

Chapter 26

IN A SPIN

FRIDAY, 14 MAY 2010

‘Did you hear that thunder?’ Momoko is looking at me as I’m summoned back to wakefulness in the morning.

I rub my sleepy eyes. ‘No.’

‘It was really loud, so scary. It sounded really close to the hotel.’

I immediately switch on the television and click the weather channel. Flash floods, thunderstorms, tornadoes. That’s today’s weather warning. A map of America comes on the screen, and a giant distorted blob of grey depicts rain and storms in every state around us. We are in Springfield, in the bullseye of the blob. People are advised not to travel unless necessary. The weatherwoman says it’ll last until next Thursday, spelling a week of storms in central America. Only California and a small part of Arizona can expect good weather.

I switch the television off and sit up against the pillow. It’s a lot to take in so early in the morning. I haven’t even unleashed a two-tone fart yet. I can hear the rain outside, creep to the window, and draw back the curtain. It’s hammering down, and the car park is flooded.

Having farted, eaten enough crepes and croissants at breakfast to see

me through to June, packed our belongings, and swum across the car park, we're staring blankly through the wet windscreen.

'Are you ready for this?'

'Just drive carefully,' Momoko says nervously.

That goes without saying.

We pull out of the motel car park and join the interstate, picking up where we left off yesterday evening. Mist and low cloud are still a single entity, forming a silver blanket over the countryside. The road is gruelling and fearsome wet, laden with trucks, my worst enemy.

We have to reach Las Vegas by May 16, two days from now. My sister is meeting us, and we have a hotel booked for two nights. We are already a few hours behind schedule, not even in Tulsa yet. It seems unlikely we will make up lost time, not in these wet conditions. Averaging fifty miles an hour only heralds further delays.

By lunchtime, my arms are heavy and stiff from clenching the wheel tightly, and my eyeballs ache. The interstate consists of dual lanes. Trucks mostly take up the slow lane. Spray from their giant tyres makes it almost impossible to see, especially when overtaking. It's probably wise to hang back, but they are topping at forty miles an hour, and we have a lot of road to consume.

Leaning over the wheel like a racing cyclist, peering into the blinding mass of rain, trying to see the road, we slowly overtake an oil tanker only to get pinned behind the next truck for thirty minutes after three attempts to pass it. I appear to have learnt nothing from my Nepali road experiences. The rain and tyre spray reduce visibility to the length of a single car. This must be what flying a plane through heavy clouds is like. When we finally pass the truck and leave it shrinking in the rear-view mirror, another two trucks appear ahead, neck and neck. I can barely tell them apart from their red taillights.

In the most atrocious driving conditions, we continue like this for most of the day. At one point, I'm sure we pass a huge wooden boat filled with animals.

By four o'clock, we have been on the road for seven hours with only one toilet stop. Just when we think the situation is as bad as it can be, it gets worse.

I can feel the car suddenly shifting from side to side, an invisible force pushing and pulling us. When I glance out of Momoko's window and see a tornado spinning ferociously nearby, trying to suck us in, I pause with shock, my foot going slack on the pedal as I watch this monster Hoover up wet debris and litter off the road. The car is now under immense wind pressure, but the sturdy, grounded trucks overtaking us one by one seem undaunted. Momoko is edging closer to the central console, leaning on the gear stick as the tornado obliterates the landscape on her side, driving the rain in arcs and debris across the road, battering the car. I'm tightly gripping the steering wheel, which is shuddering like my overworked heart, so I put my foot down, trying to outrun the tornado partially camouflaged by the rain, its body appearing in fleeting bursts, its powerful wind buffeting the Chrysler, pushing us over the perforated lines dividing the highway into two lanes. Suppose we do get sucked into the sky, spinning us in endless circles, making Momoko even dizzier. What do we do? Perhaps this is why Mr. Schwab insisted we buy a radio, so we can contact emergency services from high altitude and say, 'Hi, we're stuck inside a tornado, could you get us down?'

Pushing the car to seventy is enough to outrun this sucker and move out of its range. But we are still in Tornado Alley, a vast region of central America that gets the most tornadoes because of contrasting air masses that frequently collide. And they mostly occur in spring. Hmmm, should have done better research.

Having cleared the final stage of the storm, things settle, including our hearts, as we close in on Amarillo. A ray of sunlight appears between the clouds, and the rain eases up. For the first time today, we can see the Texan landscape. Desert plains. Farmhouses. Meadows. Animals in pens. And not an Ark in sight.

We stop in Amarillo, first for petrol, then a Whopper cheese. Vehicle and biological tanks refuelled, we drive to a Route 66 tourist hotspot called Cadillac Ranch just off the main road, where ten old Cadillacs are buried bonnet-first in a muddy field and spray-painted in a range of psychedelic colours. I don't get it. What's the purpose? Is it art? A political statement? The last tornado to fling a convoy of Cadillacs through the sky because the drivers didn't have a radio?

Stepping over enormous puddles, weaving between the vertical cars, Momoko's expensive leather boots get caked in mud, putting her in a strop. As we attempt to clean them in the car park using a puddle-soaked napkin, storm clouds loom overhead and it starts to rain again, so we get in the car, fearing another downpour.

Indeed, heavy rain ensues for a few more hours, and when it clears, the Texan desert reveals itself before it changes into the dark orange sand and cactus-like flora of New Mexico. It's like each state has its own geography and interpretation of what it should look like. Driving through an intense storm suddenly seems worthwhile.

Finally reaching Albuquerque, my back, shoulders, and neck are so stiff I can barely move. I'm losing focus on the road, veering between lanes, braking for no reason, crawling the final stretch. I'm struggling to read road signs and anticipate the intentions of other motorists. I need to put my head down. What a miserable day of driving. To my surprise, I realise my planning for this cross-country trek may have been miscalculated. Two days more would be ideal, but even one would make the driving less precarious. At least we're back on schedule. We have covered 863 miles in twelve hours, taking our total mileage to 2,126. But if I thought today was long and arduous, tomorrow will be off the charts comparatively.

We set off at nine o'clock the next day in bright sunshine, not a cloud in the blissful blue sky. Turning off Interstate-40 after a couple of hours, we head north on a succession of long, straight roads leading to Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon a few hundred miles away. These roads are surrounded by splendid deserts, deformed mountains, and rock formations. Typical Arizonian topography.

The road is miles and miles of straight asphalt that doesn't appear to have an ending in the foreseeable future. I dislike miles. I'm accustomed to kilometres in Australia. They whiz under the tyres on long distances. Miles drag. Kilometres fly. Why do Americans use miles, anyway? Everything else contrasts with the British way: phonetics, spelling, left-hand drive instead of right, Fahrenheit instead of Centigrade, gallons instead of litres, pounds instead of stones, dollars instead of pounds.

Monument Valley has set the scene for many famous western movies

with unique rock formations resembling cowboy hats and rugged ravines and canyons. We pull into a dusty layby to take in the panoramic scenery just as a convoy of German bikers in shiny leather arrives. They are touring America, and one brazenly asks Momoko to sit on the back of his bike.

Yeah right, mate.

‘Can I?’ Momoko asks.

What?

‘Hop on!’ the beefy biker says.

Funny that her dizziness seems to have gone away. With a flutter of her long eyelashes, she swings her leg over the saddle and climbs on, smiling a smile that says, *take me away from this storm-chasing maniac*. Either that or she just wants a souvenir photo since she’s Japanese and has no shame in how she obtains it.

The drive from Monument Valley to Grand Canyon, America’s most intriguing natural wonder, is full of stunning roads and arid, mountainous desert, starkly contrasting with yesterday’s aquaplaning slog. We are in the heart of it here, but my bladder ache is radiating throughout my abdomen, so at the Grand Canyon itself, I do a very British thing and pee publicly, striving to do so without arousing unfavourable attention, hosing into the wind and listening to my steamy deposit splatter down the face of these sacred rocks, earning a disapproving look from the missus.

We spend one hour here, both drawing energy from this place until we have to drag ourselves back to the car. It’s almost six o’clock, and Kate is waiting for us in Las Vegas.

While the sun descends over the Arizona desert and Grand Canyon, we set off for the final leg. We have been on the road for nine hours, covered more than 500 miles, and are looking forward to seeing my sister in Vegas. Not far now, it’s only half a centimetre on the map.

And then I see a road sign.

Las Vegas, 300 miles.

Hmmm, someone needs to work on their map-writing skills. Bloody Americans.