

Strangers Within

by Tom Harmeyer

© 2001, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2018 by Tom Harmeyer

For Terri, Jackson, Emilie and all the strangers

This is a story written by a young man, immersed in the joy of being a husband and father. Winds have blown, the cuckoo has persisted, the children have grown. In a distant land, new roads lead to the same place. New strangers come; old strangers revisit.

December 2008

I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.

Blanche DuBois

1.

A Beginning

Nothing happens unless first a dream.

Carl Sandberg

It was a glorious October morning in New Orleans, the kind of morning locals dream about each scorched day throughout the six months of sweltering purgatory we know as summer. For the first time since April, the air was cool and crisp, and the sky was that certain vivid blue, the blue that signals fall here, a blue most of us can't quite describe but that artists here have observed for generations, have commented on, have painted about, have tried to recreate on canvas, a blue so rich and full of light, it tells us locals that it is safe to go out again, triggers an instinct among us to head for our porch swing or stoop, City Park or the Quarter, the batture or lakefront or any place else where it could touch us and stroke us and fill us again with a *joie de vivre* the long, yellow summer had drained from us.

I got up from my porch swing, where I was sitting with my kids, soaking up the blue, laughing and playing and singing with them:

Johnnie, on his way to school
Saw the storekeep, Mr. Poole,
Waved at jolly blacksmith Ollie,
Passed the postman, Lou O'Malley.
Johnnie, Johnnie, answer me,
Which one do you want to be?

I kissed each of them, one precious forehead after another, then my wife, and off I went – cup of coffee in one hand, briefcase in the other – on my way, into that crisp October in New Orleans blue, leaving additional verses and giggles and pattycakes to them and her.

It was a dizzying blue, a mystical blue, a blue that hypnotized, that made things happen in broad daylight in work-a-day places to work-a-day people that we often relegate to kooks in back alleys on fog-shrouded nights. In other words, it was just your average beautiful fall day – happens all the time – just we don't notice it, won't admit to it, can't acknowledge that mysticism and alternate realities are common and real, that identity is fleeting, that strangers live within our own skin, lie within us, just we can't or don't or won't see them, us, we, me.

The designers at the Ford Motor Company of Dearborn, Michigan may never have seen that blue. Maybe that color blue isn't in Michigan. Maybe they had never traveled here or anywhere where that blue existed. Maybe the expense

account just doesn't cover this kind of junket. It's a long way in a Ford product, or any motor vehicle, I suspect, from Dearborn to anywhere where that blue does exist. It does exist in New Orleans. But, maybe you can't get here from there.

In any case, clearly the designers had never seen it, seen that blue. Or they wouldn't have settled for the blue of the Crown Victoria that flashed in my rear-view mirror, then passed quickly in the left lane, heading riverbound along Wisner Boulevard near Filmore Avenue. Theirs was a pretty blue: just a shade bluer than a Lambeth House coif, yet not so blue as the stripes on seersucker trousers from Perlis. Truth be told, it was probably as good as might reasonably be expected from Ford, GM or anyone. But, it was not a blue to dream of, to conjure up, to commit canvas to, or to digress over, as we do in New Orleans for the restorative blue of such October mornings, some of us more successfully than others, each seeking words or gestures or acrylics to capture the essence of a light, a wavelength, a formless, massless quality that nourishes, refreshes, and heals.

Where the blue Ford was going I could not know. But, I knew where I was going. I was off to work, so I was not hurrying, not on this kind of day, not when I was only to trade the coveted blue and its soul-juicing essence for fluorescent tubes and a computer screen.

It was a bad habit, I'll admit, to drift off while driving – or, rather, to drive while drifting off – but I suspected there was more adventure in the blue Ford than in my car. I suspected there was more there than what my commute offered. So, drift off I did, changing lanes, you might say, into the spaces of that car and

the lives of its occupants, as one is inclined to do on a day like this, if one will only admit to the existence of days like this. Drift off I did, to explore that suspicion.

2.

Dempsey's Habit

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes,
but in having new eyes.*

Marcel Proust

Dempsey had a bad habit. “Look, look, look!” he said, pointing out the driver’s side window of his blue Crown Victoria. “A pelican! A pelican, Giff! Hadn’t seen one of them on Bayou St. John since I was a boy!”

Calvin Gifford took only a quick glance at the spectacular sight, the sight of a lone brown pelican cruising just above the bayou’s surface. The unhurried flaps of the bird’s long, graceful wings were lost on Mr. Gifford. He did not watch long enough to make a connection between the bird’s rhythm and, say, James Booker playing *Come Rain or Come Shine*.

“Good catch, fellah,” Dempsey said, still admiring the bird as he swooped down to place a lunch of mullet in the fleshy pouch beyond his large bill. Dempsey couldn’t see a pelican in flight without hearing James Booker in his

brain, although it is unlikely Booker and any pelican were ever in New Orleans concurrently, each suffering essentially the same fate, only decades apart.

Much to Gifford's consternation, Dempsey looked long and hard at the pelican, taking only quick glances at the traffic around him. "Not since I was a boy," he repeated.

Admiring nature is not a bad habit, Dempsey would argue. Especially where nature intersects humanity, in stunningly beautiful places like Bayou St. John, with its cypresses and willows, egrets and herons, live oaks and crepe myrtles, ducks and, once again, pelicans, in the heart of New Orleans, right alongside Wisner Boulevard.

Admiring nature while driving – say, 50 – along Wisner Boulevard, speed limit 35, that is a bad habit!

"Skylark!" Gifford screamed.

"Where?" asked Dempsey excitedly.

"Right in front of us, fool! Gray. Buick. Stop, Dempsey. Stop!"

Dempsey brought his car to a quick stop, "with six, maybe eight, inches to spare," he would say nonchalantly.

Those aren't the words Gifford said between gasps. His words were not so nonchalant, nor so analytical. Gifford did not measure the nearness of the miss in inches. Rather, Gifford measured it in heart rates, in degrees of fear, of terror, of rage, and in expletives which flew from his lips. Indeed, those were the words Gifford used mostly – expletives!

* * *

That's what was happening in that blue Crown Victoria, I imagined, as I phased in only partially and only briefly, just enough and just long enough to perform the nearly rote acts of sipping my coffee then pushing my glasses back up my nose. I was then out again suddenly, thinking not about the stampede of commuters all around me, but only about Dempsey and his Crown Vic.

* * *

Unfazed, Dempsey started his car rolling again. "Now when he really gets going, as in *Tell Me How Do You Feel*, it's like one of those more manic birds, maybe the blue wing teal."

"Huh?" was all Gifford could muster, still shaken from the Buick thing, now completely lost in Dempsey's words.

"James Booker, The Piano Prince of New Orleans, The Bayou Maharajah, Little Booker – when he really gets it going, he's all over the place – erratic, full of dodges and twists, whole band trying desperately to keep up, sort of like a teal," Dempsey explained. "Ever see a flock of teal, Giff?"

"Huh?"

“But that pelican’s got me hooked on the slower stuff right now – can’t get it out of my head – darker, more focused, bluer. I’d sing it for you, Giff, but I can’t do it justice. I tell you what, you just put some vocals and keyboards to that pelican’s wing beats, swoop a little here and there and you’ll get the idea.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Gifford asked, finally mustering real words.

“Okay, okay. If I must, I’ll show you. I’m gunna love you-u-u,” Dempsey starting singing. “It’s richer, more plaintive than that though, Giff,” he explained. “Like nobody’s loved you-u-u. Come ra-a-ain or come shi-i-ine.”

Gifford scowled at him.

“You just don’t hear it, do you, Giff? Gotta let yourself hear it, man.”

Gifford scowled some more.

“Nevermind,” Dempsey said. “Let me just call Audrey, so she can track down some listings for us. But, if you are going to live here, Giff, you are going to have to learn to appreciate these kinds of things.”

Gifford’s scowl was starting to look permanent.

Dempsey whistled – capturing Booker’s tune no better than when he had sung – as he steered with one hand and dialed with the other. “Good, he’s still there,” he said, pointing happily as the bird glided now, wings outstretched, but motionless. “State bird, you know. Brown pelican, *Pelecanus occidentalis*. But, we killed almost all of them with DDT forty or fifty years ago. Had to go to Florida to get some more to re-establish them here.

“Watch – there he goes – dive! That’s great, huh, Giff? Anyway, they have been thriving these past few years in huge concentrations on coastal islands before a hurricane a couple of summers ago wrecked their nests. We all got worried, but – hee, hee – now look!”

Gifford didn’t look. Gifford didn’t listen. Gifford didn’t respond. But, at least, Gifford no longer scowled.

Gifford was occupied. It was prayer, maybe – looked like prayer – lips moving, no words coming out. Eyes and hands and mind devoted to the effort. No, maybe it wasn’t prayer. And, it certainly wasn’t singing either. And, no, Gifford didn’t look at the pelican, couldn’t hear James Booker, wouldn’t acknowledge the pelican or Booker or Dempsey in any way.

“Hey, Audrey, there’s a pelican in the bayou!” said Dempsey, shouting excitedly into the phone he held to his cheek. “That’s right – a pelican! Can you believe it? When’s the last time you saw one in Bayou St. John? Me, neither, not since I was a boy! Anyway, Audrey, what we got near here, maybe in the 250 range, for Mr. Gifford?”

Admiring nature while talking on the cell phone while driving 50 in a 35 – – that’s a really bad habit.

* * *

I sipped my coffee again, then pushed my glasses back up my nose again, this time not even bothering to phase in, hardly breaking stride in my thoughts of Dempsey.

* * *

J. Dempsey Martin loved being a realtor. “A New Orleans realtor,” he would add. “I love to take people and juice them up with the beauty here, and get them to buy a little piece of this fine old city.”

And, when his clients survived his driving, he was successful. He had helped people find homes in every corner of town.

“One guy, Maxwell – some kind of doctor – I think he bought just to get out of my car,” Dempsey would tell you. “That’s okay, though, it was a nice house, the one he bought, a raised wood-frame bungalow, broad screened gallery with tapered stucco pedestals. Put a cypress rocker out front, who cares about the rest of the house – you’d spend your life on the gallery. Fortunately, the rest of the house was prime, too.”

And, Dempsey would keep going on about that house. But, none of anything else Dempsey might say had anything to do with why Dr. Maxwell had bought it. The very first thing Dempsey said was the meat of it: Dr. Maxwell had a wife – a New Orleans girl eager to come home – and two daughters in

Cincinnati still. He wanted to get out of that car while he was still alive, so he could see them again.

“That house he bought, that was a beaut!” Dempsey continued, glorying in that sale. He loved being a realtor, a New Orleans realtor. And, he would keep talking about it, if you let him.

“It’s not too often that I serve as listing agent,” he went on to explain. “No, not if the sellers are moving out of town. If they are moving out of my city, they’ll have to move out without my help. Unless their house is mint, that is.” Like the one Dempsey was going to show Gifford. He had made an exception in this case.

“Thanks, Audrey, your fax is coming through right now,” said Dempsey, who had rigged his Crown Vic to function as a full-scale office on wheels. He loved his Crown Vic. It was a good image car, said what he wanted said about himself to his clients. And, he not only filled it with the gear he would need to do his job, he also lovingly kept it spotless. Love, love, love. Dempsey loved his car.

Love is too strong a word, however, for what he felt for Audrey, his trusty assistant. He certainly was fond of her, but, love? No, love was too strong a word for what Dempsey felt toward anyone. He could love his car, his job, his city, but people? It was beyond him to love people.

Still, Audrey had been with him for years, ever faithful in her duty, accepting, even supportive, of his quirkiness, as only someone whose own blood is quirky could be.

“Quirky? You don’t want to know about my family!” she had said in her job interview those many years ago. And, she was right, he didn’t want to know, never asked, never really cared, not knowing much about family, never having one really, too busy being what, no, who he was, a realtor, a New Orleans realtor, a realtor like no other, to care too much about Audrey, or anyone else, really.

Dempsey elbowed Gifford out of his trance. “Hey, Giff, reach in front of you and pull that fax for me, if you would. I want to read over it to find the address we need.”

“Oh, no. No, no, no,” Gifford stammered.

“Come on, Giff, hand it over. I need to find that address.”

“While you’re driving?” asked Gifford, grabbing, but holding on tightly to the document, turning red, ready to explode, but holding on tightly to the document, the forces inside him building and building and building until, finally, he did explode, holding on tightly to the document, but bursting into a firestorm of words: “Talking on the phone and bird watching aren’t enough, huh? Talking on some goddamn phone and singing about some big goddamn ugly bird scooping up some goddamn fish, that’s not enough for you. Now, you’re going to read?” He was raving now. “Now, you butthead? Now you’re going to read? Driving 50 goddamn miles per hour talking on the phone, looking out the goddamn window at some big goddamn ugly pelican, singing about some erratic goddamn teal. Now, you’re going to read?”

“Listen to you, Giff. House hunting is supposed to be fun. But, you? You’re stressed. It’s caffeine, Giff. Listen to me, friend, too much caffeine makes you crazy,” said Dempsey, picking up a cup of coffee with the hand that wasn’t holding the phone, the one that was supposed to be on the steering wheel. “See this here? Decaf.”

The papers in Gifford’s hands shook perceptibly, as he returned to that prayer-like position.

“Trust me on this – it’s the caffeine,” Dempsey added. “Now, pass me that fax.”

Gifford shook his head “no,” then just kept on shaking, until nerves and negation became nearly indistinguishable.

“Audrey, call out that address, would you?” said Dempsey into the phone. “Giff here is stressed out, won’t hand me the fax.” Dempsey jammed his left knee against the steering wheel, put down the coffee, picked up a pad and pen, balanced the pad on his right knee, turned his head to hold the phone against his neck, and scribbled the address. “Yeah, too much caffeine. Making himself nuts, all in a dither.”

Dempsey looked with sadness upon his passenger, who gestured sheepishly toward the road, as if to suggest he look there instead. “Audrey agrees about the caffeine, Giff,” said Dempsey, pointing at the phone. “Smart woman, that one. Says I’m like another brother to her. I don’t know what that means

exactly, never having much family myself. She's good, though, and makes a mean gumbo."

Dempsey did eventually turn his head, but not to the road, back to the bayou instead, still holding the phone against his shoulder, still balancing the pad on his knee, now scribbling. "Thirty-one sixteen, thanks, Audrey. Pair of mallards, Giff! To the left! They must be doing 40, maybe 45, nearly keeping up with us!"

Dempsey's knee eased the car through the curves as Wisner approached the Beauregard statue, near the entrance to City Park. "You guys are really moving! Quack! Quack!" he yelled toward the window.

Tensed and positioned for an imminent crash, Gifford didn't see the ducks. Nor did he see the large, five-bay, center-hall Italianate cottage just ahead on the right. It was mint, just as Dempsey had said. He pulled over to the curb, but did not stop the engine.

"Six fluted Corinthian columns. Central dormer with paired arched windows. Recessed entrance with a beveled-glass door. What you think, Gifford? Like this one?"

"Right near the bayou," he continued. "And, don't forget City Park. Not a half a mile from City Park. No, don't forget City Park, my friend. Fifteen hundred beautiful acres, Giff. Second largest urban park in America, man. Full of centuries old oak trees, friend. Look, here's a walking tour of the oak trees, Giff." Dempsey handed him a brochure. "Unbelievable, huh?"

“What you say, Giff? Like this one? Or would you like to keep driving?”

Dempsey gave the idling engine just a little gas, to punctuate the question.

“W-W-W-Where do I sign?” replied Gifford, still shaking.

“Great decision, Giff. You won’t regret it. Audrey, you still there? Bring over the papers, I think Mr. Gifford would prefer to close the deal right here.

Yeah, just like that Maxwell guy!”

* * *

A honk brought me to alert. I surveyed the traffic briefly, sipped my coffee, pushed my glasses back up my nose, and was out again, ebbing and flowing instinctually around potholes and school kids, slowing, stopping, speeding up again naturally, determining on gut alone which yellows to run and which turns to signal, thinking only of Dempsey, of what was going on in his car, in his life.

* * *

It was just about this time, sadly, that Dempsey’s eyes began to give him trouble. Nothing too serious – a little near-sightedness developing with age – nothing a pair of glasses couldn’t fix. He got an appointment to see Maxwell, whom Audrey recalled was an ophthalmologist.

The second Dempsey walked in, Maxwell began to express his love for the house he had bought. “I took your advice and put a cypress rocker on the front porch,” he said while fitting Dempsey with his new specs. “Marie and the girls rule the inside. Me, I practically live on that, you call it a gallery, huh, Demps? Porch. Gallery. Whatever. Can’t thank you enough, bud.”

The glasses were fine and over the next few weeks Dempsey continued to prosper in his work. In fact, the glasses gave his face a more mature, intelligent appearance, which seemed to help with clients.

One stifling August Tuesday however, Dempsey decided glasses really weren’t the answer after all. He was touring a Ms. S.L. Baldwin in the better Uptown neighborhoods, looking for “the perfect Queen Anne,” preferably with a tower.

Far too entrenched in his own life and work, Dempsey was not one to notice Ms. Baldwin’s appearance, how severe she looked, how rigid. Middle-aged woman, not unattractive, quite refined, well-dressed, but somehow severe. None of this would Dempsey notice.

In addition to houses, Dempsey was pointing out the great variety of flowers in the manicured gardens – showy hibiscus here, tender impatiens there, vibrant azaleas everywhere – while driving, of course, and chatting with Audrey via cell phone, and – well, since it was so hot, and since Ms. Baldwin, a Pennsylvanian by birth, of the Philadelphia Baldwins, yes, those Baldwins, was more game than she had first appeared – they were eating snowballs, too.

“Snowballs,” he had explained, “are not snowcones, or slushies, or freezies, or whatever it is y’all have up there. New Orleans snowballs are better because in 1936 a local fellow, out of necessity, you might say, the summer being so stifling, like today, invented the SnoWizard, an ice-shaving machine. One like no other. It shaved ice smooth and soft and fluffy and fine. To this day, his family still mixes potent syrups in dozens of sweet flavors. If you do it right, you pour this syrup on until it fully saturates the snow. Now, every summer, there are street corner snowball stands all across the city thick as mosquitoes in Barataria.”

Dempsey had gone on and on about the virtues of the snowball until Ms. Baldwin simply had to have one. It was, regrettably, his best sale that day.

For it was just then, as he sucked in a straw full of snowball syrup near the corner of Prytania and Valmont, his discourse on flowers evolving into a discussion of light, how the special light in New Orleans, that special blue luminance filtered by the steamy, subtropical air, mottled by leaves of a million cypresses and oaks and willows, bounced off the waters of a thousand bayous and lakes and sloughs and rivers, how that light had attracted artists as diverse as Clague, Boisseau and Vandechamp, Salazar and Drysdale, had attracted them all to this city to paint here, in that light, to paint flowers or peoples or buildings, each beautiful or old or majestic, decaying or in full bloom; it was at that moment, when Dempsey was finally finished reveling in how each in its own way reflected that light, loosing his full fine arts repertoire on an enthralled Ms. Baldwin, who despite her years of training in the field, had never quite heard art spoken of in

such a way, between bites of snowball, amidst gingerbread this and Victorian that, so passionately and with such pride, with such a sense of place, such depth of feeling, pure joy for the light, and space, and humanity of it all, it was just then that Dempsey's glasses slid slightly down his sweat-slicked nose.

It was then, at that very moment, with Audrey listening anxiously on the other end of the line, that Dempsey simply ran out of hands and necks and knees with which to drive, point, dial, and eat. So, as Dempsey reached to push his glasses back into place, he nearly – but not quite – put the first dent in his amazingly-still-showroom-new-looking Crown Vic. Dempsey found the brakes just in time. This time, however, even he was fazed.

Snowball, of course, went everywhere, putting a sticky sweet red nectar chill on the house hunting. A suddenly less game Ms. Baldwin brought the session to an unhappy close, and refused over the next few days to reply to Dempsey's offers to renew the hunt.

"Audrey," he instructed, "call Maxwell. I cannot bear these glasses any longer. They are simply unsafe and a detriment to my business."

On Friday morning, Dempsey was in Maxwell's office awaiting the laser surgery that would make his glasses unnecessary. He began to tell Maxwell about what happened, about Ms. Baldwin and the Queen Annes, about the gardens and light and snowballs, about how he could hear Audrey gasp when his glasses slid and he stopped short and how it cost him a lucrative piece of business, in short, about how dangerous it is to wear glasses when driving.

Maxwell was moved by the story and still in its sway as he began the procedure, right eye first. About mid-surgery however, Maxwell flashed back to a memory that he had until that moment successfully buried in a deep, dark corner of his mind. Still operating with the laser in his right hand, he reached with his left to his desktop where his Dempsey file lay open.

Maxwell rummaged around until he found the letter he had written months ago – but had never sent – roundly condemning Dempsey for his own terrifying experience in the Crown Vic. He read the letter – forgetting briefly about the medical procedure at hand – and grew furious again at what had transpired during his harrowing house hunt.

It was really no surprise in the end, that Dempsey's right eye was so badly burned that it would never provide vision again. The mystery is how his left eye, too, became so severely impaired.

Life was simply not the same for Dempsey anymore. He could no longer enjoy the return of the pelicans to Bayou St. John, nor the Uptown flowers, nor the massive oak trees in City Park and lining boulevards all across town. The Queen Annes and bungalows and Italianate cottages were but distant memories.

And, as for Audrey? Well, Audrey had a family to support, and Dempsey could understand that she needed to find a new job. But, oh, how he missed their chats.

Driving? Driving was a different story. Dempsey didn't miss driving at all. In fact, without all the distractions, he found driving easier than ever now.

And, since he limited his speed these days to what felt like, oh, about 35, his Crown Vic was still spotless.

3.

Off Course in Suburbia

Suburbia is where the developer bulldozes out the trees, then names the streets after them.

Bill Vaughan

The endless stream of speeding traffic spread across five lanes of concrete was the first clue that I was no longer on Wisner, next to the peaceful bayou. By the time I completely snapped to, I realized I was now heading west on I-10 in the nerve-jangling heart of Metairie, and what was next to this road was yet another five-lane river flowing the opposite direction.

Metairie, the main terminus of white flight in the 1950s and 60s, combines cheap imitations of New Orleans culture with the sprawl mentality of, say, a Houston. Except for the strip joints in strip malls in a failing entertainment district that once hoped to supplant Bourbon Street, for the prefab beignet stands barely reminiscent of Café du Monde, and for the soulless pre-Lenten processions that only in some cosmetic ways resemble New Orleans Mardi Gras parades, Metairie could be mistaken for any suburb anywhere.

No, wait a minute, did I mention nutria? Nutria are ugly, orange-toothed rodents the size of a healthy beaver but more akin to the rat in appearance. A South American native, the nutria was introduced to Louisiana a century or so ago as a curiosity in the menagerie of the Tabasco king. Curiously, the nutria has taken a liking to Metairie, living high in the open drainage canals that parallel many of Metairie's thoroughfares. The nutria, if nothing else, clearly set Metairie apart from suburbs everywhere.

Okay, so, the truth is, Metairie has some beautiful districts full of stately homes on tree-lined streets where a fine culture thrives, rivaling that of its more famous neighbor. However, such places lie quietly in the shadow of the Metairie I am driving through, the Metairie the name "Metairie" conjures up in the mind; that fine Metairie is but a remote oasis in this suburban Sahara.

I reached for my cup of coffee. I needed coffee. Facing Metairie without coffee was too horrible a thought. But as I lifted the cup to my lips, I noticed it was much too light, almost weightless, empty, although I couldn't remember drinking it all. I was far from work, even further from anywhere I wanted to be, facing Metairie – horrible – too horrible a thought without coffee. Even on a day like this.

Only the escape route out of Metairie is truly noteworthy – the 24-mile Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, world's longest bridge, which seems to span an ocean when no shorelines are visible mid-lake. Lake Pontchartrain, despite its beauty, is but an overgrown mud puddle however, no more than nine feet from

surface to mucky floor throughout most of its 625 square miles. And, on the opposite shore where a pristine Southern Pine forest thrived until recently, lies today only more suburbia known deridingly as “Metairie II.” On days like this in years gone by, the drive across the Causeway could be refreshing, sunlight dancing on the water’s surface, casting it that nourishing blue. But, there would be no time for that drive today, and unlike days past, it would have only ended in Metairie II, flushing out whatever joy the drive may have provided.

Although I would not cross the Causeway, I needed the Causeway exit anyway. I needed coffee. I needed to stop for a refill before facing any more of Metairie.

The Causeway exit is a classic Interstate cloverleaf – four loops, a hump, and a traffic jam set in perpetual slow motion a generation ago – all flanked by chain hotels, convenience stores, and gas stations. The prerequisite mall, Lakeside, is nearby, lying strategically between the I-10 and the 24-mile bridge, as are the mandated fast food joints, distributed at a typical suburban density, approximately 17.6 per 1,000 minivans.

So when I got off the I-10 at Causeway, I pulled into the first place that promised coffee. I wasn’t picky: even convenience store culture is bearable on a day like this one, a day when the blue finds its way even to the aging weenies on the self-serve roaster, making the 39-cent hot dog advertised on the storefront appealing, if only momentarily.

I poured myself a large coffee, stirred in some sugar, then tossed away the spoon – no, it was just a plastic stirrer, tough to measure out one’s life with one of these, I thought – and went to the register, where the old, dried-out cashier stood watch. The nametag pinned to her pink cashier’s smock identified her as Miss Francine. She or her smock or the store reeked of cigarettes. I think it was Miss Francine. She coughed just then, as if on cue, to validate my conclusion. In a just world, this poor thing would have been long retired, behind a double deadbolt, enjoying the soaps from a big avocado green sofa covered in plastic.

Miss Francine studied me warily, as she studied each customer, no doubt, certain one of us would be her killer. I was white enough or old enough or plump enough or enough of something to pass her inspection, and she let down her guard. Maybe it was the blue; maybe the blue had made it all the way to the register, but, Miss Francine even smiled, well, almost. Clearly, the raw, democratic, red-white-and-black, lotto-ticket, security-camera, kids-on-milk-carton, tabloid, beer-gut-hanging-out-of-t-shirt nature of a convenience store had taken its toll on her smile. But, all that was left of it, she offered.

She coughed some more, then said to me, “I just put them weenies on last night. They should be all right.”

“No thanks, Miss Francine,” I said. “Coffee’s what I need right about now.” I paid, wished her good day, and left.

When I got back in the car, I figured I should call the office to tell them I was running late. In a Dempseyesque move, I wedged the phone between my left ear and shoulder, sipped coffee from the cup in my right hand, and drove on.

Beside me was a minivan, mom in front retouching her lipstick as she drove, and her little boy in the rear. He was about three. He was strapped carefully in a kid's car seat which had for his amusement a colorful plastic steering wheel attached to it, decorated with smiling cartoon characters, encouraging him to drive, just like big people.

As I watched him, he watched me, too, one cheewee-stained hand pounding a Pokemon action figure against the window, the other occasionally on the steering wheel, but more often attending to his nose and the treasures within. Yes, he drove just like big people, I thought, as I took a sip of coffee.

I thought of my own wife and kids. I thought of Dempsey, and of poor Miss Francine. Poor Miss Francine. I was gone again, this time into her world.