

KENTUCK KNOB

We embarked from Braddock, Pennsylvania, where we stayed at a former convent now a rooming house for idealists attempting to turn Braddock into something it isn't and probably never will be again. Though the steel mill is still operating, barely, Braddock is basically a broken-down ghost town, despite the efforts of a small band of dreamers who have taken it upon themselves to save that beleaguered, dying place up the Monongahela River from Pittsburgh. Not much chance of a comeback but who knows; hope springs eternal. We were just tourists passing through. A couple days there with some excursions to Polish Hill in Pittsburgh and then time to start on the last leg of the trip back to New York. Riding in 'Amry', a mid-1990s Toyota Camry owned by Katie on which the silver letter 'C' had fallen off the nameplate on the trunk, therefore nicknamed 'Amry'. A trusty steed. Katie and Adrina in Amry, road tripping across the US of A, through Nevada, Utah, and Colorado, before picking me up in Kansas City. Spent the first night at a fleabag motel by closed-down strip malls on the outskirts that Katie had found for cheap, with hookers working the sidewalks outside, overseen by a family of harried Indians. Then headed east, on the road, buying camping supplies at Walmart, sleeping outside, swimming in lakes, through Johnson City, Tennessee, where we attended a high school football game, and eventually into Braddock. Now it was the final push and we were going to try and make it to the city by the end of the day.

That proved unrealistic since we lollygagged and didn't manage to leave until two in the afternoon. Typical. As we began heading southeast it was all of a sudden decided we should visit Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater. Wasn't it somewhere nearby? On the way? Let's give it a look, it's in the neighbourhood. Actually, that's misleading. Truth be told I'd investigated earlier in the day and found out it was about an hour south on PA Route 381 near the town of Mill Run, though I waited until we'd gotten rolling to casually bring it up and what do you know Katie and Adrina were game. They were game, overall. Their whims and wishes usually corresponded with mine. Our whims were one and the same. Things were very *simpatico* between the three of us, giving the whole trip a smooth congeniality coupled with a shared craving for adventure. So a little side trip to see Frank Lloyd Wright's residential masterpiece? Why not. Let's do it.

Finding Mill Run, we followed the signs to Fallingwater. It was a total madhouse. Overflowing parking lot, visitors everywhere, and the last tour had finished and anyway the admission price is steep and you have to make reservations months in advance. So it's not like there was ever really a chance to just pop in at Fallingwater. Turns out it's quite a popular destination. Well, damn, that sucks. Katie and Adrina wanted to park on the road and jump the fence and go through the woods but there were way too many looky-loos around, fucking up the programme. Discouraged, we went and got ice cream cones at the general store in Mill Run. Sitting outside, relaxing, licking the cool ice cream, I divulged another plan. As part of my earlier undisclosed research I'd discovered there was another Frank Lloyd Wright house, called Kentuck Knob, just a few miles away. Who knew? I didn't until that morning, and I'd kept that bit of information under wraps in case of just such a not-really-hard-to-predict predicament greeting us at Fallingwater. Kind of kept it in my back pocket and now as we watched the comings and goings of campers, hikers, and bikers milling about the porch of the general store, I said it's really close, we should check it out. They were game. Soon enough we were back in Amry and heading south on Route 381 to the turnoff at Kentuck Road.

And there it was on the left after a few curves on the two-lane country road. Or there it wasn't, because it isn't right by the road. There's a small ticket hut, and signs about tours and hours, all neither here nor there as it was five o'clock and closed. We ascertained the house was roughly half a mile up the hill. No instant gratification at Kentuck Knob but we'd come this far, and our Wright fixation, which didn't derive from any of us being Wright fanatics per se but the generalised iconic nature of his buildings and now this particular house's proximity to our current location, had evolved into a mission to see a Frank Lloyd Wright house, circumstances be damned. Which led to: why don't we just hike up there since nobody is around?

What's to lose? We parked in the driveway by the ticket booth and started up among eastern hemlocks and Virginia pines, and shady copses with the light slanting in at a pretty late afternoon angle. Bucolic. And quiet. Very quiet. Then we heard the sound of a car so we scurried off the road into the woods and hid behind some trees. It went by, going down, giving us the impression that the caretaker or whoever was leaving for the day and now it was wide open. Funny how you can be so sure of your suppositions when they fit into the achievement of a wished-for goal. We kept going up, sure now we were alone, not talking much in the dappled shade on our pastoral walkabout. Approximately 15 minutes later a structure came into view and that was Kentuck Knob. No doubt about it, right below the top of the hill, tucked away, and quite stunning in its unassuming way. A really nice house, Frank Lloyd Wright or not. Of course it was undeniably 'Wrightian', not just because we knew it was Wright's or had seen pictures of his homes but it had the unmistakable aura of something special, jewel-like, and it must be said, small. Not bloated or overdone, just right, and seemingly made for smaller people than the ones who currently trample the earth. Practically petite, the house, which added to its charm. Usonian, to use Wright's term, modest, single-storey, flat roof, with an overhang for the 'carport'. The details, the craftsmanship, well, they just don't make 'em like that anymore.

So that's it, Kentuck Knob. Nice, really lovely. Then we all went our different ways, in different directions, circling around and looking through the windows at the things that must have belonged to the Hagans, the family it was built for. A real museum piece, although it also looked like it might be currently occupied. Hard to tell. What a perfect way to see it, without meddlesome interlopers around. Just the three of us, revelling in our secret visitation, mixing gleeful trespass and illicit pleasure. When we regrouped by the front door Katie said she had to pee, and it was like, what's stopping you, just go over there, Frank Lloyd Wright won't mind. And she did. Hearing her do that behind a nearby tree added a freeing, earthy, natural cast to the proceedings. The performance of that everyday bodily function brought on a libidinal and titillating tenor to our encounter with the house.

It's pertinent to mention that Katie and Adrina, both just over 25 years old, are equally pulchritudinous—Katie with long blonde hair, Adrina's wavy red, each full of all the unbridled energy and erotic power conquering young womanhood can possess. Combined, a physical and psychic scattering of that clout emanated into whatever environment they found themselves in. Meaning whatever environment I found myself in, their decidedly older, very not pretty, masculine fellow traveller, more aware of these vibrations than they, due to a detached perspective accrued through age and experience. In turns endearing and infuriating, their (intermittently feigned, undoubtedly)



obliviousness to the effect they had on people, specifically the males of the species, had to be factored into any social equation. These repercussions had been a facet of the entire tour, not really commented on though definitely there. Unrestrained collective *joie de vivre*, not to mention short shorts and long tanned legs, and Adrina's penchant for not necessarily inappropriate but certainly could be construed as provocative bouts of public stretching, with straining limbs and other anatomical parts elastically unfolding and bending in all their somatic healthiness. It had been a factor in St. Louis while they danced to the sounds of the radio by twilight in a park by the Mississippi not far from some homies barbecuing and hanging by their donk cars, likewise with a couple of backcountry catfish mongers in Missouri who could barely reel their pendant tongues back into their mouths, as well as at the football game with everyone from pop-eyed teenage boys to leering middle-aged dads. On numerous other occasions it had been present and, you might say, simmering under the surface.

This interlude contrasted with those situations by virtue of its secluded, sylvan setting. The peeing on the ground had heightened the innocently lively and defiant atmosphere and somehow that led to, in the spirit of the communion with Wright's house, the childishly naughty notion that there should be some touching of the house. Really feeling it, coming together with it. Better yet, in a moment of mischievous inspiration, I proposed to Katie, 'You should rub your boobs on Kentuck Knob'. Without any further prodding she stepped to the carport, faced it, and pulled up her shirt to do just that, laughing, mock-moaning, carnally brushing against the house. Corporeal contact, breasts and nipples against ancient wood cut and milled 60 years ago, as Adrina and I watched, giggled, and exhorted, 'Yeah, do it, rub it'. A seriously sensuous melding of body and the manmade, playfully indecent and curiously wholesome, Dionysian without an X-rating. Not sure Wright would have approved, but we did. Giddy, we then left the house and walked further up through the trees to the top of the hill to be greeted by a vista of sublime western Pennsylvanian magnificence, with a long green lawn sloping down to a compound of farm buildings about 400 yards below. A house, a horse pen, a classic big red barn, and beyond that rolling hills and innumerable trees stretching into the distance.

And where we emerged, a big white teepee. An impressive one about 12 feet tall. Newish, with unblemished white canvas or some such material, well constructed, and perfect, teepee-wise. What was it doing there? A strange apparition we weren't expecting that fit perfectly into the magical trajectory of our spontaneous expedition to Kentuck Knob. Wow, a teepee, how 'bout that? The surrounding luxuriant grass proved so inviting Adrina and Katie immediately took their shoes off and started doing cartwheels and a back handspring or two, gambolling. Following those antics we went in through

the upside-down U-shaped door and lay inside on the soft long grass on our backs, staring up through the hole at the top at the circle of practically transparent blue far above. Peaceful, though after Katie's topless grazing of the house and the twirling and spinning and with the stimulating late-summer smells, charged. Languorous yet electrified, bodies close, hardly clothed, palpating. What might come next, well, the mind reeled.

Lying there, happy, irresponsible, lightheaded, and things did not go where the mind reeled and that's all right. Restraint has its virtues and this was one of those times because it was so perfect; despite what was in the air it was better to just savour the closeness and harmony while sprawled on the grass in that cocoon-like teepee. That went on for a while. Ten minutes? Longer? Time was not of the essence. Then it intruded, as it does. We'd been on our lark for quite some time and maybe it was time to think about getting going. I got up on my knees and peered out of the doorway. Far below at the compound I saw several people whose bodies and heads appeared to be turned in the direction of the teepee. And us. Did they know we were in there? Had they seen the gymnastics before? And who were they? Did they own the teepee? I turned my head and said, 'There are some people down there'. Katie and Adrina crawled over and we all beheld the small blobs of flesh- and clothing-coloured shapes conceivably beholding us. On all fours we exited and stood up. Then Katie impishly waved in their direction and they waved back. Or might have waved back. At that distance it was difficult to tell if they were waving in a friendly fashion or making some other kind of signal.

'We should go'. Which one of us said that, I don't know. Someone said it, or we all said it at the same time, and with the idyll splintered we hurriedly pulled on our shoes and started into the woods and back to the house when the sound of a car coming up the driveway made itself heard. Wasn't sure at first, faint, far in the background. This time it didn't seem so funny and insignificant like when we'd heard the car on our way up. We were trespassing, and the ramifications of that, no matter how minor, rose to the surface of our collective consciousness. The noise increased, gears shifting, coming our way. Naturally we ran off into the woods and started down through the forest, not really in a panic, though moving faster than we had on the way up. We stopped and listened. The slam of a car door, indistinct voices. Busted. Though not, because we had flown the coop just in time. Still, we were deep in the woods and half a mile away from Amry, which the people in the car must have passed on their way up.

Clouds previously light and puffy had sneakily coalesced and combined with the advent of dusk. It wasn't so sun-flecked anymore. Shadows and impending darkness. And suddenly dank and no longer paradisaal. Even a bit foreboding. We crashed and clomped down the incline triggering cracks

and snaps of twigs and branches. Anxiety crept in as we hastily bashed our way through the forest, scaring birds and small animals. And in a reversal of the usual phenomenon predicating that returning from somewhere you've gone only once without knowing the distance you're travelling always seems to go faster coming back, our retreat felt like it was taking longer than the ascent. Possibly attributable to our being sort of off track since we'd lost sight of the driveway and were now not really sure where we were going. Discombobulated, disoriented, we'd drifted too far into the woods. The only thing was to keep going downhill in the gloaming. I believe this was right about when Katie and Adrina both expressed the fear that we were going to get arrested. 'We're not going to get arrested', I snorted, as if I had access to a crystal ball on that account. I mean, c'mon, arrested for sneaking up to Kentuck Knob? Preposterous. But it was one of those verbalisations that once spoken infects a formerly carefree atmosphere and takes on an aspect of plausibility. That would really put a damper on our little escapade. Not the best way to end things.

With that outcome looming our mood darkened, dissipating the earlier prevailing cheeriness. Gradually the forest floor flattened out and we started hearing cars going by on the road to our right so we knew we were getting closer. The spaces between trees widened and we espied Amry with another car parked above it on the driveway. Not a good sign. We hung back, waiting. After a while, since there didn't seem to be anybody by that other car, it was decided we should go for it. Advancing with a peculiar speed-walking gait, just past the last trees we were startled by a woman's voice shouting, 'You three! What are you doing?' By the ticket hut that had been hidden out of sight a woman in her forties and a younger woman stood, the former in front of the latter, and the former plainly wasn't happy. 'We saw you up there, you're trespassing, and I already called the police!' She sounded very, very mad, and also had a phone in her hand, giving the impression she had done what she said she had done. In contrast to her outpouring of extreme displeasure the younger woman behind her didn't say anything and had a vaguely indifferent expression on her face. An odd scene, the two of them, one yelling, one silent, the pastoral surroundings, and the three of us, who had slowed down while continuing to advance toward Amry. And waving. Same as Katie's wave from the teepee, casual and rascally, our hands waved back and forth metronome-style at shoulder height as if they were hikers we'd met on a trail. A few more times she furiously repeated her mantra about calling the police and that we were going to be arrested. I'm fairly certain that's when I heard Adrina mutter, 'Oh, no' under her breath.

Jauntily gesturing, the three of us announced, practically in unison, 'We were just leaving', as if that explained and justified our presence. Katie, who had a sporadic habit of employing untruths to wiggle out of jams, lightly

offered, 'We were just walking in the woods by the road but we're going now'. I chortled when the lady spat back, 'We saw you at the teepee. We know you were at the house'. Her vehemence seemed disproportionate considering the circumstances, though on the other hand I guess technically we'd committed a crime. And she wanted us to know that she knew and now the police were on their way. 'Don't get in your car! The police will be here any minute'. 'Well then I guess it really is time for us to go', I replied. There were a few iterations of that exchange, her telling us to stay and wait, and us saying no that's okay no thanks we won't be staying for the police.

Confusingly right then another car pulled up but instead of the police it was a vintage Jaguar sedan. A really sweet one. With three passengers inside, who proceeded to get out. Right away it was evident they had an unmistakably British, aristocratic mien. Their clothes, their faces, their manner, it was immediately apparent they were toffs. There was a man and woman in their fifties, him with a distressed yet expensive sweater and wide wale corduroy pants of an autumnal hue, her wearing a long 'rustic' dress and obviously high-priced boots. Understated, the 'country' clothes of the landed gentry. The teenage girl who got out of the back seat was probably their daughter and though I don't remember her outfit she was fair and pretty and definitely blue-blooded. The encounter took on a bizarre quality, with the angry lady fuming up the hill on one side, us in the middle with our hands on the car's door handles, and now these newly arrived Brits blocking our escape route.

A humorous edge too, since the three from the manor born didn't appear overly perturbed. If anything they were on the verge of smiling. Not quite, but almost. Inscrutable Mona Lisa smiles. Surely a difference in their affect compared to the cop-caller. Bemused, possibly. Who were they? What did they have to do with what was going on? I wouldn't find out until later, though in the moment intuition provided some glimmerings into the truth of the matter. I hadn't thought of who owned Kentuck Knob, guessing it was part of a trust or a national historic landmark as opposed to privately owned. This trio projected entitlement, privilege, and a clear 'we own this' message. So the yelling woman was the caretaker or overseer of their property, and here were the owners, and we were in between. All instinct that didn't include particulars but when I looked into it the next day my hazy guess was for the most part confirmed. Peter Palumbo, also known as Baron Palumbo, a life peer, who at one time owned Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, is in fact the owner of Kentuck Knob. What do you know? Face to face with the possessors of the house we'd just illegally visited and some would say violated. An exceedingly wealthy English architecture collector, his wife, one of their daughters, with grand homes all over the world, who happened to be at this house the day we decided to intrude.

Well, it was time to go. Lord Palumbo said as much. 'You should be going', he advised. Not angrily, more a helpful suggestion voiced with a hint of gaiety. He waved off the custodian with a 'Let it go' movement of his arm, and as I looked from him to his wife I thought I saw what they saw. Katie and Adrina and their slightly grizzled elder chaperone having a roguish adventure, and instead of being irate they were amused and entertained by the diversion. The look in his eyes, and even more the one in hers, with a glint transmitted the sentiment, 'You three have been very naughty. You've had your fun now run along and nobody will be the wiser'. Especially with her. In my recollection I can see her on the brink of winking. Smiling back, I nodded, thankful for what I perceived to be their leniency. But, the police were still supposedly coming and that's when farce got silly. Once seated behind the wheel I couldn't get the driver's side door closed. With all the excitement I'd forgotten that, being messed up, the door often couldn't be closed all the way. Katie, because she had mastered the manoeuvre better than Adrina, would have to from the outside lift up the door and with her hip push it into place. We had laughed many times about the inadvertently suggestive bump-and-grind motion this required. So there we were, poised for our getaway, all the assembled actors watching, and Katie had to get out of the passenger side, come around the front of the car, do her thing, which she did with panache, sexily getting Amry operational, and sashayed around to her side and got in. That taken care of, we slowly motored past the Palumbos, who regarded us with their enigmatic, titled expressions. A minute later picking up speed heading east a police car passed us on its way to Kentuck Knob.