

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

by John Olson

Marcel Proust had never been to a big-box store before. He was dazzled by the sheer size and scope of the store and the seeming impassivity of the shoppers. So many products, so many shelves, such strangely intriguing examples of the human condition. The people seemed dour, meditative, locked inside themselves where all their problems are kept private and where all their dreams are in hospice. But this mood of seeming passivity began yielding odd behaviors, things unnoticed before, as when one stands for a few minutes at some quiet, unassuming location and little by little begins noticing an array of beguiling phenomena, intriguing shapes and colors and interactions that were unnoticed before now taking prominence in one's consciousness and dilating the mind until an entirely new universe blossoms out of a park or parking lot.

Perception is an art, and takes practice. He saw a man pee on a display then take a ride on one of the kiddie rides. He saw another man grab an aluminum baseball bat from sporting goods and proceed to bash in all the TVs. The employees reacted calmly, having to deal with anomalous behavior throughout their day. It's what human beings do when years of tension and taboo yield to irrational behaviors.

Marcel filled his basket with track suits and socks and a T-shirt with Willie Nelson on the front and thought about returning to Paris in the early 20th century. The air was a little cleaner here than it was in sooty Paris, and better for his asthma, but he got fed up having to wear a mask all the time during Covid, and stay indoors as if under house arrest. That's not what he came here for. He wanted to get away from all that head-splitting conflict over Captain Alfred

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Dreyfus, but there were even more divisive issues here, things that couldn't even be talked about for fear of losing a job or friends and ending up totally isolated, a pariah whose sole contact with the world was YouTube and other streaming services. The 21st century was a huge disappointment.

He'd had, of course, multiple destinations to choose from, including his native country, France. Mr. Wells imposed no restrictions on the use of his time machine. But he wanted to avoid all the riots and wars and countries overrun with militarized police in armored vehicles, especially Paris and the rage of the *gilets jaunes*, protesting the predations of the upper class just as they had in 1789 and again in 1848, that bloody uprising against the authoritarian crackdowns of the July Monarchy, inspiring Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*. The whole world was seething with instability and conflict, all the chaos and war and terrain made uninhabitable by climate change. So he bought an RV and drove around the lonesome distances of the United States where the violence, for the time being, was a little less visible. It was mostly evident in tents everywhere, or people lying on the sidewalks and metro stations, hunched over in a Fentanyl coma.

He got back in the time machine, which he dubbed *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and set the dials for June, 1901, French Polynesia. He looked forward to meeting Monsieur Gauguin, the man who painted that marvelous work in oil, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* He slipped his Willie Nelson T-shirt over his head, pressed a small blue button, and felt the elasticity of time vibrate like a surge of country music, the mournful cries of a pedal steel guitar, and surf the quantum waves of an unfathomable universe to a place of native being.

