

PASSAGE FROM ENGLAND

(Excerpt)

Frank Zajaczkowski



Los Angeles, CA – St. Thomas, USVI
2010

CHAPTER 1 – DEPARTURES

Some friends thought we were crazy. Maybe we were. Maybe what we were doing was reckless, even frivolous. Some were envious. I wasn't surprised by that. It was incredibly exciting—packing the collected essentials of our thirty-five years together and shipping them to St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands; selling off the rest of our belongings in multiple garage sales; leasing our home in Los Angeles, stuffing our Jeep with our personal things; and then driving across the country, through the Deep South, all the way to Florida.

We met some great people and had a lot of fun along the way, especially in New Orleans where Mardi Gras was in full dress, or partial dress if you had the beads handy. Annette and I, or “Netty” as I call her, always had the beads handy. From our beginnings at the end of the 60s, we learned to adapt to each other, to be the yin to each other's yang, long before that expression was drained of blood becoming a pale cliché of another age. There have been many times in the decades since when our adaptability has been crucial in the complex and sometimes treacherous balancing act of life.

We needed that balanced perspective now to get us out of L.A. because we were leaving good friends and family behind, especially our sons, Miles and Graham. At 26 and 24, they were men, not children, it's true, but we knew we would miss them terribly. At the same time, separation seemed like a good idea as they sorted out their own futures. Miles had just finished medical school, unhappy through most of it, and was starting a surgical residency with great ambivalence, while Graham was

midway into law school and already eyeing a career in law suspiciously.

Very accomplished kids with remarkably different childhoods than our own. Netty and I had too much independence, too little childhood. Getting out of town now and out of their lives for a while would let their own independence surface.

At least that's the salve we used to assuage our sore hearts as we waved good-bye and drove East out of Los Angeles, across the Mojave Desert, then onward to the future. After years of parenting and postponement, we were looking for a little time to ourselves, time to find the freedom, the childhood irresponsibility, we never had. I was afraid that if we didn't go after it now, we never would.

It was the little things that got us here, the saving, the conserving, the worrying over the years together. Annette, especially, was the master planner, no expense was too small that it wouldn't have an impact on the greater goal. Some time ago, we'd bought a pair of clay rabbits and put them on our patio steps. We joked they were our *Of Mice And Men* rabbits.

"Tell me again," Netty would say at some particularly low moment in our life.

"We-e-ell," I'd drawl, "We'll save up our stake, and one day buy our own piece of paradise, then just tend the rabbits like Lennie dreamed of doing..."

All the while, though, as we drove across America, through Arizona and New Mexico, through Texas and Louisiana, then Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and finally to the flat highways of Florida where the orange groves scented the air, I kept looking back, wondering who I was that made me who I am. How did I evolve from a British immigrant child of World War II refugees in America's 50s to an abandoned teen and druggie hippie in the 60s, then English professor, writer, suburban parent, and now what, a fifty-four-year-old retiree in the Caribbean?

It's the early days that remain the strongest part of these memories, the deepest tincture of reflection, the nearly mythic

childhood times that abide, my passage from England to America.

We put the Jeep on a ship out of Miami, and flew ahead to St. Thomas to meet up with the forty-foot container that held all our worldly possessions coming on another freighter via Panama.

The container didn't arrive. One week. Two weeks. Eight weeks went by and still no container.

Netty was seventeen when we met, and I was eighteen. She pulled me from the wreckage of my life and is the better half of our whole it seems to me. At five-foot one, ninety-six pounds, brown hair and hazel eyes, she hasn't changed much in all the years we've been together. Still tough and flexible, adaptable and rigid. The perfect counterpoint to the weaknesses in me. Her own ruined childhood strengthened her—living with a schizophrenic grandmother while her mother looked on, alternating between fits of paranoia and catatonia, her father a vague memory of lies and abandonment. Yes, she was resilient and adventurous enough to agree to this island adventure with me, but clearly her spirits were fading after eight weeks with only two changes of clothes and bed sheets that belonged to the previous owner.

It rained nearly every day of those eight weeks. Downpours that turned our leaky plywood roof into the percussion section of the L.A. Philharmonic. Rain drops so big and so fast they transformed the air into liquid motion. It was tropical rain right out of a Somerset Maugham novel set in the South Pacific—steamy, fetid, malarial rain. Well, probably not malarial, but we were new to island realities.

It's raining like that right now, two years later, August 2007. Heavy rain as I type. Two years on this island and I've just begun this story, which was another reason for coming here to begin with, to give myself the time to write it. But time is a hummingbird close to the equator where the sun zooms up in minutes, the dawn becomes noon, noon becomes night. The days blur, the weeks chase one another, and the months pause

momentarily on the horizon only to fly out to sea on the Trade Winds.

The container finally did arrive, and we unpacked everything in an afternoon, putting the rabbits on the patio facing the ocean. We fixed the leaky roof, and today we're thankful for rain because we've learned in these two years that fresh water is life on a desert island, so we collect it carefully from our rooftop and store it in our 22,000 gallon cistern beneath our living room floor for our parsimonious use until the next rain comes, which could be months away.

As the rain falls today, I feel the present and the past tapping on my keyboard in rhythm with the drumming on my roof. Rain...type...rain...type...rain rain...type type. Rain and departures. Rain and abandonment. The early days of my life. Rain and saying good-bye. They are linked within me forever.

It is 10:30 A.M., early August, 1956. I am five years-old and we are leaving Lincoln, England for America. It's raining hard. My sister, Mary, who is nearly seven, stands with me inside the Lincoln Rail Station waiting for the 10:52 from Doncaster.

Nanny, our grandmother, hands us each a box of candy for our train ride to London and then onto Southampton to board the *Queen Elizabeth* ocean liner, the sister ship of the *Queen Mary*, for our trip across the Atlantic. Cadbury Chocolates for Mary and Callard & Bowser Toffees for me. Mine come in a good strong cardboard box covered in purple cellophane decorated with big dogs and beautiful ladies frolicking through the gardens of a country manor. I look carefully at the ladies to see if they're chewing toffees as they race through the gardens. They don't seem to be. Maybe they've stuffed them down their billowy dresses. Maybe the dogs have eaten them and the cardboard box as well, hard to tell with dogs. Then I give up wondering, and stuff another toffee in my mouth.

"You two stay right here," Nanny says walking over to

the little ticket window.

Mary and I nudge closer together.

All week Nanny has been telling us we're going on an adventure. Even at my age, though, I know it's a load of junk. It's not searching for adventure that's sending us across the sea to America. I think it has to do with my father who's done something my mum wishes he hadn't.

I look down at the small, chipped white tiles that form beautiful patterns in and out of the larger, blue chipped tiles on the floor of the Station. I follow one design as it spreads across the tiles like a river of spilled indigo ink, all the way to the door where my eyes run into the feet of my mum and dad. They're talking softly. I see my mother is crying, forcing herself to keep on talking though I know my father wants her to stop.

Mary and I begin to drift closer to them, close enough that we can hear them speaking, my mother's voice rising above his.

"You're not being fair, Jack. It's difficult for me, too. Very."

"No go, then. We stay. What the point?"

His Polish accent is strong, roughing up the words, losing some of them in his mouth.

"You know what the point is, luv," her own voice stumbles now, "to get a clean start...in a new country...lots of opportunity, for you especially, Zdzislaw."

It's not often that she calls him by his Polish first name, Zdzislaw, which she pronounces *Zish-waf*. I'm still learning how to pronounce my last name, *Zajaczkowski*, *Zi-yunch-schof-ski*, or something like that.

At the sound of my father's foreign name, Mary and I stop where we are, afraid to go any closer.

"Not all again that," he says.

"And if we don't go now, you know your Travel Document expires soon."

"I know," he says harder.

"Fine, then," she answers, wiping her nose on a pretty

embroidered handkerchief, a going-away present from Nanny.

He looks at her, becoming silent again as he so often is.

“You’ll keep your promise, Jack, won’t you? Just keep your promise and we can be a family again. Things can be good for us.” She touches his arm, “Right, luv?”

I thought we were a family already. Now, I don’t know what to think as my mum glances in our direction. I look up to my sister, who’s looking down at me. When I turn back, my father’s heading out the door and into the English rain.

“All set?” my mother asks, leaning down to tie the lace of my left shoe, her hair so close to my face it tickles my nose as she completes the double-knot.

“Where’s daddy gone?” Mary says for both of us.

“To see about our bags.”

I’m afraid every time he walks away it’ll be the last time I’ll see him because mum told us he’s staying behind in England to sell our house and close up his taxi stand. My big brother, John, is outside saying good-bye to his friends. He’s twelve, and acts so much older than me and Mary I almost think he could stay in England by himself. I’ve been wishing he would so if I wanted to come back home he’d be here to take care of me.

“Frances! Oh, Fran! Thank heaven I got here in time!”

It’s the booming voice of Mrs. Marsden, Betty, my mum’s best friend.

“Bet, I told you I couldn’t stand another good-bye,” my mother bursts into tears.

“I know, dearie, but I had to see your face one more time.”

She wipes my mother’s tears with her handkerchief.

“Don’t you look smart. New coat?” My mother nods. “Very becoming.”

“Oh, Bet, am I doing the right thing?” my mother asks through snuffles.

Betty brushes aside my mum’s light brown hair.

“Course you are. There’s a whole new world over there. Ruthie will make you feel at home. I’m sure she will.”

She's talking about my mum's friend Ruth, who also married a Polish Airman during World War II. They're the Levindowskis, who moved to America a long time ago. Ruth has been writing letter after letter telling my mum all about the great things waiting for us in the U.S.A. All our dreams come true. They'll be meeting us when we get to California.

Betty points out the window, "Chucking rain since July. That about says it all, don't you think?"

They keep talking, but it's hard to hear them now above the shrieking whistle of the Doncaster train that's pulling into the station.

My mum grabs my hand and Nanny takes Mary's, and we hurry through the station door. My dad rushes up and carries our bags to the train. My mother gives Betty one last hug.

"Keep an eye on him, Bet. Will you do that for me?" she says keenly.

"I'll keep him in line, don't you worry," she winks, which sends a tear down her cheek.

We walk closer to the train. Nanny bends down eye-level with us.

"Now listen, dearies. I'm not saying good-bye because I'll be seeing you soon enough."

I turn away because I know she's fibbing. She tucks in my shirt and wipes Mary's tears.

"Be brave, little Noddies," she says in the voice she uses to read the *Little Noddy* books to us about his adventures and mishaps in *Toy Town*.

"Be brave, now, because before you know it, I'll be knocking on your sunshiney door." She reaches out her arms. "Give us a big hug, then."

She pulls me and Mary to her, kissing our cheeks one after the other.

"Let's just say 'So Long,' like the American Cowboys do."

Mary's taking deep breaths to slow her crying.

I whisper, "So long, Hop-Along."

Mary never gets a word out.

My dad comes back for us after loading the luggage. He picks me up and takes Mary by the hand.

“I back tomorrow,” he says to Nanny.

“Yes, Jack, I’ll make tea for us tomorrow afternoon, and hear all about the *Elizabeth*.”

We walk toward the train, and I can see John already on board waving to his friends and throwing a kiss to Nanny from a window.

I look back over my dad’s shoulder where my mother and Nanny stand in the rain, holding hands like two school girls saying good-bye forever.

Behind them is our city of Lincoln. A red double-decker bus swooshes by, its big slick tires splashing through the puddles. People hurry in gray raincoats, their black umbrellas swollen with wind so that the raindrops bounce off like pebbles on a drum. Beyond them all, high in the distance, up on the hill, the Lincoln Cathedral looks down on me as it has done my whole life, its upper spires disappearing in the clouds like a soft, furry collar covering its pointy shoulders.

The train whistle blows again, louder now, and my father calls out, “Fran! Come on, Fran!”

His voice breaks open the sky, sending a burst of rain falling like a solid sheet of water that I look through as my mother’s fingers drop from Nanny’s hand. She dashes across the platform as if through an underwater world, my father reaching down and pulling her out of the pool and onto the train.

There’s a billowing of smoke. The smell of diesel flooding over us. Then distant thunder as I feel the first movement of my departure from Lincoln.

So this is how an adventure begins I think to myself as the train rocks forward then settles for the briefest instant, then rocks forward again, struggling to keep the momentum going, swaying from side to side, bumping along like some huge creature getting its rhythm before breaking into a full run. Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack. Faster and faster, the sound of

Chapter 1 – Departures

steel wheels on steel tracks, like hoofs over rocks, counting the time, clack-clack, clack-clack, counting the growing distance that separates me from my home. Clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack, clack-clack....

