

# DUCKING THE APPLE

## Fock 2: Apple Yarns

So, anyhoo, south to Sacramento!

Blue Man got a good guzzle o' gas to launch Day Two, and I started my day, as always, with a cold can of Coke Classic. How healthy. Mmmm, caffeine. Where would America be without caffeine and nicotine to drug our minds?

Many a sluggish morn has been vitalized by that cold, bubbly, caramel-colored fluid infusing its legal uppers into my blood stream. I'm told that Coke will take the paint right off a car, but I still funnel it right down my gullet and into my cowering stomach each and every morn.

The route for Day Two was set. Not etched in stone, though; such routes should always remain subject to whim and fancy. Roadrage2000 would not be passing through New York City, thanks anyway. Occasional visits to the City That Never Sleeps have merit, but this trip was giving The Big Crapple a wide berth.

My very first visit to New York City was as a Boston College freshman, when Walter and I went down to visit my best friend Bobby at Columbia University. Bobby was one of the smartest people I've ever known, and whenever we hung out with him, we basically let him set the plan and we just followed along.

This sunny and cool October afternoon, we did some museum-hopping and sight-seeing, and were subwaying it back to campus. Even though he had only been at Columbia for about seven weeks, we trusted Bobby to know the lay of the land. His knowledge of subway routes seemed solid enough in our touring. I didn't even know uptown from downtown, so I simply nodded when Bobby pointed to the subway map and said, "We'll get off here and walk the few blocks to campus instead of going all the way downtown and back up." It clearly would be a time saver, and we were eager to get back to campus and get baked, so the plan was approved without discussion.

When we de-trained at 116th Street and Lenox Avenue, though, we should have gotten a clue that all was not peaches and cream. We had been rolling through tunnels for quite a while, and this underground platform was deserted except for one large black police officer. I'm no racist and never have been, and I only mention his skin color because it did foreshadow what was to come. As we walked by him toward the stairs, he spoke out firmly to us, "You boys know where you're going?" Walter and I could easily have answered, "Not a clue, sir," but Bobby concisely stated our short-cut-to-campus plan while barely slowing his stride. The officer pursed his lips, gave a little tilt to his head and replied, "ohhhh-kay." It struck me as a tad odd, but we just shrugged it off and followed Bobby up the stairway.

With the brilliant sunshine dazzling our tunnel-accustomed eyes, it took a few seconds for us to take in the scene, but after a few blinks, I knew why the cop had questioned us. We were in the very heart of Harlem. I have never felt so conspicuously white in my life.

Like I said, I'm not a racist, but just because you don't dislike other people for the color of their skin, that doesn't mean that those other people don't hate *you* for the color of *yours*. We were well aware of the bad reputation that Harlem had come to have, and spending minimum time there – like NONE – seemed to be a good idea.

I have no way of knowing whether or not Bobby was surprised by where we emerged. If so, he didn't show it. While Walter and I suggested maybe reconsidering this route, Bobby just said, "No, come on" and began to walk confidently up the sidewalk. We basically had no choice, and figured that, well, maybe Bobby had done this before and found it to be a perfectly safe route.

It was a beautiful mid-Autumn day with a chilly wind to chase the pollution away, and I was dressed in my fancy high school track jacket: a stylish blue wool with bright yellow leather sleeves. One does not blend in with a low-income crowd in such a jacket. It must have appeared as an audacious flaunt in their faces. And because it was such a nice day, everybody – and I do mean *everybody* – was outside. The sidewalks were filled with people. The front steps of every tenement building served as perches for residents who had come out to socialize and to savor the refreshingly clean air. As we began to walk, more and more faces began to turn our way, and most of them turned grave. Some people just

plain glared at us. It was obvious that our presence was deeply resented. I was very happy that we were making this walk in broad daylight.

Morningside Park, and the steep uphill path through it that would lead us to Columbia, was in view ahead, but this was one walk that would just not end soon enough. We had covered maybe three blocks and had maybe another three to go when we came to intersection crowded with people. As we stepped into the crosswalk, I found myself aimed for a head-on collision with a young teenage girl. Her eyes burned right into me, and she held her course. I tried to squeeze right to avoid the crash, but Bobby was oblivious to my plight and wouldn't veer right, even though I was shouldering him in that direction.

The girl gave no quarter, and though I tried to yield, I was blocked out. As she passed, our shoulders struck firmly. I turned and began to say "excuse me," as I would to anybody in such circumstances, but before my apology could come out, she stopped, turned, and said in a loud and venomous voice, "Watch it, **whitey!!**"

Lingering for a discussion would have been folly, so I turned, focused forward and down, and we quickened our walk substantially. I could hear her voice fading behind us, railing on about me slamming into her and cussing us out. I half expected to be collared from behind any second.

The last blocks went quickly, and we entered the Park. But instead of feeling safe, I waswhelmed with apprehension. [I wasn't overwhelmed, justwhelmed.] Dark shadows cast by tall leafy trees and bushes offered ambush positions wherever I looked. Given the overt disapproval we had just passed through, this place simply teemed with imminent threat.

We hastened up the sloping sidewalk toward Morningside Heights, approaching the gates at near racewalk stride. Then it occurred to me: gates. Of course there were gates. And, of course, they were *locked!* Arrrgghhh!

Bobby was in the middle of saying that we would just go back down and climb up the other sidewalk and try the other gate, when Walter and I gave each other a No Fucking Way look and began to climb the fence. It was not an easy fence to climb, but we were well motivated.

That night, we sat up on the roof of Bobby's dorm for more than an hour, and looked down across Morningside Park into the dark streets of Harlem. Occasional vague shouts and sudden loud noises rose through the now still night air, and a succession of police and ambulance sirens wailed across the treetops.

There was anger down there. Lots of it.

In subsequent visits to NYC, I have avoided Harlem. I don't think they would feel offended that I left them off my itinerary on this millennium trek to Sacramento.

Besides, I had very recently spent a holiday in NYC, on a pilgrimage of sorts, and that had sated my occasional appetite for Big Apple Pie.

It was Memorial Day Weekend 2000, in New York City, and the Red Sox were in town for a three-game set with the Yank-Me's. Patrick and Jim trained it down from Massachotts to catch the last two of those four, and I tooled on down from Rachacha to join them. Lots of beer, some baseball, lots of walking, a couple of cab rides, a few train rides, avid bar hopping, fine herbs, and plenty of Yankee

taunting (although you never really get enough of that). It was fun. Glad it wasn't another day longer, or I would have be a very ill man. As it was, my constitution was a little, um, deconstituted.



I left Friday morning, using the sunny pleasant daylight drive approach. My planned Thursday night departure was tabled when the van's temperature gauge starting doing some very whacko things. Getting stranded on the side of the NY Thruway in that tundra stretch out by Weedsport at 1:30 a.m. would have truly sucked. Well, to be fair, it would suck at 11:00 a.m. too.

The curious misbehavior seemed benign enough, though, that I took the rationale that it was just a faulty gauge, gave the "Go" sign to Blue Man, and we took to the



Big Apple. With a half-hour stop for victuals, and a couple other short breathers, the ride was about 6.5 hours – surprisingly, just about the same as Rochester-to-Boston usually is.

My first idea was to do the Statue of Liberty thing, which I've never done, but traffic and parking down at that tip of Manhattan were pretty damn brutal, so after a few passes I kissed that idea goodbye and swung back to find a parking spot for the night in Greenwich Village – a *free* parking spot, I should emphasize. It wasn't hard at all.

Spot procured, I went peripatetic to taste NYC life. In Washington Square, there was an entertainer, as usual [see picture below – no, the one on the left], but he was pretty bad: his act took forever, and did only a couple of blah-yawn bike tricks, and a little bit of juggling. He did juggle a chainsaw, but blah-yawn. When he took the time to walk around the crowd with a bag for money, I snuck away. I never did find the Lawn Demon. Or Wanda. I *would* have paid a cuppla bux to see that trick.



The better entertainment was over on the basketball courts a couple of blocks away anyway. This was Prime Time playground for the local 17-19 year-olds: late afternoon, teams waiting in the wings for their turn on the court, and passers-by (like myself) hanging out along the tall chain-link fence to get a glimpse of what city ball was really like.

Know what? It sucked!!! Really! I was totally unimpressed by the collection of basketball skills on display. I watched for nearly a half-hour, and there is nothing that anybody did that I couldn't have done even at age 30. They were so damn ordinary, it was astounding. In that half-hour, I think I maybe saw about 8 baskets made, about 20 shots clang badly off the rim, not one single dunk or blocked shot, and the absolute worst display of cry-baby whining and foul calls. These guys bitched and howled and argued about anything and everything. And they didn't even do that well: no real clever retorts or comebacks, no struttin' and proclaimin', just wussyass nitpicking crybabying.

There was one kid I really wanted to bitchslap. Hair all braided like Latrell, and in this matching fringing satin uniform with shorts down to his shins, he had the nerve to think that he had game. He was awful. Al Gore would have had this sniveling little rat for breakfast in a 1-on-1 to 15.

On what should have been the winning basket (more on that later), Braidboy got his pocket perfectly picked by the defender, who strode in for a surprisingly bland lay-up. But above the high-fiving, came his bleating cry (and I do mean "cry"): "Foouuuuuul."

There was some good woofin' over that one though. Guys getting right in his face, telling him he just got robbed and to admit it. But Braidboy stuck to his absurd claim until finally some weird compromise was reached.

Of course, this took several minutes. The teams waiting for the court were ripping mad. The spectators at the fence were bored and disappointed and began to leave. Then it occurred to me: it was no accident that these delays and prolongations and clangings were all happening. The game had been 13-13, then 14-14, then 15-15. Neither team wanted to give up center stage, because they weren't going to get it back. They wanted to keep their court all night if they could, so they were doing everything they

could to hold onto it just a little longer. Once I realized this, my interest in the game waned damn fast, and I ventured off for better diversion.

Yup, that's right. Went to a bar! The Greenwich Brewing Company, to be exact. It was about my eighth or ninth or tenth frosty of the day, so the world was a pretty happy place. And it just got happier as the night rolled on.

The TV had the Sox-Yanks game on, with the good guys leading, and a Mets fan named Jeff who was sitting at the bar bought me a beer because he "sympathized" with me for 1986. Sympathize this, guy, but I did take the beer: a Buzzy Blonde Ale. Yummm. :)

I took the train up to Times Square just to get buried in that assault of electric lights and cutting-edge video screen ads, and the walking sea of people. It was every bit as dazzling as I expected. Times Square even outdoes Las Vegas when it comes to sensory overload. Couple bars there, couple more back in the Village, then off to bed at my address for the night: Blue Man, parked at the corner of 6th Avenue and 10th Street, just a short stagger up from the aforementioned Greenwich Brewing Company.

There is a little extra taste of victory to van-camping right in the heart of a big city. Busses, trucks, and cabs rumble by all night, pedestrians can be heard conversing outside not long after dawn, and I'm just tucked in my bed, happily sleeping through it all. True, a couple of behavioral adjustments are required in one's waking routine -- can't just step behind a tree to shake the dew off the lilies -- but savvy roadtrip veterans know the value of not throwing out every empty bottle.

The meter I was parked at went inactive at 7 p.m. on Friday and didn't come back into play until 10 a.m. on Saturday. Given the anticipated heat-up of the van with the climbing of the sun, 10:00 seemed like it would be a non-issue. However, Saturday dawned cloudy, and it stayed comfy-cool in the Belly of the Whale, allowing me to sleep in until 10:40. When I peaked through the curtains to see if the windshield was clear, I was irked to see the orange piece of paper under the wiper. The meter maid had done her duty: \$55 for a parking violation. Ouch. Costly extra hour of sleep. But still cheaper than a parking lot would have been -- at \$5.07 per HALF hour.

