



THE WAY WE DO THINGS ON EARTH
FOUR DAYS IN THE GREAT AWAY

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY KYLE CASSIDY



Hey folks — welcome to another installment of the travel diary. Trillian Stars and I went to Anna and Gus' wedding in the early days of September, 2008. Following are notes from my journal and some photos I took. I slapped it together on the plane on the way home. If you find a typo, keep it a secret. This isn't getting revised.

Kyle

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The transition between Wyoming and Utah is dramatic. As the mountains flatten out beneath our eyes, the ground becomes colorful — we pass over a lake, blue, unreal blue, like a baby's eyes, then the mottled colors of marsh, pools, of water and greenery with the beauty of a sheen of a film of motor oil in a puddle — as the plane descends white dots which I take to be egrets, or maybe swans appear. I have no idea how high up we are, so they may just as well be mobile homes. Trillian and I press our faces against the window and stare at it all, speeding out before us.

“Oh, I miss Wyoming,” she says, “this makes me very homesick.”

We land and change planes. After we're all seated a grim looking young Air Force Sgt. gets on the aircraft carrying a flag under his arm. I'm sad but profoundly moved, realizing that there's a body traveling with us — this plane will land and disgorge its passengers to a host of fates — some to weddings, others to funerals.

Trillian and I are going to the wedding of Anna, one of her college friends.

“We were the Three Musketeers,” she says.

“Which one were you?” I ask.

“Athos,” she says without hesitation.

The Great Salt Lake is as impressive as the Grand Canyon. From the air it is a vast tableau of colors — red, blue, streaked and solid — impressive alien landscapes that I can't decide the viscosity of. Is this land? Is it water? Is it marsh? Lines that seem to have been roads

or trails at one time terminate in unlikely places, surrounded by nothing. I want to be on the ground.

The salt lake gradually changes into mountains — from under their broad, rocky shoulders jut Three Giants, Hood, St. Helens, and Raineer — St. Helens snapped in half, lumpish and irregular — its great head ripped from its torso and distributed around the world in a great cloud of ash. I never think photos taken from an airplane will be worthwhile and I've stuffed my camera into the overhead compartment. The view is so majestic as the Titans line up, crashing through the clouds that I snap a photo with my cell phone. Trillian digs her point and shoot from her purse and hands it to me and I take another.

We land at the gate and everyone is as still as a navy becalmed while the airman stands and leaves the plane alone. It's a tangible reminder of that great loss of life — the sight of young men and women escorting the bodies of other young men and women saddens me in a way that I can't articulate — such a grim and terrible duty — so much to ask of someone so young;—everything.



We gather our things and deplane. The shuttle to Fidalgo island takes an our and a half and involves a bus change in Mount Vernon. For the second half of the trip we sit behind two young Mexican girls who talk non stop on their cell phones. The bus drops us off five blocks from our hotel and we haven't walked 100 yards when a car pulls over in front of us and Anna, the very Anna, launches from it like a golf ball from a tee. She races towards Trillian and they embrace. Her fiance, Gus, and I shake hands. I've met them

once — a year before we stayed at their home for several days. I found them charming and kind. Gus won a Moonbeam award for a book he illustrated, I'm not sure if it was *Everybody's Somebody's Lunch* or maybe *Wind Bird*. It was probably the latter, but I just like saying *Everybody's Somebody's Lunch*.

They offer to pick us up and take us to the cocktail party after we get settled. We send them off, check in at the hotel and spend the next hour playing like children in the enormous suite Trillian's booked. Apparently made for a family of ten to stay a month, it has room after room, cabinets deliciously filled with plates, pots, pans, bunt pans, stand mixers, vacuum cleaners — everything one would need to wait out the end of days. And why not? Fidalgo's the crown jewel of the San Juan islands — largely, I suspect, because you can drive to it. Many of the 300 islands that make up the archipelago are accessible only by boat or by float plane.

The cocktail party is some 20 blocks away, at the home of a long time family friend named Ingrid — larger than life in every imaginable way. She leads the party with a garrulous laugh and rapid smile, orchestrating people, drinks and food, cooks scurry in and out, bartenders laugh and pour, everyone is having a grand time.

The only people I've ever met before are the bride and groom but this proves not to be awkward — extraordinary people seem to have extraordinary friends and I fall easily into eager and welcoming conversations. I'm trying to use mnemonics to remember everybody's name — a technique that I read in a book on schmoozing — and it's working pretty well. I'm surprised at the number of names I know after an hour.

I meet Anna and Gus' parents, and myriads of their friends from college and elsewhere. We eat, we wander around, admiring the opulent lawn and the never-ending house, pausing occasionally, daring to touch sumptuous wallpaper that gives a tactile response.

As the night approaches, Trillian and I go to find a place to watch the sun splash into the bay. Spying a house at the end of a street overlooking everything, we stand by the driveway holding hands.

"You can get closer," calls a voice — faces from the party — "this is my house. Come on and watch the sunset from the deck, it's magnificent."

So we go, feeling very welcome. The sky ignites reds and oranges, bleeding into a deep blue cut by clouds.

We're standing on the veranda with a cousin from Gothenburg discussing Swedish Pop Sensation, *Kent*. Like everyone else we've met, looks like a movie star.

In the distance there is laughter, approaching, and we can see Gus and Anna and Carla and Steve, the photographers (my mnemonic for them is "Steve Carlton" — the famous Phillies pitcher) followed by a few stragglers, heading down the lane to watch the same sunset. They pause at the bottom of a tree and there is much clicking and laughing. As they're leaving we run down to meet them. I hand Carla my camera and she takes some photos of Trillian and I. When the sun has played out its death scene to the dregs we all tramp together up the hill where the party has grown in our absence. There is a cheery blaze in the fire pit which takes some of the bite out of the air. We talk with Derek and Alex and Dan and Erin, two couples who went to RIT with Gus and I feel like we've known

them for years — like we've suffered from some amnesia, but fate has returned us to our circle.

With the party still in a splendid state we say our good byes and walk our jet-lagged selves back to the hotel with the aid of the GPS. "Don't worry," Anna calls out after us, "there's no street crime in Anacordes!"

I get up early the next morning and look for a place to photograph the sunrise, but am not having much luck — all the waterfront is fenced off — a local man suggests a hilltop several miles away, but there's no way I'll make it in time to meet the sun.

Trillian calls — she's found a place at the marina to the north. I walk to meet her through seas of ships in dry dock. She's leaning against a statue of a woman and child looking out to sea. I've made it to the water, but the sky is not cooperating — she holds back the sun from us. Today there will be no sunrise, it will just get brighter.

We meet Anna and Gus back at the marina at 9:00. Anna's father, Nick whom I'd met at the party the night before, (my mnemonic for remembering his name is "Nice Nick in the Naugahyde" — he was wearing a sport coat that looked like it was made of microfiber) lives on a nearby island where the wedding is taking place and he's bringing about 15 of us over on the boat.

The Veteran is an astounding craft (featured this month in a ten page spread in *Wooden Boat World Magazine*, by the way). Built in 1926 as a salmon purse-seiner its 65 feet along and 16 feet wide. The commute from Fidalgo to Nick's island takes about an hour. Trillian and I sit in the bow, taking the opportunity to shout "I'm on

top of the world!” if not actually, then at least in our minds. Cormorants fly in formation around us and a lone seal pops his head from the water and watches as we pass slowly by. Edie, Anna and Gus’ dog, is standing out on a rock waiting for us when we arrive. She barks excitedly and runs around in circles.

“She’s going to be so excited, “ says Anna, “she loves crowds.”

There’s no dock on Nick’s island and we anchor about sixty feet from shore and ferry to the rocky beach in small boats. The island itself is a northwest paradise acres of Douglass fir trees, easy undergrowth, a seven acre lake, and occasional wide clearings and meadows make up the landscape. Immediately upon the shore is a boathouse, followed by a hidden meadow, a stand of firs, and then another large meadow. In the first of these a dozen long tables have been set up. Trillian and I walk through a magic landscape — through pathways, to a small, hidden house with huge windows and a loft bed that seems the obvious extrapolation of Thoreau’s home in the woods. Nick’s father bought the land, 100 acres, during the depression for \$400. Its value today I can only imagine would send a Realtor into spasms of joy. Anna lived there as a child, so for her, it’s coming home.

Around the house and through the fields busy off-camera workers have created a tent village — several actually, each with their own sign designating the origin of the inhabitants “Anacordes” says one, “RIT Village” says another, “Georgetown” a third. These will house “intrepid” guests — including Trillian and me. And for the convenience of the intrepid guests, as well as others who will be joining us, three freshly hewn pine outhouses have been constructed — rustic,

and yet built with a precision of craft that defies many permanent structures — a clever turnpike announces whether the facility is occupied or not. A sink has also magically appeared in the woods — complete with a mirror and running water.

Trill and I drop our bags in our tent and set off to explore, hiking up the mountain through the wide open cathedral made by the enormous trees. Everywhere greens and browns, it's like being inside a bag of diffused light — moss and soft leaves beneath our feet. The forest wraps round the sound, its quieter here.

When we return, another boat has arrived, carrying Dan and Erin and Derek and Alex as well as the band. We point out our tent to our new friends and they set up their own in our neighborhood.

The band is, not surprisingly, made up of charming and affable people — one of whom it turns out is a boat captain in his spare time. We get along famously and I find myself marveling that you could select from this group of 120 or so five people at random and find in them the friendships of a lifetime.

At 2:33 a pontoon plane flies low over the island and lands dramatically in the bay. Everybody rushes to the shore and watches three women get out. They look at the anxious crowd a little uncertain of what to do — and we stare back at them a little uncertain. Are they Senators? Movie stars? Tycoons? Finally one waves tentatively and we all burst into applause. This is what we've been waiting for. A plank is produced and they come ashore. In the grand scheme of things, this seems entirely appropriate.

Nick is, by many accounts, shy, but you wouldn't know

it by the way he takes command of a crowd and holds them gently with wit and charm. At 3:00 a ship's bell summons us to a clearing by an unfamiliar shore and we walk down a dappled path to find seats in the woods. Gus and Hal, the completely adorable and entirely perfect minister (who, not one to rest his income solely on births, deaths, and weddings, also owns a bar called *The Brown Lantern*) await us all.

The band plays Pachelbel's Canon and Anna and her parents emerge from a distant path. Trillian bursts into tears and there follows one of the most wonderful weddings I've ever seen (and I hate weddings like Darth Vader hates ewoks) — punctuated by Edie who, at turns, rolls on the ground at Gus and Anna's feet, runs around them in circles, not understanding why she is suddenly invisible, and eventually begins to bring them sticks, hoping for a game. She is the joyful child, oblivious to the fact that this day is any different from any other day — and this one is perfect.

The wedding crescendos, culminates, and then disassembles joyously and we all return to the clearing for the reception — the band labors on, we eat our fill and are charmed — as the sun sets we gather at the beach where a tiny house has been constructed from wood. Throughout the day we have all written a secret wish on a card and stuffed it into this house. On the beach Gus sets it alight and it burns, taking our secrets up into the sky. As the house burns driftwood is thrown on it until a huge blaze lights the beach — music plays and Trillian and I sit arm in arm, as content as we've ever been.

I head back from the beach early and leave Trillian to her friends. The brightly colored tents are easily visible beneath the brilliantly shining stars. I lay on the

ground for some time looking up. Back home the sky is like a great inverted bowl of coffee, as brown as the Mississippi. Here it is a black velvet cloth scattered with luminous diamonds. The diaphanous belt of the milky way, a giant diffuse iridescence lights up the Earth around me. In the distance Duran Duran, then Billy Idol, then the Ramones, then Madonna ... my college years unravel quietly amidst shouts of joy. I lay there for some time watching the planet swing through the universe before I climb inside the tent and underneath the sleeping bag. The party is far off but reassuring.



At 6:00 the next morning Trillian and I pick our way through the sleeping village to the shore. The embers of the bonfire are still glowing in the wind and the tide has gone out. We watch the clouds blow in off from the direction of the ocean at incredible speeds and crash into the top of the mountain.

“If we were adventurous,” I say, “we’d climb to the top of the mountain and touch the clouds.

“Is that all it takes to be adventurous?” asks Trillian, laughing.

We pack our gear. Carla, shows me the amazing slide show she and Steve put together of the previous day’s events — any one of the photos is better than any of mine. I’m left breathless by their craft. I briefly consider giving up photography entirely.

“I teach workshops!” She offers helpfully. I’ve already learned valuable lessons from watching her work. Like it’s okay to blow some highlights if you blow most of

the highlights. I want to take one of her workshops. They were both consummate pros and very kind to me.

We say goodbye and leave on the first boat with Derek and Alex, they're giving us a ride to Seattle. On the way we talk like old friends and I realize I'll be very sad to see them go.

We take the ferry from Whidby Island, the same one from the movie *The Ring* — a film Trillian and I watched with some great result not too long ago. A critical scene in the movie involves a horse leaping off this ferry. I try and take a sinister photograph but am unable to. It just looks like a ferry.



Derek and Alex drop us off at the Olympic Sculpture Garden and I call our Seattle contacts, by a brain-bursting coincidence, also named Derrick and Alex. Derrick's in the area and I hear him shout my name about ten seconds after we've hung up. I've never met Derrick before — he was on the list of Seattle people for Armed America but wasn't home when Phil and I came through town. Now he's a system administrator at Microsoft, an airplane pilot, and the sort of all-around nice guy who lets strangers sleep in his guest bedroom.

We wander through the garden. I frown at nearly all the sculpture and can't help but wonder how far divested I must be from the art world that don't think a fifteen foot tall sculpture of a road cone is worthy of the time it would take to make and install. Perhaps it's not me though. Perhaps it's a collective madness on the part of the city of Seattle.

There is one sculpture that I like, the Neukom Vivarium by Mark Dion — it's a felled tree, brought down by an ice storm in 1996 and moved, whole, into an 86 foot climate controlled room and left to rot. Thought decompose isn't what I'd call it — instead of dying, this log has become an incredible source of life — it is covered with plants, covered with animals, ants, worms, make their home here, variety after variety of fungus, mosses — magnifying glasses are provided and we spend many minutes peering at small and unobserved things. It is more alive now I think than when sap was flowing through it. Who wants to be embalmed? This, my friends, is art.

From there we meet Jhayne who has ridden down on a motorcycle with her immensely cool mother, Victoria, in order to meet us. We first go to a coffee house and then to her friend Robbin's where we sit and talk and Robin amazes us by repeatedly solving a Rubik's Cube in thirty seconds or less, no matter how muddled we may make it.

From there, Trill and Derrick and I go back to his house and meet his charming wife. We sit up until the wee hours of the morning talking about fascinating things. We look at their wedding photos and spend a generous amount of time in a very engineer like endeavor — firing a potato cannon up into the air. The spuds rise up and up and up to amazing heights — crashing back down to the earth after ten or twelve seconds.

“You can shoot them into that wash-tub,” says Derrick, “they pretty much atomize if you do that.”

“Have you ever shot a baked potato?” Trillian wants to

know.

“They just come apart in the tube,” Derrick tells us.

The next morning we say farewell to two more wonderful new friends and get on the plane back to Philly.

I’m sitting next to a woman from Alaska named Diane.

“Do they have grizzly bears where you live?” I ask like a neophyte.

“Oh yes,” she says, “grizzly bears, polar bears, black bears, brown bears ... Seven years ago my husband and my pastor were out hunting moose and they saw a grizzly bear cub in a tree.

‘We need to get out of here,’ my husband said.

“And when they turned around, the mother bear was right there. She hit my pastor in the face — tore his left eye out, ripped his face open. She knocked my husband down and when she came in to bite him, he put his gun in her mouth and pulled the trigger.

“He wrapped our pastor’s face in the game bag they brought to haul meat and then he carried him three miles to the top of a mountain where he could get cell phone reception. A Blackhawk helicopter out of fort Wainwrights 68th Medical Company Air Ambulance airlifted them out. They put his eye back in and he jokes that he can see better out of it now.”



These are the people that you meet on airplanes. For the last four days I'd been thinking that we were having an adventure. It's easy to forget in my day-to-day life that around me people are experiencing catastrophes, whether being mauled by a bear, or accompanying the bodies of fallen friends or losing their houses — what I've had is maybe not so much an adventure as a pretty wonderful time.

I'm grateful for every tick of the clock.

Color Plates





































