

IBS Rides the Internet (A Fictional Memoir) **Ron Singer**

It has been explained to me that even my title is open to confusion. My intention was to suggest an analogue to a story by my namesake, Isaac Bashevis Singer, which is about a misadventure from the days before cell phones (and the Internet). In 'The Briefcase' the narrator is scheduled to give a lecture in Washington, D.C., but when he checks into his hotel he discovers that he has brought the wrong briefcase from New York, not the one containing his notes. Frantic phone calls summon both his wife and mistress (pardon the anachronism) and a comic denouement ensues. I forget if he ever gets the notes.

Anyway, when I told Zoe, my daughter, the gist of my own misadventures and mentioned my intended title, she informed me that IBS commonly stands for Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Are acronyms taking over the world? Wondering what my own initials, RTS, might stand for, I Googled them, and found references ranging from several Regional Transit Systems to *Radio televizija Srbije*.

Although I'm not a complete technophobe, I confess to an aversion to social media. The fact that I'm 76 may account for this aversion, but I do have my reasons. For example, I think social media are (is?) making people solipsistic and, in some ways, stupid, thereby exacerbating the global crisis of democracy. I only mention this aversion because it underlies the string of misadventures that comprise my narrative, which is now poised for lift-off, here at Cape Carnival.

The triggering event was a Facebook notification that arrived last Saturday evening, which indicated that I had received a Google announcement from the wife of John Solomon, a former colleague. A legend in the classroom, John was also an old friend and, until his knees gave out, my favorite squash partner. When I last saw him a few months ago he was slowly emerging from a supermarket, looking as if most of him was giving out. When I asked how he was, he told me he was suffering from heart disease and other unspecified ailments – unspecified, because he was still an ultra-Stoic.

As soon as I saw the notification, I said to Liz, my wife, 'I think John may have died.' She nodded, and returned to the *Times* crossword, which can be demanding on Saturday. When I tried to open the announcement, Facebook led me through an unfamiliar process that I imagined would lead to John's wife's message. It didn't. Strangely, it led to a different message, which happened to be about the death of a different old man, Tim Parker, a friend from my Peace Corps days in Nigeria during the 1960s.

This message came from someone named Robin Parker-Simmons, whom I guessed might be Tim's grandchild. Since I don't seem able to re-access the message now, I'll paraphrase it: There would be a funeral tomorrow, Sunday, for Timothy J. Parker, who had died at age 78. The venue would be Thomas B. Goode & Sons, Funeral Home, on the upper west side of Manhattan. To facilitate further communications with the family, would I kindly provide Robin P.S. with my e-mail address? I replied, indicating that I planned to attend, and providing the address. (Remember that!) I pushed buttons and hoped for the best.

This last-minute funeral would require certain adjustments to my Sunday schedule. I had signed up for a midday squash round robin (another coincidence!), which would have to be

curtailed. Luckily, the courts were only a dozen short blocks from the funeral home. Liz and I had also been invited to our daughter Zoe's house in Brooklyn for Sunday dinner at six, but unless the subways were even worse than usual there should be ample time for me to get there after the funeral. Since I now had a big day ahead, I made myself get into bed early. But Tim's death caused a lot of vivid memories to bubble up.

To call Tim Parker a friend is a stretch. In the mid-1960s, most Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) in Africa were teachers who worked at schools miles apart and rarely saw each other. Although the P.C. supplied us with Honda-50 motor scooters, some PCVs secretly purchased bigger machines. An engineering graduate of a mid-western university, Tim, sporting leather regalia, bombed around on a big Norton modified for the tropics. Our clique of scooter and motorcycle riders dubbed ourselves the Ekiti Brothers, after the province where three of us worked. In a way, we were sort of a thinking man's Hell's Angels. Not that we were violent. I mean, Tim was a particularly gentle soul, and we were all in the *Peace Corps*, which most of us had joined to avoid the Viet Nam war.

We were once in a roadside bar, a typical mud shack with a corrugated tin roof, when, before we could even order our drinks, the ragged young proprietor cried, "Ah, Americans! Yes! Let me show you something!" He rushed to the back room and a minute later returned with a 45-rpm record, which he carried with the utmost care, like a crown on a cushion. With equal care, he placed the record on a small plastic machine and set it going. When we heard the scratchy lyrics, all five of us, including the Brother known for the least self-control, managed to limit our glee to broad smiles:

When it's pea-picking time in Georgia,
Apple-picking time in Tennessee,
Cotton-picking time in Alabama,
It's girl-picking time for me!

After expressing suitable appreciation, we ordered the usual local beer. 'Warm', we specified, since, by then, we had all become acclimatised. When the beer came, we settled into a desultory debate about the singer's identity. For some reason, we didn't ask to look at the label, and only years later did my musician son-in-law inform me that it was Jimmy Rodgers. He also corrected me: the first line was, 'When it's *peach*-picking time in Georgia.'

Recalling those days prompts both pride and mortification. The pride comes from my accomplishments as a PCV. For instance, I helped a colleague who had some construction experience lay out tennis and basketball courts at our school. Since then, whenever I see a Nigerian in the NBA, I enjoy a moment of pride – unearned, since, as far as I know, no basketball pro ever attended that school.

Associational thinking applies not only to dreams but to night thoughts. In this case, the 'court' theme brought me back to John Solomon, my still-living ex-squash partner. John introduced me to the sport during the summer of 1979 when we both happened to be in Oxford, England. In his delightful, peremptory manner, he suggested we meet early the next morning and that I bring along my sports kit. When we met, he silently led me past the house of the Master of the College where he was an alumnus and through the gardens to a building that looked like a big shed. Stepping over a high threshold, he flipped a switch and I found myself in a big boxlike

structure with white walls and red lines. ‘Here’, he said, extracting a racquet from his own kit. ‘Let’s get started.’ Thus began 39 delightful years, and counting, of squash.

Back to Nigeria, 1965 or 1966. An even more laudable project than the courts was helping to raise money for a social club where the elite from the town’s multiple ethnicities (Yoruba, Edo, Ibo, Hausa-Fulani, etc.) could amicably drink and play darts or ping pong. Of course, this feeling of accomplishment has been marred by the fact that my tenure witnessed the ethnically-fueled political crisis that led to the horrific Biafra war.

As for the Easy Rider act of the Ekiti Brothers, it was innocuous enough, I suppose, although we certainly made fools of ourselves. If we did any real damage, it was probably to the already war-tarnished reputation of the United States.

Perhaps our most outstanding folly was an eight-millimetre home movie that we made over the course of about a year. Although this movie was supposed to be a sort of lampoon of the real *Easy Rider*, it was closer to the *Keystone Cops*. The main action had us riding around the countryside, stopping to whoop it up at bars like the one where we heard the song. Instead of provoking violence from local bigots, however, our antics provoked unfeigned hilarity in the delighted onlookers and contributed to the local economy.

The film’s plot, such as it was, conflated the resource-looting theme of *Heart of Darkness* with the work of Dr. Albert Schweitzer. A main prop was a big piece of wood, painted white to resemble, faintly, an elephant’s tusk. Wearing a pith element, a long-sleeved safari shirt, and baggy pants belted at the chest, my character was called Dr. Cyril Schmutzer. In several scenes, I tried to lobotomise one of the Brothers, on the theory that this would turn him into a virtuous Christian. When I finally succeeded, the guy who played my victim, a recently deceased, non-observant Jew, made a very funny tropical zombie. We called this concoction The Lesson, because we framed it as a blackboard lecture on morality by Dr. Schmutzer. Tim, the gentlest, kindest Brother, played a feral gang member.

I forget how the movie ended, but I do remember what happened to the only copy. After his Peace Corps days, the guy who shot it (who went on to become a documentarian of minor note) moved to Roxbury, in Boston. When his apartment was robbed, he spent days and nights searching through dumpsters and garbage cans and posting reward notices, all to no avail. Oh, well, *ars longa*.

At some point, my night thoughts segued into memories from family history on my father’s side, many of them ludicrous. A notable one was the funeral of my aunt Rachel. In the course of repeating it over the years, I may well have mythologised this event. Since for some reason I attended it alone, and since I have lost touch with that side of the family, there were no witnesses. As Liz, who is an artist herself once remarked, after listening to another supposedly true story, “You’re a writer, dear. You make things up.”

Aunt Rachel had been a committed member of the Workmen’s Circle, a progressive, pro-labor group that still exists. I remember the funeral as a duet. The first voice was that of the presiding official, a sort of secular cleric. A very short man with a small mustache and an extremely nasal voice, he based his eulogy around the cliché that life is like a book. The line I remember is, ‘If some of us leave behind large, even massive tomes, full of adventures and accomplishments, Rachel’s book is a slim volume containing but a single theme, her beloved family.’

I think I must have been in college at the time, and both of Rachel's sons were already grown men. I remember them as a pair of big round heads in the front row of the room in which the service took place. At this point in their lives both were fat, like most of my dad's family.

While I was trying not to laugh at the ridiculous eulogy, I was also regaled with a private lecture. This was a shouted whisper in my ear by an uncle-by-marriage sitting behind me. Family legend had it that this man, a large, stooped, beetle-browed German-Jew who married into our Ashkenazi family, was a dull-witted lawyer whose practice depended on the Albany connections of his clever wife, another aunt, who was either a secretary to powerful politicians, or scrubbed their floors.

'Ronny', the lawyer kept saying, in a deep, loud whisper, with his strong accent, 'why don't you ever visit me at the office? Come up some time! I'll show you around, take you out for a nice lunch.' He repeated this invitation, or plea, several times, only shutting up when Rachel's sons simultaneously swiveled their heads and made exaggerated shushing gestures. I remember tears running down their faces, which I suppose were prompted not by indignation over the loud whispering or by the eulogy but by their mother's death.

At around two a.m., I mentally strolled through the paternal portrait gallery. It was quite a collection. Among my uncles were a hard-drinking longshoreman who lost a leg to diabetes (they all had this disease) and who was married to a jolly, forbearing Polish woman who looked like a polar bear; and the eldest brother still alive, by the time I came along, a cab driver and bookie, bald, saggy and fish-faced. When my dad would take me to see the Knicks or fake wrestling at the old Madison Square Garden, I remember this uncle leaning against his cab door, near the 50th Street entrance, counting money and chewing on the stub of a disgusting cigar. His wife, as I recall, managed a department-store cafeteria, Macy's or Gimbels.

My dad's sisters were also what were then called 'characters'. In addition to the two already mentioned, there was a zany former ballerina married to a Hungarian anarchist whose day job was as a fur cutter. Since fur-cutting was a seasonal, piece-work occupation, this sallow, seedy uncle-by-marriage seldom seemed to be employed, leading to my industrious father's jokes, such as that his brother-in-law never went out on a job in winter (too cold) or summer (too hot) or autumn (a leaf might fall on his head). (What about spring?) The name of this uncle-by-marriage was Manny, which prompted my dad to refer to him as Manual Labor. I think I inherited the paternal gene for waggishness.

At any rate, by the time I dragged myself out of bed that Sunday morning, my main worry – selfish, as usual – was how I would manage to get through the round robin without injury. (The motto of aging squash players is, 'live to play another day.') In the event, the squash session, though truncated, went fine. During a break, when I told my partners where I was going afterwards and mentioned the odd pathway by which the invitation had arrived, one of the younger players explained that this was how the Facebook messaging service worked. He said that he had once had a similar experience, where he tried to open one message and found another one.

Reassured, I finished playing, showered, dressed, and started for the funeral home. At five minutes to two, half a block from Thomas B. Goode & Sons, I started searching for familiar faces. I saw only one, a medium-sized old boy wearing the costume of an academic: tweed jacket, glasses, and a woollen tie. Although we were heading in the same direction, the man did not look like an Ekiti Brother, or, for that matter, anyone else I had ever known. Nor did he acknowledge me. Of course, we might both have changed beyond recognition.

As I walked through the main entrance of the funeral home, the uniformed doorman did not ask me to open my backpack. This was a surprise, since you might think that these days funeral homes were inviting targets for terrorism. The shabby vestibule and the receptionist carried me back to funerals of the past, including Aunt Rachel's.

Since I had no idea what had become of Tim Parker over the years, I anticipated that, for me, the eulogy might be what my duller pedagogical brethren sometimes call 'a learning experience'. But maybe one of the Ekiti Brothers who had kept in touch would say a few, or a few thousand, words, about those disgraceful old days.

'Can I help you?' asked the receptionist, a heavy-set man of a certain age. Even his smile seemed muted, a hedge against the presumed grief of his interlocutors. When I approached the table, he did not stand up. 'Yes, thanks,' I replied. 'Timothy Parker, please. I'm an old friend.'

The man looked baffled. Checking his handwritten list of the day's funerals, which was very short, he shrugged. 'I'm afraid I don't see that name. We do have a service at two, but the deceased is...' and he gave a different name. 'Are you sure you're in the right place?' He mentioned a nearby, rival funeral parlour.

'Huh!' I said. Extricating my old-fashioned print date book from my backpack, I showed him the name and address of his own establishment, which made him raise his eyebrows and think for a moment.

'You know,' he said, 'our two o'clock is on the fourth floor. Why not go up and see if you recognise anyone?'

'But ... why?'

He shrugged. 'Stranger things happen. People change their names and so on. It will only take you a minute.' He pointed toward an elevator at the rear of the lobby. Mostly from curiosity, I walked across and pushed the button. Running the elevator when it came was a young man, also in a dark suit, who seemed to be playing a card game on his smart phone during our slow ride.

When we reached four, I found myself in a generic, old-fashioned chapel with pews and some religious paraphernalia. Although by now it was a few minutes after two, people were still milling around, greeting each other, signing a guest book and beginning to get settled. Their faces wore the usual range of funeral expressions, from solemn (the majority), to determinedly cheerful (some) to devastated (a few). I spotted the tweedy professor and a round-faced young fellow of about twenty who looked familiar. But neither they nor anyone else looked anything like Tim or the three other Brothers who, as far as I knew, were still extant, and whom I thought I might have recognised in their current incarnations. Obviously, I was at the wrong funeral.

After a minute or two of wandering around staring at people, I noticed a big bouncer-like guy giving me the eye. So I threaded my way against traffic, and took the elevator back down to the lobby. Still at his table, the receptionist beckoned me over.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I checked our database.' With a shrug, he gestured to a desktop computer that I could see through the open door of an office. 'No record of any funeral for a Timothy Parker during the last six months.' I thanked him and left.

Back on the street, I felt at loose ends. I was not due at my daughter's house for three hours and she had told me she was working a co-op shift this afternoon and her husband was taking my grandson to a Pokémon tournament. Walking toward the subway entrance on Central Park West, I cut through the small park that abuts the back entrance to the Hayden Planetarium, which, in turn, abuts the Museum of Natural History.

What could have happened? When in doubt I call Liz, my go-to confidante. When I told her about the non-funeral, she was as puzzled as I was. ‘I’m right behind the Planetarium,’ I said. ‘Since I have three hours to kill, I think I’ll walk across Central Park to the library.’ I was referring to a private library we belong to, on East 79th Street. ‘It’s such a nice day.’

‘Good idea.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Wait a minute! Didn’t your friend Tim die a while ago? Am I crazy? I think we were on vacation somewhere and I sort of remember reading about it in the paper.’

‘Huh! Now that you mention it, I vaguely remember the same thing. Or was that a different Peace Corps friend?’

‘No, I think it was Tim.’

When we had repeated our plan to meet at Zoe’s house and disconnected I decided I was too tired even to walk to the library. I would just take the subway home. If the train gods were smiling, I could drop off my squash kit, have a nap and still get to Brooklyn on time.

This plan worked. At five forty-eight, I was walking up the hill from the subway when who should I see coming down the hill but Liz. The fact that we met right in front of Zoe’s house – Liz had taken a bus from her studio – seemed like an uptick in fortune. We hugged, rang the bell and went inside to a cheerful dinner. Our nine-year-old grandson ate everything, laughed at all my jokes, and joined in the conversation, a large part of which focused on my Internet misadventure. Liz repeated her hunch that Tim had died previously.

This pleasant dinner and the swift resolution of my confusion confirmed my sense of a turn in fortune. The resolution was my son-in-law’s doing. After listening patiently to my account of the mix-up he cleared it up, elaborating on what my squash partner had said. ‘Liz may be right,’ he explained. ‘When Google messages accumulate, and you try to check one, they sometimes key you into an old one. That’s what must have happened. I bet if you searched your friend on the ‘Net, you’d find out he died a while ago.’ To his credit, my son-in-law did not show a trace of the condescension that I, an ignorant old fool, deserved. Such a simple explanation for such an apparently complicated string of errors!

He was right. When I got home, a search readily yielded a paid Death Notice for Parker, Timothy J. that had appeared in *The Times* about a year before. Included among the relatives of the beloved deceased was a grandson, Robin Parker-Simmons.

That might have ended the *IBS* saga, but – surprise! – it didn’t. This morning, six days after the non-event, I received an email from Robin. It occurred to me that this might be a response to my belated acknowledgment of the funeral invitation, in which, you may remember, I had provided contact information.

The first part of the email was sweet. Tim had often reminisced about me and the other Efiti [*sic*] Brothers. (A Freudian typo?) He had mentioned what a smart, funny guy I was. Then came the kicker:

The other day, Mr. Singer, I gave your contact info to the other surviving member of the gang, Peabody Farnsworth, whom I met at my grand-dad’s funeral. Mr. Farnsworth emailed me, and said he wanted to get back in touch with you. My bad, for not asking your permission first!

Oh, no, after half a century! Pea Farnsworth, the butt of all our jokes, and, if I say so myself, a ridiculous buffoon! During one drunken episode, this sloppy prep-school groupie had belched

and farted simultaneously, prompting Tim to quip, ‘Shot out in front, and blown out behind.’ We must have repeated this witticism a hundred times.

Extrapolating, I’d guess that by now Peabody Farnsworth, Esq. was a retired, thrice-divorced insurance executive, who maxed out his credit card every month and suffered from obesity and related ailments. But I didn’t have to guess. Scrolling through the rest of my emails, I found one from peafarn@gmail.com. Before I open it, let me guess what it says:

Yo, Ron Singer, how’re they hanging, Bro? After all these years! Remember me, Old Pea Farnsworth? Since Tim, Jerry and Ben have all bought the farm by now – sad, very sad – you and I should get together *pronto* (while we still can)! From time to time, I train down to the Big Apple from this dull CT ‘burb, so what say we knock back a few brews and swap some lies about the old days? Remember ‘The Lesson’, Bro, in which you starred as that brilliant *savant*, Dr. Schnitzer?

Aside from three minor details, my guess was right: Pea lived not in Connecticut but Westchester; instead of ‘a few brews’ he suggested dinner at an expensive restaurant; and he referred to me, correctly, as Dr. Schmutzer.

Thus are we all dogged, for better and for worse, by the mistakes of the past.

Ron Singer has written and published extensively about his family, and Africa. He is the author of Uhuru Revisited: Interviews with Pro-Democracy Leaders (2015).