

**One of my earliest recollections**, probably as far back as the days when I could first comprehend language, is hearing about Buffalo, New York and Niagara Falls. Buffalo is ultimately where I am from. We moved to Chicago in 1960, and I have lived in Illinois ever since, but in 1957 I was born in Buffalo, at the eastern end of Lake Erie where it drains into the Niagara River.

Not until 1967, though, did I actually see Buffalo again, on a return trip with my brother and father, to see the old house on May Street in a quaint and safe neighborhood with shaded brick streets, and welcoming grandparents resting on the front porch. But beyond our visit with relatives, I also longed to see Niagara Falls, because I thought of the falls as one of America's wonders, in the same vein as the Grand Canyon, the Statue of Liberty, the Rocky Mountains; Niagara Falls was a place for entertainment, astonishment, and fear; a place of pure power on display. I recall now that I did not seem to think of the Niagara Falls as part of a river system that itself provides a connection between two of the Great Lakes—

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Erie and Ontario—though my father may have educated me on these facts along the way. I was nine years old after all, and it would be many years before the term “drainage basin” was in my vocabulary.

This year, returning to Buffalo and the falls after nearly 40 years, I was not sure what to expect. I showed my wife, Julie, the old house on May Street, now with new owners and surrounded by a neighborhood that looked bombed out and finished, gang symbols on many of the buildings, broken or missing windows on most, a few others barely standing. But it was not this house or its trashed-up environs that drew us to Buffalo from central Illinois. It was the Falls, and a chance to see my aunt and uncle.

After our family visit, we approached the Falls not as one would travel to a single place to see an amusement park or a freak of the nation, but rather we traveled from the mouth of the 36-mile-long Niagara River at Lake Ontario, upstream to the Falls, in order to view them in context. At Lake Ontario, the Niagara River is about one mile wide and sluggish, giving no hint to the sublime ferocity, magnificent horror, and beauty only 13 miles upstream. From the walls of old Fort Niagara, we could barely see downtown Toronto, 30 miles across the lake; and in the other direction, the invitingly blue Niagara River gently curved to the right, with its variety of recreational craft lazily traveling to and fro.

From Fort Niagara southward to the city of Niagara Falls, we had few glimpses of the river. But soon we came to the top of a hill with the city in sight, and only the briefest view of a misty cloud hanging motionless in the river gorge: spray from the Falls themselves, where the entire Niagara River pours over a sheer cliff, reaching speeds of 68 miles per hour, falling as much as 173 feet.

For the first few miles below the Falls, the Niagara River is unnavigable, except for the famous “Maid of the Mist” tour boats that bring death-defying visitors into the spray of the Falls where the river is flowing fast and deep, as deep as the Falls are high. Downstream, the rapids of the

Niagara Gorge are as wild as any river could get; despite urbanization, tourism thrills and rip offs, and intensive use of the river for hydroelectric power, the river flows through the gorge as it will—white water, boulders, undertow, whirlpools, drawn by the force of gravity; water seeking its level.

Goat Island is located in the Niagara River, within the rapids and water racing to the edge of the Falls. Upstream of Goat Island, the river is rather placid, without much suggestion—except for the increasing rate of current—of what lies below. At the upstream end of Goat Island, there is a point called “The Parting of the Waters,” where the Niagara River splits, 90 percent going toward Horseshoe Falls, the rest toward the American Falls. At the point of split, the current gives the impression of having stopped completely, appearing safe and inviting, especially on a warm day when a visitor would like to cool off. But one must not be deceived, for below the point terror is waiting, if one were to yield to temptation. The current rapidly speeds up to about 25 miles per hour, and quickly rolls over a series of rapids as wild as anything below the Falls. And in a short space of time, the edge is there, a point of no return, and a quick drop onto a boulder field designed by nature to leave no survivors—although over the years a few lucky souls have made the journey and lived to tell their tales.

The commercial exploitation of Niagara Falls for tourism is to be expected, and it is inescapable, with gambling casinos, bright lights, souvenir shops, and all the rest; but the natural forces driving the Falls are much greater and have not been overshadowed. As my wife and I stood in awe at the grand, rumbling spectacle before us, I recalled myself as a nine-year-old boy, gawking at the same view, and I thought about how that sight may have inspired me over the years, and how my perspectives on life, rivers, and the Falls have grown and become spirited with knowledge and enhanced with age.

Later, on the same trip, we stood on a footbridge over the Galien Riv-

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er, within an old-growth beech-maple forest at Warren Woods, Michigan. As I watched the slowly flowing waters beneath me heading toward Lake Michigan, I was suddenly reminded as never before of the connections; how those waters were destined to pass through Lake Michigan, the Straits of Mackinaw, lakes Huron, St. Clair, and Erie; past Buffalo in the Niagara River; past the “Parting of the Waters,” to continue toward the point of no return, a minuscule part of the 4 million cubic feet per minute flowing over the edge so many miles away.

There are many places in this world worth visiting and many rivers I would like to see. But in my recollections and mind’s eye, none are like the Niagara; it’s where I came from, after all, and one day my wife and I shall return, though we may not wish to wait another 40 years.