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Santa Fe, New Mexico, a Sunday concert downtown: First stage of the mass landing of solo humanity in the next seat opened with her jabbing her cane underneath my seat in a rapier thrust forceful enough to singe the hair on the backs of my calves. Second act ended with the lady backing over her chair and an 18-20 inch drop to the cushioned seat with sufficient impact to temporarily distort my depth perception of the stage and the backdrops.

"Is my cane a bother?" comes next to open the monologue. "If it is, there's plenty of room in the upper balcony for this performance. Good seats, too." After a short pause, "Now I'm on a cane, can't sit in the balcony. Better sound up there."

After arranging and rearranging her position, "We are from Australia. Reason we live in Santa Fe part of the year, we like high altitude. You must be from Texas, wanting to sit so close to the stage. Texans always want to be seen; never fails."

Invariably ... no, always, wherever we are on this unforgiving Earth, I fasten a blue and yellow checked bow tie on an Oxford white shirt collar under a camel hair blazer over white slacks, harnessed by a tan leather belt from Italy matched to a pair of tasseled loafers...only to

be greeted by an usher of a kid or a wise-guy waitress, with, "How long you been in town, Tex?"

Try as I might for control, the first response to geographical confrontation is to brush lightly underneath the nostrils from the inane fear that nasal drip has given me away. In the 1930s Mertzson kids' noses dripped all winter. The affliction was so bad, referees at out of town football games called unnecessary roughness for arm and elbow offenses against the players that were really only cases of extreme sinus drainage provoking wiping the nostrils.

Best ploy to divert her was to introduce her to my pal, a gracious diplomat able to charm any nationality. By leaning back deep into the cushioned seat, I made room for contact. They conversed in civil style on the musical scores.

The program stalled for musicians re-tuning horns and strings. The cacophony and the shrillness of the instruments switched the injuries from the old sister's cane to long-ago memories of sliding a cue stick above the belt line so much to make difficult shots at Doc Sorrell's pool hall that the friction raised a blister under my short rib. The mounting throb in my temples announced the return of the old pain of recalling how those Australian grangers

destroyed the woolie and lamb markets in the U.S. How they put us shortgrass woolie operators so high up on our toes, we whistled anthems to "The Land Down Under" to the tune of "God Save the King."

At intermission, the aisles filled too tight to leave our seats. With no place to rest my right elbow or move my right hind leg except against the bulk and the torso of the Aussie lady, the balcony seats looked generous and well situated to the stage.

For an opener, and an unintended close, I watched my suggestion that we move upstairs from our row C seats to the lofty heights for a better view of the stage collapse before barely reaching my pal's ears. (We'd sat in the balcony the night before and were so far from the stage, the performers looked like the clay soldiers buried in a Chinese emperor's tomb.)

I wasn't certain whether I was having fever from the low altitude downstairs, the dual body blow, or if the body temperature of native Australians runs higher than ours. I heard at the time I visited the country that the inside temperature of a kangaroo's pouch reached over a hundred degrees, but couldn't recall ever hearing other temperatures except the lukewarm reading held in beer boxes in the pubs.

The page or the seat number I was on was irrelevant. She hit next with the comment that her granddaughter from New Hampshire owned more cowboy clothes than any Texas dudes ever seen in all Santa Fe.

She then made a strange switch: "And there's lots of cowboys between Santa Fe and Las Vegas on the Pecos River. You a cowboy, Tex?"

Time stopped long enough for my pal to take my hand to soothe and divert an outburst. My breath rate changed to deep, sporadic drafts. The absolute maximum I can stand to be called "Tex" is once a quarter without losing control.

Yet in one deliberate motion, I made a half turn, looked her face to face and ended the evening saying, "My family owns a ranch between Santa Fe and Las Vegas. There are no cowboys left except old ones. And please slide your cane underneath your husband's seat instead of mine."

I held forth and my pal held on to my hand. Space freed and the concert was marvelous.