

The Apology

Last week, while cleaning my closet, I found a dust-caked leather briefcase with my old business card dangling from the handle. I carried it to my desk and pressed the release buttons with my thumbs, hoping they weren't locked. I'd never remember that combination.

The lid popped open, releasing a musky smell of old documents. I shuffled through file folders, pausing at one marked "Euro Trip—September 1990." A sharp wave of sorrow passed through me as scenes from that journey snapped into focus. The realization struck: Back then, how effortlessly I took my charmed life for granted. In that moment, my past appeared through a lens ground by years and experience.

Thirty-five years ago, on a Sunday, I dragged my two-week suitcase to the curb outside my townhouse. No fancy rolling bags for me, a forty-year-old gym rat. During business trips, I never lifted more than a beer stein. Some luggage lugging would do me good.

The sizzling sun broke through the haze, unveiling my suburban yuppie neighborhood. Shielding my eyes, I checked for my airport ride, which was due any minute. My wife, Marie, came out with the three kids for goodbye hugs and kisses.

Buzzing lawnmowers filled the air with the smell of freshly cut grass. Parents bullied kids into cars for dreaded church services. If I were being totally honest with myself, I was looking forward to the travel, although I was always homesick by the end.

My neighbors eyeballed my jeans and T-shirt as I jumped into a rock-star-type limo. Back then, business travelers dressed for networking. I was sure some of the rubbernecks had me pegged for a drug dealer. Only a few knew my real job. As Division Manager for Princeton Applied Research, I traveled in style.

As the limo cruised through my development past endless strips of three-story carriage houses, I said one last silent farewell to my family.

The driver stopped under the banner that read "Thank you for Visiting Tapestry East." He rolled down his tinted window and smiled in the rear-view mirror. "You sure you have everything?" I checked my passport and tickets. The drive to Newark Airport took ninety minutes. No time to turn around.

As with all of my quarterly European work trips, this would be a piece of cake: a two-week tour of company sales offices in London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Munich for business discussions and customer gladhanding, with the intervening weekend in a Euro-destination of my choice. This time, I was giving a research paper at a prestigious electrochemistry conference in Dubrovnik, Croatia. My company was well known there. What could go wrong?

On the plane, I read a travel brochure on Dubrovnik, an ancient city on the Adriatic Sea. A UNESCO World Heritage site, it was popular with European vacationers. The pictures of an archaic city sloping towards the water enticed me. I was a little apprehensive. With no business colleagues to translate Croatian and escort me around, I'd be on my own. Still, I had the weekend to relax, study my presentation slides, and do some sightseeing.

My first week was easy, as expected, two days each in the UK and the Netherlands. Both sales specialists took good care of me. The one from England was a great translator, British to American. Sometimes he'd mess with me, like when he dropped me at my hotel and said, "I'll knock you up in the morning." Didn't sleep well that night.

Back then, I had little knowledge of or interest in international affairs. My sole focus was on advancing my career and taking care of my family. All I knew about homeland politics was that we had a famous Hollywood actor in the White House. I promised myself that someday I'd take the time to get involved, maybe after retirement.

On a Friday night, I flew from Amsterdam to Belgrade, the capital of what was then called Yugoslavia, an hour's flight from Dubrovnik. The Dutch airport was packed with rude travelers, each determined to edge their way to the front of the line — nothing overtly aggressive, just a steady pressing against my back, waiting for me to stop paying attention.

Unlike my business dealings in Amsterdam, here I was seen as a typical American—too lazy to learn the language. Too spoiled to care what locals thought. One of my sales guys said, "With your clothes and mannerisms, you're easy to spot." If no one got too offensive, I'd just ignore the attitudes.

In Belgrade, I waited an hour in a crowded baggage transfer room and stood in a long Customs line. The sweltering room stank of body odor and cigarettes. When I reached the immigration agent, I was relieved to have a few square feet to myself. I flashed my most innocent smile. All I got back was a cold stare. He was slim and six feet tall, looking to be in his late twenties. Sweating profusely, he appeared uncomfortable in his uniform. He stood behind a tiny podium with a six-inch square of unfinished wood on top. I'd be pissed too if that were my desk.

My smile wilted as I held out my passport, opened to the proper page. Without as much as a glance, he slapped it out of my hand with his rubber stamp. What was his problem? If this were New York, I'd be yelling for his supervisor. No. If this were New York, it wouldn't have even happened. I considered the two machine-gun-holding soldiers in the room and wisely retrieved my passport from the floor. Eyes cast downward and feeling abused, I shuffled away.

As I left, the next guy in line yelled at the agent, in what I suspected was Serbian. I looked over my shoulder to see an older man angrily placing his passport onto the micro-desk, which supported it for stamping. OK, so I had broken the passport-stamping protocol. But the agent didn't have to be such an asshole about it. If he had taken a minute, he would have seen I was a dumb American and treated me with the respect I didn't deserve.

A few minutes later, I stood next to my suitcase, in the middle of another packed room. The passport-slapper moved through the crowd toward me. He stopped next to me and put his hand

on my shoulder. On the verge of tears, he spoke in broken English. “I had terrible week. This not your fault. Thought you were Croatian to joke and give me trouble. So sorry.” He apologized three more times before leaving, only after I shook his hand and told him it was OK.

I was glad to see him leave. I’d had bad weeks, too, but never took things out on strangers. Besides, I was sure his visit was the result of the ‘talking to’ he got from the old man behind me. But something in his tone was genuine, and his watery eyes confirmed his sincerity. I wondered how bad his week had been.

The flight to Dubrovnik went more smoothly, but something about that customs incident gnawed at the back of my mind.

As my cab rolled into the old city, its beauty gave me chills. We spiraled down from a hilltop on a narrow cobblestone street bordered with twenty-foot-high stone walls. Those fortifications, originally built in the 16th century, now accommodate shops and restaurants. The bone-jarring ride ended at a breathtaking marina on a crystal-clear aquamarine bay. A mixture of modern yachts and replicas of ancient tall ships set the tone of the city.

My hotel, Lero, was a low-rise that sloped down to a beach. Reception, two floors below street level, buzzed with briefcase-carrying check-ins that looked like nerdy electrochemists. In my opinion, I appeared to be a regular guy, a wise-ass Croatian, even. I recognized no one and heard no English spoken.

My growling stomach hinted it was time for an early dinner. I rode the elevator, barely big enough for me and my two suitcases, from floor minus 2 to floor 0. After stashing my stuff in the room, I recalibrated and headed for the street.

I explored, searching for a good dinner spot. Strolling toward the darkened marina, I passed closed stores and empty restaurants. My expectations deflated. Six p.m. on a Friday night, yet the streets were nearly empty. Small groups of local teens stood quietly along the sidewalk, talking amongst themselves. Their chatter stopped as I walked by. No nightlife at all. Something felt off. I chose a seafood restaurant that looked inviting from the street, but tables sat vacant inside. I asked the waiter why the city was so quiet. He shrugged, gesturing towards his mouth as if to suggest a language problem, and handed me a food-stained Croat-to-English menu, probably the only copy.

The spicy baked lobster entree was memorable, but the service was painfully slow. By the time I returned to my hotel, the streets were desolate. Back in Pennsylvania, no self-respecting teen would be home before nine o’clock – especially on the weekend.

The city’s strange vibe didn’t end there. At the hotel pool, a lifeguard was talking with other staff when I asked the best way to the beach. He looked annoyed and, after glancing at his friends, warned me that the beach was full of parasitic worms and I should not sit directly on the sand. I thought they were just playing with me, but I decided to stay at the pool.

Wherever I went, everyone seemed polite but edgy. Each new encounter made me feel more like an outsider. My initial excitement faded, replaced by a growing sense of alienation and uncertainty.

The conference was held at a 17th-century, dimly lit cathedral overlooking the water. I scanned the elaborate stonework, clueless about its architectural style. I did enjoy the striking contrast between the ancient church and the conference's new technology.

Extension cords lined the damp stone to connect the slide projector. About a hundred unpadded, wooden folding chairs were arranged in front of a cavernous room for the audience's discomfort. Attendees had to balance coffee and notebooks on their laps.

Despite high-caliber talks covering the latest research, the room's mood seemed subdued. The speakers' accents were impossible for me to understand, especially with the echo of the large stone room. Luckily, the English program books contained transcripts of each talk. Most of the attendees came from Eastern Europe.

My presentation was well attended. I described our new PC-based system for studying electrochemical mechanisms. Termed "Fourier Transform Impedance Spectroscopy," the technique probed a chemical system with a complex voltage waveform to produce an "equivalent" electrical circuit that mimicked its electrochemistry.

My examples showed how everything from corrosion-resistant coatings to fuel cells to neurochemical reactions could be modelled. Everyone seemed to be paying close attention, nodding to signal that they followed me. I'd come well prepared and ready for questions, but none arose. During the next coffee break, three professors who spoke decent English humored me with a few questions before quietly walking away. Despite searching, I couldn't find any other Americans or Brits to converse with. It was a lonely weekend. And the city's strangeness remained a mystery.

I spent the next week in Paris and Munich. A happier time filled with corporate camaraderie, well-pronounced English, and VIP treatment. Oddly, other than the conference proceedings, we never discussed my weekend. I worried it might show my ethnocentricity.

Later that week, I returned to my quiet life in the Philadelphia suburbs with a bag of gifts and hugs for all. I didn't mention my passport encounter because it still bothered me. What drove that guy to snap out at me like that?

I might have found out, but when most adults watched the news, I read technical journals with MTV videos playing in the background.

Three months after my trip, a full-scale war had erupted: The Croatian War of Independence. I developed an obsession with the news accounts of ethnic cleansing and horrendous war crimes.

The more I learned about the collapse of Yugoslavia, the more I understood the tension I had witnessed. Unbeknownst to me, things were already happening in remote locations during my visit. Later, in the siege of Dubrovnik, more than ten thousand homes and businesses were torched and looted.

To this day, brutal internet images of abused civilians, both women and children, have been etched into my mind. One in particular, of a young girl being dragged into a vacant building, struck a nerve. Something horrific could have happened to that custom guy's family. Eventually, generals were tried for crimes against humanity.

Over the years, images of that trip have haunted me. It must have been torture for the locals to pretend nothing was wrong for the sake of business, but they all saw it coming — everyone but me.

The city has since been rebuilt. A return trip has been on my bucket list for a while. My wife and I have planned to see it on a river cruise at some point. In my retirement, we've visited many of my old business destinations.

Maybe that picturesque city would be as welcoming and vibrant as I once expected. What if I ran into that customs agent? He'd be in his seventies if he made it through the war. I'd bring my digital translator. What would I say to him? Would he remember our encounter as vividly as I? At the very least, I'd owe him a big apology for the careless naivete of my young, charmed life.