

Incidents of Coincidence

Columbo claimed there is no such thing as coincidence, and I heard a preacher say “everything happens for a reason.” So where do the following tales leave us?

In my travels I spend more time than I care to admit sitting in airports, waiting for a flight to board. As with most guys, this activity includes what we euphemistically refer to as “people watching.” Being guys, generally we watch some people more than others. One Sunday around suppertime, I was doing exactly that in the Buffalo airport, hoping to get home from my weekend clinic with no major delays. My flight had just arrived from Toronto. After the passengers deplaned, it would be our turn to queue up and shuffle down the jetway to our seats. I watched the doorway as the passengers disembarked, again as guys do, assigning numerical values to the worthy fauna. One puzzlingly familiar form caught my eye—hmmm, by every appearance it was my own wife! She had been horse shopping in Canada and been bumped onto the connection through Buffalo at the last moment. Neither of us had any expectation of running into anyone we knew, much less each other. So we shared the next leg to Charlotte and then went our separate ways since our cars were at two different Florida airports. Late that night we reconvened at our home in Ocala. On the Coincidence Scale I give this one a 6 out of 10.

Back in the ‘80s, I served as the local organizer for several USDF Instructors Seminars that Major Anders Lindgren conducted in New England. These ran for five days, and it was customary for the whole group—25 or more—to dine (and party) together on the fourth night. Among my duties was the task of finding and booking a room at a suitable restaurant that could accommodate our needs, not an easy assignment in a relatively rural area. Consulting the Yellow Pages, I had located an out-of-the-way place and paid it a brief advance visit to be sure nothing would go wrong when we all assembled.

That night when we sat down to dinner in the upstairs banquet room, the Lindgrens were pleased to note there were several Swedish dishes on the menu—a surprise to me albeit a welcomed one. Amidst cheerful banter, drinks appeared. The gravlax was pronounced “excellent” by the Major’s wife, Puci. Entrée decisions were made by all. She chose the Beef Wellington.

Back story—Puci is a worldly lady, born in Czechoslovakia, a woman of strong opinions who had quite a life even before she met up with the Major. A former husband had been an hotelier and chef of considerable renown on the continent, and to say that Puci had always been a stickler about the quality of the service and how she was treated everywhere she went would be an understatement!

The meal arrived, and I was relieved when Puci was not only satisfied by her selection but couldn’t stop raving about it. “I haven’t had a Beef Wellington this good since the ones my former husband used to prepare. This is marvelous!” she went on.

As the party wound down, Mrs. Lindgren requested that our waitperson ask the chef to come out of the kitchen so he could be thanked and congratulated for such a fine meal. In conversation, first she discovered that he spoke Swedish. Then to her amazement, she learned that this gentleman working at a restaurant I had chosen practically at random in an obscure small town in Massachusetts had made “the best

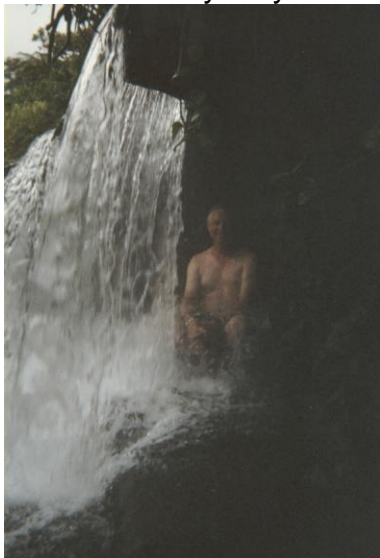
Beef Wellington since . . .” because he had been trained in Europe by the very chef she had been married to and was just following his recipe to a T! I’m giving this one an 8.

So I’ve been saving the best one for last: Tabacon is a hot springs resort at the base of the Arenal volcano in west central Costa Rica. It is large enough and luxurious enough that there must be a civilized way to get there, but I was transported there through the jungle and across a gorge on a spindly cable bridge on which the loose slabs of concrete deck rattled like xylophone keys as we drove over them. In other words, we were not exactly “downtown.”

At Tabacon itself, rich foliage and the chatter of monkeys and exotic tropical birds accent the pools and rushing waters. While maintaining the natural setting, engineers have channeled the downflow off the volcano so that in various combinations, cool waters flood over you as you recline in a rocky hotub; a steaming waterfall cascades onto your shoulders while you sit in a shadowed grotto; or you walk the bed of a “typical” mountain stream—strange only in that the water temperature as it burbles along is 105 degrees.



So there we sat, my hostess and I, far off the beaten track even by Central American standards in a delightful stone pool when along came a group of four more touristas. We felt uncrowded by their presence—the space was large, but their voices wafted across the water with undeniably Massachusetts inflections. Having lived up there for nearly 20 years before relocating in Florida, I struck up a casual conversation.



“Whereabouts in Mass?”

“Southshore,” one said. “Hingham.”

“Used to live on the Northshore,” I replied.

“Oh, where?”

“Just a little town outside Newburyport.”

“Huh,” she said, “I used to live up there too but in Byfield.”

Now Byfield was also where I had lived, a little Mayberry sort of burg that was so tiny and informal that the post office closed at lunchtime so the postmaster could ride his bike down to the bridge to fish.

Plunging on, I said, “Did you ever eat at The Grog? We used to live in the caretaker’s quarters on the estate of the guy who owned that place. Richard. Had formal gardens that looked out across the salt marsh and the Parker River.

A stunned silence from my new acquaintance. “*You* lived in Richard Simpkins’ carriage house? SO DID I !”

Thousands of miles away from either of our homes and removed by a dozen years, this stranger I met in the jungle not only hailed from the same town but had occupied the very same room I’d slept in for eleven years!

Take THAT, Columbo!