and got us our coinage. BUT, the clever coot gave us 4 U.S. quarters for our U.S. dollar, so we had to insert the more valuable coins into the machine. We got cheated after all. Damn Canadians.

Nobel Prize. Hahahahahahahahahahaha. Ahh, I crack myself up sometimes.

Once in the foreign land, we took a good long time strolling lazily through the rising mist of waterfall spray, taking many photos and doing some quality people-watching. Lea thought there were



"too many Indians" there; I guess I'm just more turban-tolerant. We posed for pictures under brilliant rainbows that curled up through the tiny cool refreshing droplets -- and agreed that the U.S. got the shit end of the stick when it came to Niagara Falls ("...inch by inch...").

We watched the tiny people down below filing on and off boats and walkways in their bright (and cheap) blue or yellow raincoats, and stared at the millions of gallons of water that just kept pouring and pouring over the cliffs. I mean, Niagara Falls is huge! It's 174 feet high, and it's *twenty times* as wide!

Where the hell does all that water come from, anyway? I mean, it can't be all rain runoff, can it? It just keeps roaring by 24/7/365 (or 366 on Lea's Year -- she was born on 2/29). What is the source of it all? How come it doesn't run out? Here we were, in the middle of one of the worst droughts to hit the northeast in decades, and there was all this water just tumbling on by. Do they catch it once it gets around the river bend, and pump it back up to the top so it can run down again? Or is it really all new water? Amazing shit, this waterfall thing.



Am I the only one who ever bothers to get impressed or baffled by this stuff? Every time I mention something like that, I get a perfunctory answer, a shrug-n-grunt, or a deprecatory gesture. Once in a while, someone will venture a reply like "rain runoff", to which I reason, "But it hasn't rained in 40 days! Besides there are no mountains anywhere near here for it to have run off *from!*" They just wave me off like *I'm* the ignorant one. Well, *screw you, Two-Sheds!*

Well, I've come to find out that Niagara Falls serves as the drain for the Great Lakes. If you toss a little toy sailboat in the water at the western tip of Lake Superior, it just may end up plummeting over NF and smashing to tiny bits on the rocks below. Twenty percent – that's *one-fifth* – of all the fresh water on the planet goes through Niagara Falls. And with such force that the Falls have receded about one-third of a mile in the three centuries since European explorers first discovered it.

Oh...ahh...anyway...

Lea and I watched the Maid Of The Mist (that's the boat, duh) chug along amidst (get it? "a mist"? ) the swirling spray. Apparently thinking that my mind was someplace other than where it was (I was probably wondering where all the *damn water was coming from*), Lea asked if I wanted to go on the boat. It wasn't like she was saying, "I wanna go on the boat"; it was more like, "we can go on it, if *you* want to..." Well, I really didn't want to. The view I was getting of the Falls was just fine and dandy. Besides...there was...something else...beginning...to gnaw...at...me.

She must have sensed the same thing, because we turned at the same moment and looked across the street. There, beckoning, was a second-floor awning over a large, open-air porch, and emblazoned on the flap of the awning were the words: **The Beer Garden**.

I looked at Lea, with the familiar gleam in my eye, and she quickly finished her sentence, "...or we can go get a beer!"

So we adjourned to the patio, sat contentedly among the flitting sparrows – at least I did, Lea was spooked by some Sicilian voodoo thing about birds – watched the Falls, and quaffed \$31 worth of beer. That was \$31 Canadian: only \$22.50 in U.S. currency. Of course, *that* total was cleverly printed in much smaller numbers underneath. Clearly, they were hoping to take advantage of us foreigners, hoping we would be boggled by the conversion, or baffled by the buzz. It almost worked too. Probably fooled the Indians.

As sunset neared, we aimed back for Rochester, and saw a very odd phenomenon. It's a little hard to describe, so you gotta focus for a minute.

HEY! I said Focus! FO-CUS.

OK.

For about three miles, over every decent-sized vertical object – tree, telephone pole, streetlight – was a vaguely dark, swirling cloud, each one about 10-12 feet tall, about 1-2 feet wide in the middle, and roughly the same shape as a tall candle flame. It looked like smoke, but it wasn't going anywhere, nor was it actually rising from the object. It was just hovering above each tall roadside thing we could see.

After a few good looks, we discerned that these were all insects – gnats, skeeters and such -- hundreds, maybe thousands of them swirling and spiraling madly in each plume. As we looked ahead down the roadside, we could see them on and on to the horizon, but only directly above tall objects, and they lasted for a good three miles. It was **weird**. Even I thought it was weird, that's how weird it was. And you know how weird I am.

Have any of you ever seen that?

Weird.

Then there was Lake George, a roller coaster of a trip if there ever was one, in more ways than one.



Lea and her sloop (left), and PPG Place in Pittsburgh (not appearing in this Bling)

Rain, and an extra long track coaches meeting that I was forced to attend, dampened and delayed our first full day of vacationeering, so we didn't get off the Thruway and onto soothing and rural Route 8 until very late afternoon. We stumbled across Clifford's (Jim?), a closed tavern in the town of Ohio, and Gaby's a very nice bar/lodge type place in Warrensburg. Gaby's had pleasant staff, good beer, all dark work décor, and a huge fireplace in the center of the room. It would be a great place to ride out a blizzard. It crossed my mind that if I were to see such a storm forecast, then I could race it to

Warrensburg and get snowed in. I could've hunkered down for a deep and comfy buzz there, but we were after bigger game, so we remounted the Blue Dog and continued on to Lake George.

Clifford's Tavern was closed ☹, but the Gorge was, dare I say it, gorgeous. 😊



The night began casually enough. We ate, and adjourned to a quiet outdoor patio-style bar that overlooked the lake. We were the only customers there. A lone acoustic guitarist plinked away at some depressingly mellow tunes. I could feel momentum slogging to a halt in the mire of melancholy.

So we mentioned to Susan, our waitress – oops, I mean, *server* – that things seemed kind of dead, even for a Monday night. She ruefully replied that most of her co-workers were going to catch the Blues Cruise from Pier 11 (?) at 10:00, and that *she* had been hoping to be able to go too.

As former bar-rags ourselves, we knew immediately what was being unsaid: *if you two would fucking leave, then I could go on the damn cruise!* It sounded like a whole lot more fun than this place anyway, so we obediently knocked off our remaining suds and sallied forth.

We made a brief side stop at a cool head-shop type of place, and Lea bought a purple navel ring for herself, and a new chilly for me. 😊

When we got to Pier 11 (?) and the boat named *Horicon*, there were several people in line ahead of us, and they blocked the marker board on which the night's pertinent info had been scrawled. When the little drama of the “no I.D.” girl finished playing out in front of us and we got a clear view of the board, I was stopped dead in my tracks. There, albeit in bad handwriting, the board announced: “Tonight: Crissy Critters”.

Well, may sunshine warm thy testicles! This was the very band that carried my party-dood soul to new heights and had me dancin' like a kangaroo on fire in my 1993-94 Winter in Paradise (i.e., Key West). Needless to say, my zeal jumped another cuppla notches. We procured our tickets and hurried off to the boat.

Then things got ugly for a little while.

OK, we're getting onto the boat, a pretty mundane process, one would think, but not for this ill-fated couple. We passed by three or four crew members, offering them our tickets, but they just pointed us up this steel-plated ramp to the boat's entrance. Eagerly, we approached the top platform and presented our tickets to the crewman there, and went to board the vessel.

Gentleman that I am, I let Lea go first. She handed her ticket to the crewman, and stepped left to board. I looked straight ahead at the crewman, presented my ticket, looked to my left, and ... **no Lea!**

Turns out there was an 18-inch gap between this steel-plate platform and the actual deck of the *Horicon*. And since the crewman was **right next to it**, and there were no written **or spoken** warnings whatsoever, when Lea took the natural step to the left, there was nothing but twelve feet of air, and then lots of cold, dark lake water beneath her foot.

Her leg, devoid of support, plummeted toward that cold, dark lake water, hell-bent for a few bangs and bruises, as she began to fall into what would have been one very uncomfortable – and decidedly unsatisfying – split.

Fortunately, as she plunged toward the cold, dark lake water, the First Mate somehow caught her under the arms, and saved her from a battered and wet fate. (It would be nice to claim that I was the hero of the piece, but my lesser heroics come later.)

Amazingly, Lea escaped physically unscathed, though she was a tad rattled, as you can imagine. Which brings up an interesting point. *Warning: digression imminent.*

Have you ever heard of anyone ever being “scathed”? I sure as hell haven’t, and I listen for that kind of thing. George Carlin talked about “chalance” and “near-fetched”, but what about “scathed”?? *Damn, the Patriots got scathed by that interception, eh, Gil? Or: The Hawks scathed the Preppies for the CCCC title.* Let’s **use** this word. Your fender didn’t get scraped, it was scathed. You didn’t get a papercut, your finger got scathed. That pizza didn’t burn the roof of your mouth, it scathed your palate.

“Scathe” should be THE word of the new millenium! Along with *twaddle*.

So, uh, yes. Lea’s falling to a soggy death into Davey Jones’ Locker, and Mr. First Mate Hero Dood (FMHD) snags her in mid-air. Lea, nurse instincts zapped into overdrive by adrenalin, discerned in a jiffy (uh-huh) that she was not damaged, and just as quickly established Priority Response: as FMHD lifted her from what she perceived to be Sure Embarrassment, she instantly began to insist that she was OK, and bellowed to me, “Diicccckkk, get my shoosoooooe!”

Seeing that FMHD had her safe, and noting that the long, shapely, silky left leg as it was pulled from the abyss was – everybody say it – **unscathed**, I figgered, “shoe??” It took about two seconds (which is roughly my personal record for downing a pint of beer) to locate it on the deck right below the boarding platform – it too escaped a watery grave – and join Lea safely on the boat.

FMHD was making a big show of the rescue – though his concern was sincere – but Lea just wanted to be left alone. A good number of you have already had the word LAWSUIT pass through your minds. Maybe my evaluation of it all was that we really had nothing to sue for, unless Lea were to feign an infirmity. Maybe I’m just too much of a poet to think like a mercenary during my friend’s plight. Maybe I just wasn’t sharp enough to think of it at all.

BUT, I did know that it should be worth **something**.

As FMHD paused in his fussing, I asserted, “That should be worth a couple of free beers.” Probably relieved to be getting off so easily, FMHD immediately snapped his fingers in the bartender’s direction, and indicated, *these two, on me*, and soon left us. Must have had to go rescue the next passengers.

Well, as it turned out, the tumble did aggravate a lower back pain, and seemed to start another one in her neck, so Lea ended up spending most of the cruise sitting upright in a white plastic deckchair.

But, WTF, **I** wasn’t hurt. So, gallantly leaving Lea to suffer in solitude, I took to the dance floor: Crispy Critters were playing!

To be honest, only one of what I knew to be a Critter was on stage that night: James, the kickkickickickassingest saxophone player you’ll ever see at a bar. I only saw him with the Key West version of the Critters for one week, but he took that band to an even higher notch than I thought they had. Mikey, the lead guitarist, had been the soul of that band with his fiery jams (I had seen him playing acoustic solo in Lake George the previous summer, ironically in the same patio bar that Lea and I had started out at), but James set them ablaze with his gyrating licks.

In the five-year interim, James went techno, with very cool effect. His “electronic saxophone” looked like either a flute or a bong (depending on your lifestyle), played like a clarinet or sax would, but could sound like **anything**.

In one song early on, I was dancin’ away, with/near/around everybody, and James was squirming frenetically as usual – pumping small blasts of his soul into the mouthpiece like machine gun fire – and I paused for a good listen, because something seemed amiss. The song was *crankin’*, but there was no sax music. I eyed James, and, sure enough, his fingers were jumping like grasshoppers in an air popper, but there was no horn music of any kind to be heard. I now had to focus (uh-oh) to figure this one out.

Wait a tick! Where the hell is the bongo player? The drummer was pounding out his own part. WTF with the bongos? James’...fingers...match...the damn bongos! Yes!! Uncanny. Mystery solved, back to dancin’ an frolickin’.



James, with his electrosax, and with traditional instrument and the band.

Well, it kinda went like that for the two-hour tour around Lake George. Near the end, we both met this funky, multi-pierced dood named Mike. I met him first, but he moved in on Lea while I danced with/near a drunk chick who ended up falling flat on her butt on the wet floor. (So did some trendy woman in a tight black dress. Funnnyyy!)

When the boat docked, I found and chatted with the skipper about boarding safety, then rejoined Lea for a careful debloating.

Mike had invited us over to a nearby bar called Shepherd's Cove, because "my friend is bartending, and he'll give us free drinks." Yah, riiiiight, he will. Well, dammit, he did. Shots too, including, for moi, a "special shot (he's a party dood)" of Myers's Rum.

Mike's friends Scott and Joey (?) showed up and we all drank some more till the night hours became small morning hours.

As the bar neared closing time, Mike suggesting smoking "some pot". "OK", I replied with alacrity, and fetched Blue Dog forthwith for the five-block transport to his cottage. We parked on a hidden side street, at the bottom of a small embankment that was topped with some thick bushes. [Foreshadowing: bush and slope will be heard from again.] From there, we strolled to the white shoeboxy cottages at the end of a *cul-de-sac*.

Damn, I hate that term! WTF does it mean? *Cul-de-sac (noun): [French, literally, bottom of the bag (first appeared 1738)] 1. a blind diverticulum or pouch; 2. a street or passage closed at one end; 3. blind alley.*

Bottom of the bag?? All those years on Peacedale, I was living in the bottom of a bag?? C'mon, guys, we can do better. Let's call it a Plort or a Fleen or some other letter combo that isn't taken yet, and give this hyphenated Frenchy shit a rest.

So, *anywaaayyy*, -- stop interrupting! -- Lea and I are sitting on the bed, among Mike and five of his friends, and the bong comes out. Lea's chattin' up a storm, as usual, and has us all cracking up. She does not partake. But I sure do! I know that parking spot by the bush is Home For The Night, so I attack the bong with -- what else? -- alacrity. Result: I got stoned. Duh. In fact, make that double-duh., because I got very stoned.

Mike really deserves a bit more description. A friendly and outgoing, southern-kinda-talkin' guy, with normal length black hair, he is quick to inform you that, along with his many visible piercings, he has a "Prince Albert", which, I'm told, is a stud through his willy. (With no apologies to any Willy's out there. You can use "dick" in your own fucking book.) He is also a "club-boy" in Florida. Uh-huh, Mike will bat from either side of the plate. Quite a dancer, as he claimed: "I can do a 720, I can spin around three times." Ok, math boy.

So the buzz has been going on for quite awhile. The bong has done another lap or two, and then a pipe got passed to me. I didn't see anyone else smoke from it. Several more minutes of multi-level-stupid stoned conversation later, I began to feel quite light-headed, but excessive pot can do that to me.

I got up, sauntered out through the screen door and plopped into the porch swing to catch some air. It was as I sat there with my head tilted back that I noticed the lights...flashing in my head. Uh-ohhhhhh...I remember this feeling.

After another minute of paying attention, I had no doubts: somebody had slipped me a mickey. Whether it was in the "special shot", or the solo pipe hit, or something else, I have no idea, but I knew I would soon be triple-jumping across the asteroid belt.

I'm proud to say that my first thought was, "I gotta get Lea out of here" because I knew from long-forgotten experience that my ability to take control of a situation was about to be seriously compromised.

Lea was just emerging from a not-so-subtle hide in the bathroom, when I walked in, thanked all for the buzz, and announced that we were O.H. (Outa Here). There were "aw, c'mon" utterances, and a hug or two for Lea, but it was **time to go NOW!**

As the two of us walked down the *cul-de-fucking-sac* back to Blue Dog, I think I told Lea that something was amiss in buzzland. We crawled off into the Belly o' th' Whale for a little sleepy-time-time, but as soon as I lay flat back, my head tumbled into an impressive display of whirling and sliding, multi-colored, geometric grids. Stars shot through them, I seem to recall, and they began to twirl and intertwine faster. I think I might have moaned "wwwooowwww..."

But after a short time of this, the twirling shapes began to twirl my full stomach a little too much. Been there, I can handle it, I reasoned. Excusing myself as needing to purge the demons, I exited the van and fairly dove for the previously foreshadowed bush.

Bang, boom, off you go, and I was back in the van. For about two minutes, when I had to dash a second time. Then a third. By the fourth, I knew I was in for The Long Haul, and sprawled prone on the cool ground of the embankment. Physically, things were quite a struggle by now, my system stubbornly maintaining that there was more to purge when there just wasn't.

It didn't take long for Lea, good nurse that she is – you know you can party with reckless abandon when you have a nurse with you – to come to see if I was still alive. By now, I had managed to tell her what was going on, and reassure her that all would be well in the end, and that I "just had to ride out the storm".

Meanwhile, as my body convulsed and retched, my mind was having a GREAT time! Tornadoes, starbursts, and gyroscopes of a hundred different shapes and hues, some amorphous, others vivid, sprinted and pranced and preened across my brain. It went on and on and on. Had I not had a small experimental history with hallucinogens in my mid-70's college years, I would have been terrified that I had gone insane. Instead, I recognized it for what it was: one of the most intense trips I've ever had.

I "reasoned" that Lea was possibly concerned about her debilitated friend, so I tried to calm her fears with "statements" like, "I'm not as miserable as I look", which, I guess, came out like, "**Immit aa mibble azza uukk**".

Sounded fine to me. <shrug>

I should have gotten a fucking clue that my own vocal output must have been sub-par when everything Lea said sounded like, "**AaAaarrRRrr UuuUUuu JiiiiIite??**"

I remember lifting my head about an inch off the dirt and grass to utter, "Lea, I can't understand what you're saying." I'm sure it came out rather gibberish-ish though. But Lea's a trooper, she hung by me: "I wasn't worried as long as you were breathing," she would later say. Hmm.

Somewhere around four o'clock or so, I awoke from a brief doze, and with Lea's encouragement, made a move for the van. I dove into the Belly, and deep into sleep.

I awoke to bright sunshine at about nine o'clock, and, to my relief and delight, felt just fucking fine, thank you. No hangover, no stonerhead, no ill effects whatsoever. The trip had squeezed everything out of me. I was even a bit chipper, which was good because it made it a little easier to kind of apologize to Lea for the late-night activities "not going as planned".

So, Monday had begun with Lea purging her Sunday night demons in the bushes at UR – oh, didn't I mention that before? ;) -- and it ended with the RAM-tough mega-purge. Quite a day, quite a day.

Tuesday, as you would suspect, was a *much* mellower day. The whole rest of the trip was. We took it out hard, and paid the damn price.

Lake Placid was pretty boring, and too small, and too commercially congested. They even wanted to charge us something like \$5 just to take a *look* at the Olympic ski jump. From the ground level.

From a distance. Nope: *if you come beyond this gate, the fee is charged.* Ahh, that wonderful Olympic spirit lives on.

But Burlington (VT) was pretty nice. We had a nice outdoor lunch at a brewpub that had some cool Abe Lincoln philosophy. Their menu was fashioned like a small tabloid, printed on newspaper, and complete with little vignettes and boxes of interest, one of which bore the words: *Abraham Lincoln said about alcohol: "the injuries come not from use of a bad thing, but from the misuse of a good thing.* Well said, Abe.

Mr. Lincoln's quote is reminiscent of another pro-booze snippet from a colonial pundit, Mr. Benjamin Franklin. To wit: *Beer is God's way of saying he loves us and wants to see us happy.* Now, isn't it good to know that our founding fathers had their priorities so well in place?

And if you look at the label on any Samuel Adams beer bottle, you will see an image of Sam himself, hoisting a frothy pewter mug, and the concise text: *Samuel Adams. Brewer. Patriot.* No mention of politics, per se. And "brewer" is listed first. Again, a man with his duckies in order.

I'm beginning to feel just a tad parched. Hmm.

Anyway, Lea and I enjoyed an hour-long ferry cruise across Lake Champlain. Well, I enjoyed a good part of it by power-napping in Blue Man.

So days three, four, and five were very calm indeed. But, if you're gonna get mellow, the Upstate NY region is a good place to do it. Any stress you may have brought into the region with you, just seems to evaporate. Unspoiled Nature can do that to you.

It's the negative ions that trees give off, which slow the flow of the stress hormone cortisol in the body's hormonal pathways, according to some sports scientist who made a very over-our-heads lecture at a USATF Level II Coaching School. Allegedly, the release of these particles causes such a soothing physical reaction that NASA built a negative ion generator for all of their spacecraft to stroke the astronauts' brains.

Bullshit? Or not? You decide! But I do like the negative ions concept. And I always do feel mellow around leafy shady trees. I thought it was because they looked nice. <Shrug>

By the final day of our Upstate Tour, both Lea and I were very comfortable with prolonged silence as we rolled along the wavelike roads amid forested hills and glimmering lakes. Lea silent. For long stretches. Wow. I don't know who first coined the sentiment, but I find it true: *True friendship is found when silence between two people is comfortable.* We were definitely well into that zone. I love Lea. She's my li'l sis.