



By RUSSELL COBB

# Glorious and Free. Mostly.

Why a liberal Texan is still in Canada.



**WE GOT TO CANADA PLACE AT THE APPOINTED TIME—9:00 a.m. sharp—but people were already lined up past the elevators. A security guard waved an arm in exasperation. “If you are ready to take the Oath of Citizenship,” he said, “please step forward in a single-file line.”**

It was one of those March days where you long to be anywhere but the Canadian prairies. Snow was blowing sideways against the windows. Back in Texas, where I’m from, winter was already over and it was time to sit on patios and drink margaritas.

We didn’t step forward. We—my wife and I, that is—stood back, wondering where the *Permanent Residents* were supposed to go. We were there to “land”—the technical term—a symbolic act that, for all intents and purposes, would, finally, make us Canadians. First, though, there would be one more interview, with an agent from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC).

As we waited, we looked around the room. We were the only non-visible minorities. This was astounding to us. At a time when many American states were imposing draconian policies meant to make life intolerable for undocumented immigrants (mostly Hispanics), here was this benevolent country, ready to open its doors to people of colour.

I felt my eyes well up as I watched the Haitian family next to us, all of them dressed in their Sunday best, including a little boy of about six in a navy blue jacket and tie. They took pictures of each other, looking both serious and very happy to be there. Just past them was a Chinese woman in impossibly high heels and

a tight, ankle-length sequin dress, with her entourage of five Canadian friends. The friends snapped photos of her standing in line as if she stood on a celebrity red carpet. She strained to hold back tears from ruining layers of mascara.

I had been hatching plans all winter to leave Edmonton and move back to Texas. Becoming Canadian had been a strategy to hedge my bets against the cruel realities of the American job market, not the fulfillment of a sentimental dream. But here I was, in front of these people, moved by their emotion, their genuine happiness, moved to tears myself by their faith in the abstract promise of “Canada.” I couldn’t look at my wife.

**THE RECENT RE-ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA** took me back to the dark days of Dubya, back when some Americans were having serious conversations about moving to Canada if George W. Bush got re-elected, and back when I would have laughed out

loud if you had suggested I’d one day be living in Canada. In 2004, I was dating a Texas union organizer who spent the months before the Bush vs. Kerry election travelling around the country, rallying people to support Kerry. She was confident Kerry would win and we spent election night at a party that was supposed to be a victory celebration. She had even bought streamers and balloons. Around midnight, when it became clear that Bush would be re-elected, she made a bold pronouncement: “I can’t take these red-necks anymore! I am moving to Canada!”

For a while, in Texas’s only liberal stronghold—Austin—the city was abuzz with talk of a mass migration. Also around this time the “Jesusland” map started popping up on the internet, breaking up North America into two countries (Mexico didn’t seem to count): Canada and Democratic-leaning states on one hand, and Republican states—Jesusland—on the other hand. Almost everyone I knew wanted out of “Jesusland.” Yet the more my girlfriend

talked about moving to Canada, the more incensed I became. Not because I sympathized in the slightest with Bush, but because I lived *here*, in Texas.

“I’m not coming with you to Canada,” I told her one night at a party. “This is my country, damn it. If you don’t care enough to stand up and fight to change it, then you *should* leave.” A fight ensued. She was the labour organizer and I was the navel-gazing intellectual. What right did I have to sermonize? Had I ever walked a picket line? No, I hadn’t. Had I ever organized prison guards? No, I hadn’t. I’d never been to Canada either, but I suspected it wasn’t the liberal paradise she had in mind. Did she even know who the Prime Minister was? No, she didn’t.

We broke up soon after the incident. I think she moved to Los Angeles. Shortly thereafter, I started dating someone (my current partner) who shared my affinity for Texas food, music, and football—even if we both felt excluded by the state’s politics.

I continued to disparage liberal migration to Canada, until—sweet irony—I received a job offer at the University of Alberta during the last year of the Bush regime. Despite having spent a good deal of my twenties roaming around the world, I had never been to Canada. I am embarrassed to admit it now, but I was one of those Americans who thought about their neighbor to the north, whenever I thought about it all, as an undifferentiated mass of ice and snow, populated by wild game and naive people who ate lots of donuts and drank lots of beer. My entire Canadian knowledge base was derived from SCTV, Neil Young, and Kids in the Hall.

Around that time, I had become friends with a Canadian from Ottawa who told me to turn down the Edmonton job and stay in Texas. “You’ve seen *Strange Brew*, right?” he said. “Then you know what a hoser is. Well, Edmonton is Ground Zero for hosers. It takes a special kind of troglodyte mentality to live that far north.”

