

Only three months after I fled China with my last tour group, I volunteered to return to the tumultuous land on another tour assignment. Follow The Pseudo American on the bumpy path of the American journey.

The Pseudo American

By John T. L. Lu

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11387.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

THE PSEUDO AMERICAN



JOHN T.L. LU

Copyright © 2020 John T. L. Lu

Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-068-2

Epub ISBN: 978-1-64719-069-9

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-64719-070-5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2020

First Edition

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 - A Chance Encounter.....	11
CHAPTER 2 - Summer Heat	26
CHAPTER 3 - Prelude to Sin.....	49
CHAPTER 4 - A Blurry Line.....	79
CHAPTER 5 - Silent Envy.....	107
CHAPTER 6 - Desert Fair Lady	116
CHAPTER 7 - Getting Acquainted	173
CHAPTER 8 - Bathtub Stopper.....	185
CHAPTER 9 - Anglican Church Bell.....	217
CHAPTER 10 - Speculation	247
CHAPTER 11 - Mirage of Montparnasse.....	264
CHAPTER 12 - Return to China	294
CHAPTER 13 - Exit Visa	323
CHAPTER 14 - Reluctant Tourist.....	333
CHAPTER 15 - Coins and Dollar Bills.....	340
CHAPTER 16 - Girl with a Lion's Mane.....	366
CHAPTER 17 - Musty Old Things.....	377
CHAPTER 18 - Old Golden Mountain	391
CHAPTER 19 - The Great Western.....	412
CHAPTER 20 - Thrill of the Hunt.....	419
CHAPTER 21 - Finger in a Hole.....	425
CHAPTER 22 - Asian Phobia and Carrot Juice.....	431

CHAPTER 23 - Faux Angeleno	443
CHAPTER 24 - The Muddy Art Trail	450
CHAPTER 25 - Brown Water and Green Jade	457
CHAPTER 26 - Legion Patria Nostra	467
CHAPTER 27 - Alas	476
CHAPTER 28 - Starry Starry Night	497
CHAPTER 29 - Scavenging	505
CHAPTER 30 - End of the Rope	509
CHAPTER 31 - Blank Canvas	516
CHAPTER 32 - Location Location Location	522
CHAPTER 33 - Chattanooga, Africa	527
CHAPTER 34 - Sea of Flames	532
CHAPTER 35 - Quicksand	538
CHAPTER 36 - New Kid on the Block	544
CHAPTER 37 - Not So Subtle Hint	553
CHAPTER 38 - Straight Jacket on the Stage	564
CHAPTER 39 - Knowing is Half of The Battle	569
CHAPTER 40 - Aim High	579
CHAPTER 41 - New Kid No More	587
CHAPTER 42 - Unauthorized Euphoria	593
CHAPTER 43 - A Piece of Paradise	600
CHAPTER 44 - Perestroika	611
CHAPTER 45 - Forever Young	618
CHAPTER 46 - Barbarossa	626

CHAPTER 2

Summer Heat

For the remainder of July I worked consecutive three-day-turn-around tours. While some long haul tour managers put little value on these local programs, I saw these short trips as constant refresher courses on operations and logistics. Short-burst tours not only provided opportunities for me to refine my handling of roadside situations, they allowed me to sharpen my interpersonal skills via a wide range of clientele.

“You doing okay, John?” As an experienced manager, Anita had seen tour guides burn out and gradually lose their fervor for the job.

“Yeah, other than a bit hot in the desert, but I’m good.” I had no problem running “local tours” when my fellow senior tour guides were assigned to Europe; it was only fair that other tour managers get to spread their wrings over long-haul programs. After filing my end-of-July tour report Anita began to brief me on my upcoming Europe assignment.

“You’re taking OEU0815 (Overseas Europe, Aug. 15 departure), so far 34 pax and growing.” Thirty four meant the group was a solid go. At times a group would get postponed or canceled if it didn’t reach a minimum passenger count.

I waited for the punch line, “And...?”

“There’s a family of VIP’s with two pre-teen boys. These folks live in the ‘mini Versailles’ in Carmel Valley just north of San Diego,” Anita said.

“Did you say Versailles? As in the palace in France?”

“Yes, the family lives on a lavish palace-like estate.”

“Then why did they sign up for a group tour? Why not do the VIP experience on their own?”

Anita chuckled, “The husband read about your OEA0602 in the Chinese papers and signed his family up for OEU0815. I guessed they’re curious about you.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I was annoyed. Why on earth would anyone do that?

“Anyway, they are surprisingly easy-going people. Just keep in mind that they would prefer dining as a family whenever possible.”

Tour members dined together as a group at designated restaurants whenever a meal was included since groups were often short on time. Restaurants catering to tour groups typically accommodate us with large banquet rounds or long farm tables, depending on the region. What Anita hinted was for me to exercise discretion and afford this family privacy whenever possible without upsetting other tour members.

A week later I met my OEU0815 tour members at the Pre-Departure Luncheon. My prospective tour members seemed more fascinated with OCA0602 than their own upcoming Europe tour. The “Versailles family”, or the Cao family, did not disappoint as they inquired about European museum etiquette, lunch arrangements since lunch was not included, among many practical matters for an extended bus tour.

“John, when did you go to Cambridge?” Mr. Jason Cao asked.

“Summer of 1985. I was only there for a summer art program.” I made it very clear that I was never a student of

Cambridge University, but a member of Denver University's 1985 summer art program at Cambridge University.

"And you subsequently backpacked through Europe?" Mrs. Margie Cao inquired from her notes.

"Yes, I covered a few countries in Western Europe."

"We would love for you to share some of that experience with our boys and maybe someday they could explore Europe as you did!" Mrs. Cao added.

"John, what was it like during the Tiananmen Square protest?" Mr. and Mrs. Tom, a couple from Temple City, California, seemed eager to learn about OCA0602.

"Let's focus on addressing everyone's questions and concerns on the upcoming trip and I promise you I'll share the Tiananmen Square experience with you when we have down time over there." Who could blame them? The internationally telecasted incident took place merely two months ago, and dramatic media coverage remained fresh in everyone's mind.

"See you all at the Tom Bradley Terminal in a week!" I waved goodbye to my prospective tour members.

"John, by the way, you're going to Grand Canyon tomorrow." Bob, our tour director who oversaw customer relations, handed me the paperwork for my next trip. I appreciated the frequent tour assignments since I didn't have anyone to spend my down time with.

"Bob, uh, 37+1? Am I sharing room?" I didn't mind sharing room with a tour member since not all single travelers would splurge on the additional cost for a single room.

“Not this time buddy, the odd numbered traveler is a female,” Bob pointed out.

“Okay, is she hot? Am I sharing room with her?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, you barking dog,” Bob brushed me off.

August in Southern California was consistently hot, not Arizona or Nevada hot, but warm enough for us spoiled SoCal residents to want to take refuge in air-conditioned malls. On a sizzling summer morning, a group of 37 eager travelers were ready to sample the ruthless desert heat via the Grand Canyon route. I arrived at the Ritz Tours plaza at 7:00 am which allowed me sufficient time to get acquainted with my driver.

“Hi! How are you? I’m John, your tour guide for this trip,” I was not familiar with this driver, but then there were ample new drivers during the hectic summer season.

“Hey, I’m Jack,” The barrel-chested man gave me a stern handshake. “Why haven’t I seen you around?” Jack asked. “I typically work with Michael, Jeff, and Robin,” he replied while double checking the air conditioning belt.

“I worked mostly overseas routes,” I replied.

Jack gave me a disapproving look, “So you’re one of them long-haul tour managers, yeah?” It was important to establish the hierarchy from the start. I need to quickly win over my new driver’s friendship and trust. Additionally, I must assure the man that I would not short-change him on his gratuity at the end of the trip.

Jack glanced at my cowboy boots, then looked at me as if he had unveiled a mystery.

“Say, ain’t you the guy who got the group out of China a couple of months ago? Yeah, you and your cowboy boots man, ain’t too many Asians sport them fine boots like you do!”

I reckoned Jack and I could be friends.

“Bud, you take care of the road, I’ll do the rest and I’ll do you right, no worries.” The new driver and I broke the ice and established the pecking order, and then it was time to gauge the earning potential by studying the group dynamics.

Of the thirty seven passengers, three quarters were couples, two single men, and one single woman. Elderly couples were not likely to buy into optional tours. Thankfully, there were only three pairs of seniors. Couples in their forties were my prime audience as they were likely financially secure and willing to splurge. While I was confident that both single men would buy into optional tours, I was unsure of the single woman. This group had the potential to be lucrative.

“Good morning!” I greeted everyone over the microphone, “My name is John and I’ll be your guide for the next three days.”

Jack maneuvered the bus out of Ritz Tours plaza and steered the giant beast onto Atlantic Boulevard toward the 10 Freeway heading east to our first stop at Lake Havasu, Arizona, some three hundred miles away. Although it was only 8:00 o’clock in the morning, the thermometer on the bus instrument panel already reflected 89 degrees Fahrenheit which meant the temperature would soon reach 102 degrees once we hit Barstow, the gateway into the Mojave Desert.

“How many of you are visiting California for the first time?” I didn’t actually anticipate many show of hands; it was just an icebreaker. Yet one hand raised quite literally before my eyes. It was the single woman in a yellow windbreaker who occupied the seat next to me.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“London,” The brunette answered with a British accent.

Intrigued. I pressed on, “You do realize that this is a Chinese tour, right?”

“Sure, but I was told by your office that you spoke some English.”

Stunned by her quick wit, I recomposed myself. “Alright then, if I mess up please feel free to correct me, my lady,” I bowed.

She smiled and nodded without further jabs.

The English woman had fair complexion, light brown eyes, and a tall nose bridge, yet her oval face yielded a hint of the Orient through her high cheekbones and almond shaped eyes.

“Brilliant, we shall have a jolly good time in the bloody desert!” I played it up.

“And what’s your name, my lady?”

The brunette sat sidesaddle, leaning against the window, and responded, “Annie.”

“Annie is it? Right, everyone, let’s welcome Annie to our great state of California.”

The cabin erupted in a thunderous applause.

I hollered at the two young men napping in the back of the bus, “Uh, hello, guys, excuse me, it is eight o’clock in the morning.”

One of the guys open his eyes and hastily woke his buddy who remained drowsy. “Sorry.”

“What are your names, gentlemen?”

Both guys sat up, “We’re Kevin and Scott.”

“Is that like a band?” I mocked them, hoping they could be my go-to comic relief for this trip. “You know, like Simon and Garfunkel.” My remark evoked laughter from those who were well versed in the American popular culture.

For the next hour, passengers introduced themselves while I acted as a show host, interjected stories and teases in both English and Mandarin. An hour and a half elapsed before I rested the microphone and afforded everyone a moment to take in the barren desert before taking the aisle seat next to Annie in the front row, directly behind the driver.

“How long have you been doing this?” The English woman asked.

“On and off since 1982,” I replied, before leaning forward to insert “Watermark”, by Enya, into the motor coach’s cassette deck.

“You’re quite good at it,” she complimented.

“Well, thank you! Actually I feed off the audience, and a good audience like this group tends to bring out the best in me.” What stage entertainer wouldn’t adore a responsive audience? “So what brings you to L.A.?” I asked.

“I’m on holiday.”

“Alone? On a Chinese tour bus? I find that hard to believe.” I was not flirting, but trying to decipher this tour member’s background.

She smiled, and turned toward the window without answering.

I ceased my inquisition on the lone vacationer and made my way through the motor coach to allot attention to all passengers. By the time I returned to my seat, the brunette had dozed off. I let the Enya tape run its course, then placed the cassette back in my entertainment center, a travel case containing a variety of soundtracks. Although the air conditioning was running at full throttle, the aging blower on the ailing MC-10 bus was no match for the ferocious desert sun. Temperature in the main passenger cabin continued to rise as we entered the high desert. When Jack noticed the air conditioning gage wigwagged toward red, he immediately downshifted and pulled the bus into a resting area minutes before Barstow.

I gently tapped on the microphone to wake my napping group, “Folks, let’s take fifteen minutes to stretch your legs and use the restroom.”

The English woman sat up from her cat nap, “Are we there?”

“No, my lady, we’re merely outside of Barstow. C’mon, pee pee stop, let’s go!”

Some tour members took the opportunity to acclimate to the desert heat by strolling along the rest area, but most retreated back to the comfort of the motor coach after having sampled the grueling inferno.

“Jack, is the AC belt solid? Are we good?” I sought reassurance from my driver, not wanting to repeat last summer’s fiasco when our bus AC belt snapped and left us strained by a tiny desert town named Kelbaker under the 108 degree heat.

“Don’t worry Tonto, I got this.” *Tonto? Shouldn’t I be Kemosabe?*

After the brief restroom break, our bus labored on to highway 40, or the old Route 66, toward Arizona. Once bustling with business, the “business district” off Route 66 had reduced to a handful of boarded up shacks surrounded by layers of tumbleweed.

The lone female traveler marveled at the desert scene, “We’re certainly not in Europe or Hong Kong that’s for sure.”

“Do you also work out of Hong Kong?” I asked.

“Right. I work for a multinational marketing firm, so it all depends on where the company needs me.”

“What exactly do you do if you don’t mind?” I figured her for the office type.

“I’m in charge of international marketing projects for the firm,” she replied without divulging details, which meant she either didn’t want to brag or was not telling the truth.

“Impressive, especially at your age.”

Annie took offense, “I beg your pardon? At my age?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude but, it’s just that there aren’t too many marketing executives in their twenties.”

Annie laughed, “Twenties?”

“You don’t look a day over twenty-eight, and I am a very good judge of age!”

“Twenty-eight?” Evidently I made her day through my deliberate miscalculation.

I continued, “Uh, okay, sorry, twenty-six? C’mon, I can’t be that far off!”

“Oh, John, you’re a sweet lad, but let’s not get carried away here.” We both laughed. “Say, your English is far more proficient than your office staff described,” she added.

“One hour to destination Tonto!” Jack interrupted me before I could rebut, putting a stop to the flirtatious exchange.

She lifted her eyebrows and tilted her head to the side, “Tonto? Did I just get you in trouble with your Kemosabe?”

I winked at Annie then reclaimed the stage, “Annie, since you are from London, do you care to share the story behind the nursery rhymes ‘London Bridge’s Falling Down’, my fair lady?”

“It was about the London Bridge being in the state of disrepair,” Annie answered properly.

“Correct. And like all emergencies around the world, there was always that bloody Yank to save the day, yeah?” I continued, “Mr. Robert McCulloch, founder of Lake Havasu City resort, bought the bloody bridge and had every piece of masonry shipped to its current location in 1967. And by 1971 this original London Bridge proudly sat across the mighty Colorado River as a tourist attraction.” I returned to my seat after sharing additional insight of our first destination of the day.

“This heat really isn’t bad at all,” the English woman said, “At least it’s dry heat,” she continued, “Have you ever been to Europe, John?”

“Yes, I did a summer at Cambridge before backpacking through Western Europe,” I took a gulp of water and continued, “In fact I’ll be taking another group back there next week.”

Annie’s eyes widened, “Really? You guide in Europe as well?”

“Yes, I run a sixteen-day tour out there covering eight countries.”

There was something about this passenger that made her easy to talk to. By the nature of my job I could strike a conversation with anyone, but this woman’s caring gaze and her inquisitive tone sent out all the right signals. Sadly, she was under my care, and I was on the job. I grew increasingly depressed when we chatted about my studies at Cambridge and my impression of England, because for there could only be superficial flirtation between us and nothing more.

Annie glared at me with disdain when I unwittingly gave her my naive impression of English women from my initial visit to Europe.

“Bloody hell, you didn’t just say all English women have Clydesdale size ankles!”

I chuckled nervously and regretted my blatant stupidity for blaring out my thoughtless observation. “But I was 20 years old and that was my first trip abroad, so please do forgive my ignorance,” She still seemed annoyed.

“Well, my academic advisor at Cambridge told me that my description on English women’s ankles equals that of an Englishman declaring all Chinese women had bound feet.”

Annie looked even more irritated, “I’m half Chinese,” she said.

We looked at each other, allowing the pregnant pause to dissipate, then burst out laughing at my silly tale that went from bad to worse. “Oh, boy, I think I dug myself a deep one this time. Maybe you can dig me out with your hoof?”

“Grow up!” She chortled, while wiping away tears from the jolly good laugh.

Overhearing my goofy romp with the passenger, Jack gave me a glance via the rear view mirror and shouted, “Fifteen minutes to destination, Tonto!”

How I wished this woman was not under my care as I truly would love to know more about her, but I digressed. “Folks, we have an hour and a half here. Be sure to put on some sunscreen and wear your shades and hat. You will need it,” I reminded everyone on the intensity of the environment.

The group disembarked, with some holding on to their sunhats, resembling an iconic photo from the Vietnam War in which soldiers held on to their helmets as they leaped out of the helicopter.

Kevin and Scott wasted no time in inviting the English traveler to lunch.

“Hey Sacagawea, be sure to guide Lewis and Clark on the right track,” I shouted out to the party.

Annie playfully looked back and gave me “the bird”. Bloody hell, the English woman was well versed in colonial American mannerisms. People signed up for group tours for different reasons. Some simply would rather leave driving and worrying to the professionals, some sought camaraderie, and others desired measured solitude; my fair lady seemed to suit the last category.

“Jack, wanna get a burger?” I tended to my driver who was sweating profusely after locking up the bus.

“Man, you could talk, most guides just let them sleep,” Jack took notice.

Jack and I seated ourselves on the red vinyl stools by the counter. The 1970s’ pale green checkered design counter had faded from age and wear. Layers of grease on the giant exhaust hood above the grill served as a testament to its faithful service over the years. The elderly waitress, whose skin had seen excessive sun exposure, dropped both baskets of frozen fries into the deep fryer before tending to Jack and me with her note pad.

“What can I do you boys for?”

“Havasu Burger with fries and black coffee for me ma’am,” I ordered my usual with sunny side up egg on the double meat patty with cheese.

The weathered waitress turned to Jack, “And what would you like sweetie?”

“Double cheeseburger with fries and a coke please.” Jack was very low maintenance.

“Thank you boys. It’ll be just a minute.” The waitress hollered at the cook before clipping our ticket onto the wobbly order wheel.

“Say, where did you pick up them boots? You just don’t see Asians with cowboy boots!”

“Picked up the habit in Colorado. You should’ve seen the look on them European folks when they saw me in my blue jeans and cowboy boots on my Europe route.” I took a sip of my hot black coffee to Jack’s disgust.

“How can you drink that stuff in this heat?” Jack sneered.

I took another sip from my cup. “Why, it cools me off on the inside,” I chuckled.

“So how long did you live in Colorado?” Jack asked.

“Through all four years of college,” I replied.

“Why on earth are you doing this gig if you’re one of them smart college boys?”

Jack came from a small town in Idaho where it lacked commercial opportunities. For Jack, one had to be crazy to want to take a job that required lengthy time away from family.

“My ex-girlfriend back in Hawaii bought me a one-way ticket to Los Angeles and got me this job with Ritz Tours.”

Jack laughed, “Is that so? She must not like you very much and wanted you out of her sight.”

I laughed it off; too complicated to explain.

“How about you? Why do you do it?”

Jack took a big gulp of the glass of ice cold Coca Cola, “I’m divorced. My old lady cheated on me with my high school buddy.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

The seasoned driver lowered his head, “Well, it was nearly over anyway, and when I got on the road, things just went south.”

“Everything happens for a reason, right?” I patted my bus driver on his broad shoulders.

“I just thought you college types would have gotten some fancy pants office job or something, and I overheard that you went to Cambridge University in England? Boy, you’re way overqualified for this!”

“I had done my share of office work, but if you meant Corporate America, well, my friend, that was never in the cards for me.” I never regretted not taking the convenient “Chinese immigrant path” by becoming an accountant, a dentist, a doctor, or a financier. For my goal was simply to immerse into “my America”, find my “Americanism” and enthrall in the world of fine art; but it would be pointless to elaborate.

I straightened up my posture, wiped the remnants of egg yok and burger grease off my mouth with a piece of napkin, and began to mingle with my tour members who chose to dine in the comfort of air conditioning.

“Kate and Bill, you guys doing okay?”

“Jason, wow, dude, did you ordered everything on the menu?”

I made the rounds and chatted with all my passengers before heading out.

“I’m gonna check on our people outside, meet you back on the bus.” I was ready to journey into the fiery rays.

“Why are you going out there? Man, it’s hot, just meet them back on the bus. Look around you, more than half of the bus load are in here!” Jack could not understand my wanting to get out to the punishing sun.

“Well, it’s the job buddy, I need to make sure the ones who are not in here are doing okay out there.” Nothing better illustrates my care for my tour members than having me accompany them under adverse weather conditions.

“You’re nuts! Other guides would just hang out here and meet them back on the bus!”

“Right? See, obviously them four years of college didn’t teach me anything! Ha ha...” I pushed open the door and ventured into the unforgiving August heat. My Ray Ban Aviators sunglasses were no match for the blinding rays. Everything was blanched under the blistering sun; even the iconic red London phone booth appeared as pale as the sun-bleached masonry on the London Bridge. I searched the park grounds for familiar faces and spotted a family admiring the original carvings on the iconic bridge.

“Susan, would you like me to take a photo of all four of you?” I offered to snap a family picture for Susan, her husband Nate, and her parents.

“Thanks John, that’d be perfect!”

“Did you guys eat?” I made sure the family was aware of the time constraint.

“Oh, my mom made lunch boxes for us,” Susan smiled at her mother, “Chinese mom, you know,” we all chuckled at the cultural faux pas.

“John, would you like something to eat?” Nate offered.

“Oh, no, that’s very kind of you, I had a burger at the diner.”

This particular tour was truly a cultural melting pot where English speaking passengers were mixed in with Chinese speaking immigrants, being entertained by a burger-chomping, cowboy boots-sporting Asian redneck tour guide with a “good ole boy” tour bus driver at the wheel. Although I continued to struggle against my cultural baggage, I did appreciate the traditional kindness afforded to me by Nate.

“How old were you when you came to the United States?” Nate asked.

Judging from Nate’s accent, I figured Nate for a Mainland Chinese.

“I was fifteen.”

“No wonder, you seemed acculturated,” Nate marveled.

“Acculturated”—a word estranged from most immigrants—and in fact, a word that some immigrants resent; yet this highly educated man from the People’s Republic of China chose this word to describe the culmination of my “Americanism”. A fellow tour guide back in Hawaii once commented to me that no matter what I do I would always be “Chinese” in the eyes of (Anglo) “Americans”, which I dismissed as a failed immigrant’s self-conscious fallacy. The disenchanted tour guide pointed out that if I had actually been “acculturated”, then why would I continue to work in

the ethnic Chinese community? Such a question would never arise had I been a bi-lingual Anglo who spoke fluent Chinese.

“Well, living in the Rockies would do that to you!” I answered, sidestepping my internal minefield.

“John, my mom said you are a very good tour guide,” Susan passed on her mother’s compliment.

“Xie’xie buo’mu, nin’tai ke’chi le.” (Mandarin: Thank you auntie, you are too kind). The elderly lady was pleased that I responded in Mandarin. After excusing myself from the sweet family, I continued to seek out my adventurous tour members. Surprisingly I found Annie all alone sitting by the edge of the lake near the bridgehead.

“Hey, what happened to Lewis and Clark?” I jokingly brought up her “lunch dates”.

“Oh, hello John,” the brunette turned and motioned for me to join her. “The lads couldn’t take the heat and went back to the diner.”

I dropped onto the sizzling ground next to Annie and glanced at her. “Hmm, this heat really doesn’t bother you?”

“Not at all. My boss and I used to holiday in North Africa,” she paused, and looked at me in embarrassment seconds after she carelessly divulged words she wished she could retract.

“North Africa? Bloody hell, you don’t look old enough to have been in Field Marshal Montgomery’s Eighth Army!” I teased, “Would you like me to take a picture of you?”

“That’s quite all right. I haven’t got a camera,” she said.

“Did you leave it on the bus? I can go get it for you.”

“Right. I didn’t bring a camera on this trip.” The brunette continued to stare across the lake, seemingly entrenched in some distant thoughts.

“Well, whatever it is, it’s his or her loss. Either way, I don’t judge.” I tried to lighten her melancholy.

She laughed, “You’re quite goofy.”

I looked down at my watch and realized it was time to rendezvous with Jack back at the bus. “Hey, we should go. I would hate for us to get left behind in this hell hole,” I urged.

She smiled and appreciated my not prying.

As Annie and I marched toward the motor coach, many of my tour members emerged from under patches of shades, like the towns children of Hamelin under the spell of the Piped Piper, and trailed us out to the parking lot. Jack had kept the motor coach running during the entire time so the cabin of the bus would remain somewhat cool upon the group’s return. I did a silent passenger count before giving Jack the all clear. “Ride away, Kimosabe!”

“Ok, now we will continue north for about two hundred miles to Flagstaff, Arizona, our overnight destination.” Before I could begin to chronicle the Native American history of Arizona, my passengers dozed off under the gentle rocking motion of the bus. Although there were no strenuous activities at Lake Havasu, the heat alone effectively drained

everyone's energy, leaving my passengers in a lethargic state while tucked snugly in their seats. I inserted the tranquilizing sound of Enya's "Orinoco Flow" into the play deck, and no sooner then I returned to my seat, Annie, like all the other tour members, was napping peacefully like Snow White.

An hour into the drive I stood up to check on my passengers.

"Hey." Annie rubbed her sleep eyes and tried to orient herself. "How long was I kipping?" The lone traveler sat up and fidgeted through her purse and produced a tin of breath mints. "Mint?" She offered, and I obliged.

"About a good forty minutes. Didn't miss much. The desert is still dry."

"Did you kip?" The gullible passenger asked.

"No, but Jack did. He's quite talented." Hearing his name mentioned, Jack gave me a brief glance via the rear view mirror.

"Are you always this silly?" The brunette straighten her posture and adjusted her hair. I watched Annie go through the same motion as did Deanne on our road trips. "How do I look?" Annie had to make sure that she was presentable.

"Absolutely smashing, my lady, except..." I motion for her to stand up and twirl.

"What? Except what?" She stood, patted down her jeans and checked her waist-length yellow windbreaker.

Marveling at her bum, I asked, “Hmm, are those yoga pants or just really tight jeans?”

Realized she’d been tricked, “Bugger, you clever little prat.” She smacked me on my shoulder as she sat back down. The sparkles in her eyes hinted more than just a mere tolerance for my prank.

“So, when will you arrive London with your group next week?” Annie asked.

“I’ll get in on the 16th and stay for a couple of nights then on to the continent for two weeks.” OEU0815 was coming right up.

“I should like to host you for a drink when you’re in London if you’ve got free time between attractions.” It was a nice gesture, something we receive all too often in this line of work but that seldom pans out. However, it was the thought that mattered.

“Well, why look ahead when we have Grand Canyon and Vegas coming up?” I was not suggesting anything inappropriate, but merely reminding my ruminating traveler to live in the moment. Annie gave an approving smile. After all, she came on this trip alone for a reason.

The English woman silently gazed out toward the fast-moving landscape.

Annie was not the first tour member I encountered who used the trip to help untie emotional knots. I still remember Carmen who grew out of her timid shell through those five

harrowing days in China during our Tiananmen Square adventure just two months ago.

I walked toward the rear of the bus to check on those who were awake.

“Hey Jeff, you guys doing okay?” I invited myself to visit with a couple from Los Angeles.

The bus jolted as it ran over some sizable debris. My tight grip on the back of the seat railing kept me steady.

“Jeff, you guys live in L.A. yeah?” I asked.

Ginger, Jeff’s wife, replied: “Yes, we live in South Pasadena.”

“Nice! So why be a part of a bus group?” I figured folks in South Pasadena were financially established and could have vacationed independently without having to wait on others.

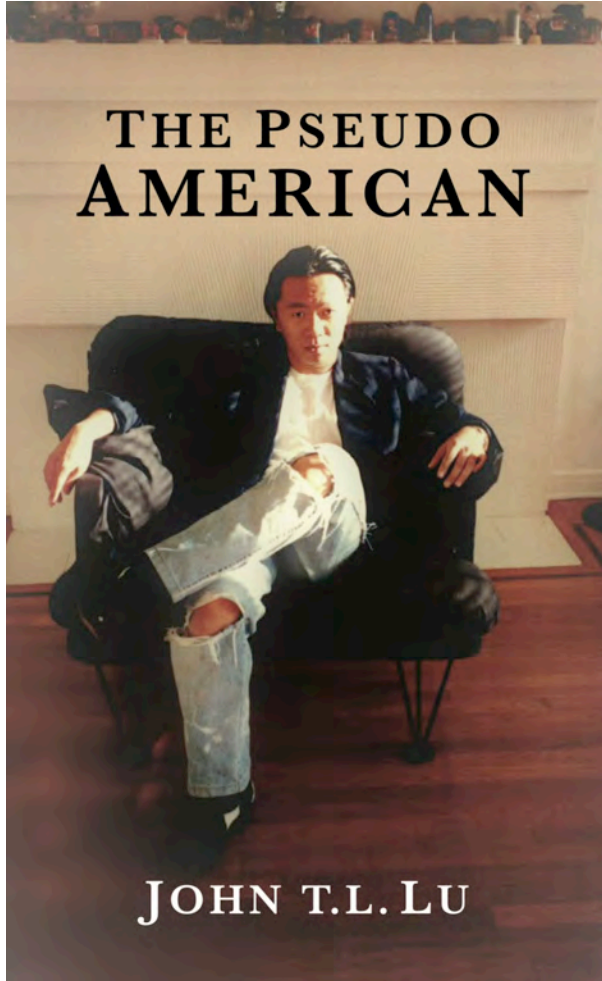
“Well, we wanted to use this opportunity to figure out an alternative career path,” Jeff politely responded, “And figured it was best to leave the driving and worrying to professionals.”

Before I could probe further into Jeff and Ginger’s background, Jack shouted “Fifteen minutes!” I waddled back toward the front of the bus and reached for the microphone. “Wakey wakey folks, we’re fifteen minutes from our hotel. We’ll check in first, then you may venture out to dinner at your leisure or join Jack and me to a local restaurant that caters to groups, meaning cheap and fast! Ha ha...” Truthfully, Flagstaff didn’t afford very many dining options. Although I

suggested going off alone as an alternative to dining with the group, I would rather everyone stay together and return to the hotel together under my vigilance. As it turned out, everyone opted to dine as a group.

“Wow...there isn't a whole lot to see here, is there?” Kate commented as she looked out the window into the dismal streets.

“Well, we sure aren't in Los Angeles anymore!” Kate's husband, Bill, murmured.



Only three months after I fled China with my last tour group, I volunteered to return to the tumultuous land on another tour assignment. Follow The Pseudo American on the bumpy path of the American journey.

The Pseudo American

By John T. L. Lu

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/11387.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**