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LOST IN THE MALL OF AMERICA

*"The difference between St. Paul and Minneapolis is the difference
between pumpernickel and Wonder bread"*

- Garrison Keillor

It had been a while since I had last been to Minneapolis. My visit, seven years ago, was punctuated by an encounter with the emaciated local formerly known as Prince in an elevator of the Radisson Hotel.

Now, I had flown back to the city for two days of discussion and meetings with the editors of a travel magazine who were under the erroneous impression that I might have something to contribute to their Advisory Board. The hotel where we were staying was just a few hundred steps away from the state of Minnesota's greatest single tourist attraction, and the most populated "tourist attraction" in the entirety of the Midwest, the Mall of America. It loomed on the landscape like some an architect's nightmare, all brick and boredom with small entrances on each one of its meandering sides.

I walked across the east parking lot, past a row of buses from places like Sheboygan, Merriville, and Danville, that were parked in the July sun waiting for their charges to return from the air-conditioning and the culture of the big building that sucked them in off the tarmac.

Seeing those long distance "air-cooled" buses with "emergency" restrooms makes you realize what a serious place this really is. People actually view the Mall of America as a destination, a place worthy of four or five hours of highway travel and a stop or two along the interstate, similar, I suppose, to the way that Romans look at Michaelangelo's' statue of David and the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

The size of the place is impressive in an institutional sort of way. Big enough to house a fleet of 32 747's, the Mall is home to 30,000 live plants. In fact, it would be extremely difficult to see it all in one day so, in the interest of journalism, I decided to return again tomorrow. I walked the MOA with my tape recorder and observed the most significant icon of American contemporary culture in the country. This is who we are. This is what we worship. This is where most of the greater Minneapolis area spends its winters:

The Mall of America does have a heart, a centrum, and its called Camp Snoopy. At seven acres, it's the largest indoor theme park in the country. Imagine the scene, five hundred and twenty stores centered around a six story high indoor park that manages to produce thousands of high decibel screams from real children all at the same time.

I discovered this phenomenon while trying to eat a leisurely dinner high above the action at the California Café. I sat out on a ledge at night with an entirely credible pepper-seared Ahi tuna followed by a dish of chocolate, cinnamon,

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pretzel ice cream. It was dark in the café, the food was wonderful and the service quite unmallish. I sipped a glass of Sovignon Blanc and started to relax when the screams nearly punctured my eardrum.

It was the sound of thirty children all strapped into a contraption called the “Mighty Ax”. This thing rose six stories and had a cubicle filled with seats at one end and an axe at the other. The ax moved and turned the cubicle moved went up in the air eighty feet, turned over, and did everything possible to induce a crowd of twelve year-olds to scream in terror. While this was going on, the giant Ferris wheel in front of me was cranking up, scaring the beJesus out of its occupants. Sometime between my tuna and my dessert, I decided that all Minnesota parents are essentially nuts.

Of course, you don’t go to the MOA to have a quiet dinner. You go to see and do as much as you can. If you’re from out of state, and slightly entrepreneurial, you go to look at businesses that are springing up in this high rent district.

Mock NASCAR computer racing is big. There are several in the mall, complete with real racing cars and computer simulation screens for real “drivers”, Each of these high-tech arcades was fancy enough to pass for a gentlemen’s club and each featured an adjacent racing wear clothing emporium.

The biggest line that I saw turned out to be in front of a store selling “smoothies” made of yogurt and “real fruit”. I saw “real fruit” being advertised in several places, leading me to believe that this may be a new concept in Minnesota. It’s sort of like “wow Jack – they got real bananas and peaches in there”.

It wasn’t long before I came across the Chapel of Love Wedding Chapel, which bills itself as “an intimate oasis surrounded by the fabulous Mall of America”. I mentioned to Angela that we ought to consider renewing our vows in the 75-seat “garden chapel”. Folks from just about every state in the union and “five” foreign countries have seen fit to get hitched up on the second level. And who said that all the class in the world was centered along Las Vegas Boulevard?

“I know what we’ll do Mom, we’ll get married at the chapel in the mall, then we’ll go get us some Cinnabun’s and shop for a while in Sears.”

Just past one of the stock car racing stores is the National American University, a rather ritzy looking place that trains computer technicians and those with less important natural talents.

The MOA is more interesting than Woodfield or Oak Brook because it has any number of hidden sociological treasures. Stores, devoted to narrowcasted individuals with excessive hobbies will find much to like here. There was a train store that imported German HO trains and converted the wiring to meet American standards. I spent ten minutes in a lovely store with silver metallic paneled walls to which were affixed thousands of refrigerator magnets expressing nearly any possible combination of ports team affiliation, social predilection, or political belief.

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I passed a shop that was doing a brisk business selling shirts that carried the message "Poor, Ugly, Happy".

The Runkel Brothers American Garage was a store that sold depression-era knick-knacks, highway signs and clothing from a bygone era. I liked it but I sensed that the mall kids walking by in their brim-backwards-so-I-look-like-the-dwarf-Dopey, baseball caps, and George Foreman long shorts, didn't have a clue about just what the depression era was, so why would they shop there.

There was a magic store that enthralled me for about a minute and a half. The store had black walls and ceiling and a lone employee who stood behind a long counter performing, or rather demonstrating his wares. The problem was that no one wanted to interrupt the act to actually buy anything. Still they must have sold some magic, rent at MOA has to be in the stratosphere.

I actually felt sorry for the clerks in the Lake Wobegon store. "Everyone listen up", I yelled from the doorway, "Garrison Keillor is off the air and he wasn't funny to begin with. Let's get a life here in Minnesota." They tried to sell me one of his tapes and a Lutheran whitefish cookbook.

I wandered into a place that looked like an old time store called the Farmer's Almanac. But then I started hallucinating on scented candles and calm. I rushed back out into the Mall, trying to find my way out. I was lost inside a building in the middle of America. I'm not a very good traveler.

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