Late July 2016

*Salve amici!*

I am writing this letter in a village library 15 miles from where Irving’s house is in Nova Scotia. There we have no WiFi so must travel to reach a signal. A friend has suggested to me that my life is often strange, if not weird; she urges me to write a letter a la Stephen King. Our trip up to Nova Scotia has indeed confirmed her perception, so here goes. I hasten to add, however, that my friend is not always right. Last night, for instance, the largest black bear I have ever seen (well over 250 pounds) strolled for twenty minutes just 15 yards from the back of the house. While digging up ants and grubs, he occasionally stood on his hind legs and with his front paws swinging in the air, scratched his ears and wiped his mouth. At times he opened his jaws wide and tilted his head back and upwards toward the sky, as if supplicating help from the gods. I think the ants were stinging him. Relaxed he periodically flopped down, sat for a minute, and then continued his foraging. Eventually my orsus magnus disappeared into the woods. For the first time I felt nervous that he would come to the back door – he was so huge. There have also been ethereal moments when I am alone on a dirt road that climbs a hill, passes a lake, a pond, and dense woods. The sound of the wind is delicious. On that walk a deer, with his erect white tail, snorted warnings to his companions and dashed away. In the midst of all this, I search for some semblance of normalcy ty learning Latin (don’t ask why). Ego cotidie laboro. I am starting to think in Latin. I remind myself of Ukrainians whom I once knew who kept themselves sane by engaging another language.

*Otiosi in via: On Holiday: “The Missing Adult”*

After a fiasco of trying to fill Irving’s new car with gas on Elmwood (not being used to his car, I kept pulling in to the wrong side to access the pump – every time I turned I kept getting the wrong side – burst into giggles), we launched on our pilgrimage to Nova Scotia. On an early afternoon we blithely made our way on the New York State Thruway. The first thing we saw were periodic lit computerized signs alerting drivers to look out for a “missing adult in a blue Impala.” I identified with this lost, confused soul.

 We had absolutely no plans about where we could stay, so guide by nostalgia we got off at some exit in the Mohawk Valley section, got thoroughly lost, pulled into a country gas station where an exceedingly short man with a towel attached to a long-handed broom cleaned our windshield. He directed us to Route 5. The ragged, impoverished rural surroundings started to look a bit familiar; soon we found ourselves in Little Falls and in sight of a motel. In the parking lot was a group of motorcycle riders wearing leather jackets inscribed with “Harley Davidson for Christ” in luminous orange letters. The young man behind the motel desk was slow and uncommunicative, but he gave us a room that was brown and dark. The keys did not work, so had to keep going back – and so did others waiting in line before me. Ours was a “disabled room” in which the bars on the toilet made it absolutely impossible to reach the toilet paper.

Evening was falling. We recalled that on a previous stop in Little Falls we had accidentally wandered into an antique collective in an old warehouse surrounded by weeds and other abandoned buildings down by the railroad tracks, the canal, and the river (they all run parallel to each other). So maneuvering a maze of circular one-way streets and bridges that seem to go nowhere, we returned. The same deserted, lost soul landscape greeted us. Across from the warehouse we recognized was a sign for a restaurant that was tucked into another brick remnant from the past. On the door was a sign saying that the chef was trained in France. We entered and discovered an asbestos tile ceiling from which hung dusty chandeliers. To reach the dining room, one walked through an empty pool hall and past a bar propped up by three regulars. A few couples hid in the shadows of tables. The menu was pretentiously presented in French; the food was quite good and too plentiful. Afterwards, we wandered over to the warehouse holding the antique collective. A young woman clutching a massive cone dripping with startling blue ice cream forlornly sat alone at a wooden table – the only one there. We asked if the ice cream was good. “Terrific,” she replied, coming to life, so , of course, we went in and purchased a huge one for ourselves. The inside of the warehouse was full of junk, something out of Dickens’s dilapidated London. We joined the woman at the table outside; she told me she had always lived in Little Falls, but had never know this part existed. She added that she lives in “the tenements up on the hill,” and that her ex-husband had the children for the evening; she felt bored, so had come down to explore. We crossed the bridge that goes over the Mohawk River (where the felled logs from the mills used to roll down); me a single lawyer form Buffalo was biking to Albany; looked at a family of ducks astutely negotiating the rapid falls, and studied a faded reproduction of an eighteenth-century print showing a viaduct that once crossed from the canal to the river sot that barges could reach the river and go out to sea.

The next morning I entered the motel breakfast room. Empty worn table and week-old bagels under greasy glass covers as well as a group of women holding hands and praying (along with the single waitress) greeted me. I left. We went back down to the warehouses, had breakfast at a nearby makeshift café, and discovered a newer antique collective – incredible stuff (really high class). The man had just opened it; he represents dealers from all over the Northeast. Suddenly my eyes caught sight of a piece of Victorian taxidermy. I simply could not resist: three birds perched on branches inside a glass globe that sits on an oak stand. Dear Reader, I bought it. The man packed it up and carried it to the back of our overstuffed car. (I shall not unpack the piece until we return to Buffalo – I hope it arrives intact. The birds and the wire tree wobble terribly when moved). I started to worry how I was to get it across the border. Aware of my dilemma, the dealer wrote “centerpiece” on the bill. The purchase unbalanced me. Ever since writing about Victorian wild animal skins, I have fantasized about owning a piece of taxidermy, but never really thought I would make it a reality. Be prepared to see if sitting in our front hall.

Where to go Next? We decided, at the last minute, to drive to Boston and stay with Rachel. The heat outside was getting hotter and hotter (0 plus degrees – the heat was following us), and I knew that Rachel’s second floor apartment with no air conditioning would be hell. We went anyway. In the meantime, via the new satellite radio in the car, we were able to reach BBC World News and programming. The radio unbalanced me more and added to my sense of chaos, for first there were extended, informative programs on the ramifications of Brexit (I was still recovering/reacting to the implosion I had left behind); soon there were blow by blow accounts of the truck that slammed into and drove July 4th celebrators in Nice, and then intruded the riveting, ongoing accounts of the attempted coup in Turkey, and then, of course, the spectre of Trump and his wife’s plagiarized speech. The world was coming apart around us (and has continued to do so since arrive: more shootings in Germany, a priest’s throat slice in France, and the stabbings in Japan).

Once we arrived in Somerville, Rachel’s apartment was welcoming (she had bought cream cakes), but unfortunately hot as hades. She had erected all sorts of fans. Two in the “storage, study, spare bed” room blew directly on us all night. Irving did not sleep a wink; I tossed, and “things” were not good. The windows that opened let in the noise of the busy road outside. The toilet paper kept falling of the back of the toilet – hard to retrieve. The bagels and butter were remnants of a year ago – a butter lamb I had given Rachel in early spring. These basic elements of life continued to keep me off balance. (And I kept worrying: what about my taxidermy stuffed into the back of the car – was it wobbling too much; was it falling apart?)

What to do next. Pack and hunt for a hotel to stay at in Portland, Maine. We used Rachel’s computer to search for some reasonable comfort. Frantic calls from Rick (Irving’s friend in Portland) wondering when we would come, but most of all telling us that his dog was dying and that an old girlfriend was flying in from Vancouver – she has terminal cancer. We were supposed to stay with Rick. So on to websites in search of a hotel. We called one that was cheap, but last year was rowdy. I called to see if the teenagers’ summer camp was back again. Last year we had demanded our money back because the teenagers had run through the halls until 5 a.m. “Yes,” I was told, “they are on floors 5 through 8 and the only available room is on one of those/” “No thank you.” “But they’re much better now – under better control than last year,” pleaded the voice at the other end.

In Portland we stayed at a good old Ramada Inn on the outskirts of Bangor, so I had a devil of a time finding Rick’s house. Once we got there, he told us that his dog had had to be put to sleep that very afternoon. Depressed, Rick slumped in his larger leather armchair. The girlfriend’s flight was also badly delayed. We persuaded him to go out and eat with us, so found a nearby Thai restaurant that I shall not recommend. We agreed to see him and his friend next morning, but when we arrived, we could hear his guest moving behind a closed door (not wanting to be seen), and Rick was upstairs dead to the world from sleeping pills. Stumbling over the remains of Rick’s university office piled in the living room (he just retired), we left a note and were on our way, once more listening attentively to the latest on BBC. Earlier breakfast in the Ramada was to be found on by navigating through a series of eight long corridors that extended form the lobby to some hidden cave at the back of the motel. There were signs posted “Keep Going,” but what we found at the end was dingy and dim.

The next stop was the L. L. Bean Outlet. Irving had discovered he had no decent long trousers, and I needed a new pair of shorts (the ones with me are ten years old). Boiling hot in Maine – really boiling hot, we headed straight for the men’s pants and found a man who was straight out of “Are you Being Served.” He gave us the attention one dreams of having a department store. He measure Irving, reassured him, checked him out, took the pants over to the “monogram lady” to be shortened, and told us to go out for lunch – all with a flair and a twist of the wrist. Lunch was the worst lobster roll ever. The shortened pants were waiting for us on our return. With the L. L. Bean perched on top of the taxidermy, we were soon back on our way and listening to the horror of the world and national news.

Eventually we came to Bangor, Maine where we always stop – the home, by the way, of Stephen King (supposed to be my muse on this trip). There is an old hotel (1897) called the Charles Hotel (could it be the set for “The Shining”?). We did not know if were still going to be there (had looked for a phone number, but could not find one.) We drove up and much to our horror discovered that there was a music (the Blues) festival taking place in Bangor. We thought surely there is no room. Irving dashed out of the illegally parked car (blinkers flashing), checked at the desk in this run-down funky lobby (something out of Chelsea, NY), and found out though under new management (the pug dog that had one “graced” the lobby was no longer in attendance) that there was one room left – one with no window, dark, and all brown furnishings – and a nasty bedspread. We toot it and moved the car to a nearby parking garage – the man found out we had not come for the music and saw how desperate we looked, so gave us free parking for the night. In the hotel everything was opposite of what one expects. No WiFi, no telephone; the handyman is a woman; the maid is a man. We slept a troubled night. After breakfast and an unsatisfactory, disappointing walk around what used to be a lively antique shop, we checked out but not before I caught a glimpse of a silver-haired man escorting a vampire of a womn dressed in a long, zebra dress that made an S curve of her figure. In the hotel lobby she leaned over the our-of-tune grand piano and with her long slender fingers repetitively pressed the keys and made no tune. Her slick dangling black hair draped over the keyboard. The went to their room.

Before leaving Main, we called the man who looks after the house in Roman Valley. We learned that the person who moves the stored furniture into the place was now in hospital, unable to walk or move his arms. John R. is a friend, so we felt sad.

Crossing the border with the taxidermy was not difficult – it was, after all, well disguised ina cardboard box and topped with an L. L. Bean bag. All I said was: “We are taking in everything with which we shall return.” The guard was snippy, but in the end waved us on. Each bump from then on reminded me that my stuffed birds were continuing to wobble in the back. Our satellite radio continued to unbalance us. This time it was the shootings in Baton Rouge – I am losing count.

Once crossed over into New Brunswick, the information/tourist office we have relied on in the past was closed – so we drove on and wondered where to stop. Irving suggested St. Andrews by the Sea, so off the highway we went and crossed out fingers that we would find a vacancy. We drove down to Water Street, stopped at a familiar motel which has balconies overlooking the sea – no vacancy but there is a house next door, and if we were willing to take a suite , we could stay there. And what a nice place. The back open d on to the sea. By this time, I was feeling the effects of too much travel – not just from this trip – but from returning from England, going on a walking holiday, going up for a week to see my daughter in Ottawa, returning to Buffalo, and packing yet again. So I asked to stay another night – just to rest. We did, though Irving was impatient ot move on and get to Roman Valley. I took a lovely walk on a peninsula that is only exposed at low tide – I was careful not to get trapped by the incoming tide. We ate in dingy, unappetizing restaurants that displayed huge 1960s portraits of the Queen, and eventually found an Austrian restaurant with an overbearing waitress who in a low dramatic, excited whispering voice enticed us to order the schnitzel and some gooey desert. I could hear a client arguing that she wanted her money back. She was upset that the man at the front desk thought she and her husband required separate beds – the world goes on. Irving tried to take advantage of the WiFi, but when he used his computer, the “machine” in his parlance went around in circles. We spent the next day in an aquarium. St. Andrews has a marine biology center. It had started to rain so that was the only thing we could do. The study of Latin continued.

Time to move again. Irving insisted we go to St. Martin’s By the Sea where he once stayed at a B&B (Serendipity by the Sea) run by a kind man with aids. Thanks to the miracle of medicine, Richard is doing quite well. His partner, also called Richard, waits on him hand and foot. They are both most generous. We had driven past the house about two time. They have chosen neither to put up a sign or a house number. The bedroom we had was something else: scarlet oriental décor and heavy dark wood and lamps that take Ph.D. in engineering to realize how to put on. The bed featured springs that have sprung. The bathroom was cavernous and down the hall. Impossible to close the door. There was one window that looked out to sea. The thunder came, the rain poured; I looked out and low and behold (*ecce!*) at nine p.m. there was a full arc rainbow over the sea. I have never seen such a phenomenon at night. The rain must have caught the sinking light of the descending sun. Somehow it all contributed to the strangeness of this trip. I rushed down stairs to tell on of the Richards and brought him out to the front to see. He fumbled with his Iphone camera, but never succeeded, and I think he cared less. I galloped back up and made Irving look at it out of the window. The following morning we came down to breakfast to find both Richards dressed as cooks, side by side with caps and striped aprons and making our breakfast. All I could think of was Tenniel’s illustration in *Alice* of the Walrus and the Carpenter.

St. Martin’s is known because it was once an isolated fishing village. Now it is known because it is the entrance to the Fundy Provincial Park – and what a park. We took time to drive on its road that follows a dramatic coastline. The road has recently been extended, so we took it to the very end that takes one down a steep decline to a wild long beach. Though not adequately dressed for the occasion, we both set out and walked quite a distance. Irving got pebbles in his sandals, so I plodded back to the car and fetched his boots – everyone was much happier. On the way back a deer and her two fawns crossed in front of us. On the way out, the sea mist blew in and created an ethereal pastel landscape.

Once on the road again, it was not too long before we reached the Nova Scotia border. We stopped at the Welcome Center, listened, as always to the clichéd bagpiper who every year stands outside is doors, and entered to try and find accommodation for the night. After much discussion, elected to stay outside Antigonish and by the sea. Just before we left in the city of Amherst, a pheasant crossed the road in front of us.

We chose a place called the Red Roof B&B. On the coast road, bugs hit the windshield and splattered blood – a reminder of what was waiting us in Roman Valley. In the meantime, the BBC is still reaching us and so is the Republican Convention. We had a hard time finding the B&B because the name we had been given was written in Luxembourgean. The sign, however, was in English. We drove in to find a small farm run by someone who made his millions as a techy in Toronto. He, with his long plaited hair, has returned to the earth and settled in with a local woman, two donkey, several alpaca (his wife rather aggressively spins their wool while one eats breakfast), three friendly dogs (one did not like Irving’s hat so made life slightly miserable), and lots of vegetables. The owner talked incessantly and even when we asked to make phone calls insisted on calling and talking to the people for us. (I’d say he likes to rule). We had a quick turn around and found a café on a point with an historic lighthouse. Got there just before the door closed.

We finally got to Roman Valley. On the first night, the moon was large and full. Across it was a solid black bar that was completely unreal. Gradually the bar slid down over the moon. I thought maybe the apocalypse had come. However, that came the following night with a major weather “event.” I have never seen anything like it. For over two hours the thunder shook the valley and Irving’s old farmhouse on the top of the hill; lightning struck in a chain formation and streaked across the sky; the rain pelted the windows; the wind blew and opened all the doors; and then all the lights went out. The brook roared. It was all exciting. Now I am back to the more regular routines of conserving water so the well does not run dry; rationing food, separating garbage (the county is very strict about garbage), keeping an eye open always through the window, and diligently studying Latin. Ego non sum mendax. Mea verba sunt probi.