



A Short Stroll ...

Our story this week is from another place, another time, and indeed, another world.

It is sometime in the mid 1970s, during the early years of my time working in the school music business in Canada. The owner Bill and I frequently attended meetings at various places in North America, and a 'not-to-be-missed' music educators convention was held in Chicago in the week between Xmas and new year.

During our time in Chicago each year, the days were always busy with meetings and buying/selling activity, while the evenings were of course full of social activities, many of them sponsored by major manufacturers in the field. One evening while we were there, Bill told me that we would be doing something a little bit different. One of his Chicago business friends had procured a couple of very difficult to obtain sports tickets for us - tickets to a Chicago Black Hawks hockey game at the famous Chicago Stadium. This was a real treat. As a child I had watched 'Saturday Night is Hockey Night' on TV, and many of the broadcasts had come from this stadium.

As game time approached, Bill and I grabbed a cab and set out for the stadium, but along the way, we got quite a shock. Over the years, there had been a tremendous amount of urban decay, and the area surrounding the stadium was like something from a post-apocalyptic movie. Entire city blocks had been reduced to nothing but rubble. It was possible to see the outlines where streets had been, but no structures remained intact; all that remained was piles of garbage and mounds of shattered bricks. The stadium itself stood in the middle of this zone, itself scarred and battered, but swarming with life, as thousands of people poured into it, coming out of their cars, buses and taxis.

We found our seats, and were astonished at how small the place was. Compared to today's cavernous stadiums, this place was tiny. We seemed to be hanging almost directly over the ice, and once the game began we could hear and feel every contact between the players as though we were in the game ourselves. The crowd was extremely raucous, and an astonishing amount of beer was dispensed by the sellers plying the aisles.

But as enjoyable as the game was, the most memorable part of the evening's 'entertainment' came for Bill and I at the end of the game, when we left the stadium. There was a long line of taxis waiting in the cab rank, but the lines of people waiting for them were endless. Bill was a very impatient guy, and there was no way he was capable of waiting in line like that.

"What do you think? Shall we walk? It shouldn't be too far before we'll get to a main road where we can flag a cab ..." It wasn't a question actually, as he was already heading off down the sidewalk in the general direction of downtown, so I of course quickly followed.

A minute later we were amidst the rubble. The noise and bustle of the stadium receded behind us, and it became dark. Very dark indeed. There were no streetlights of any kind, and it was actually a bit difficult to walk, skirting brick rubble and garbage on the place where a sidewalk had been.

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We looked at each other in an unspoken question, but there was no way that Bill would turn back. "C'mon. We'll be through this in a few minutes ..."

It got worse. It got darker, if that were possible, and we began to see people here and there. Not perhaps, the kind of people one would particularly like to meet up with in such an environment.

And then, in a squeal of brakes, a taxi that had been heading along the road towards the stadium did a sharp U-turn, and pulled up alongside us. The driver rolled down his window and yelled at us, "What the \$#* are you idiots doing! Get in! Get in, quick!"

We needed no further encouragement, and jumped straight in, then giving him the name of our hotel. As we talked, and he found out that we were Canadians, he shook his head. "I tell you, you two are *very* lucky that I got to you in time. Another few minutes and you would have been relieved of your wallets at the least, and possibly a lot more. You're \$#* lucky to be alive!"

Now how much of this was simply angling for a nice tip, and how much was the literal truth, we had no way to tell, but back at the convention the next day when we told this story, the reaction from Chicago people was unanimous. We had indeed, been very very foolish, and we were indeed, very very lucky.

Two naive Canadians going for a night-time stroll in what was at that time one of the most dangerous places on the planet ... Well, at least I'm here to tell the story!

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