

Chapter 53

WALK TO SAN FRANCISCO

FRIDAY, 20 APRIL 2018

Today, I'm leaving Canada for America, a little side trip while in this region of the world. In the morning darkness, I pass through the terminal at Vancouver Main Station and walk out to the row of Greyhound coaches, discerning which one goes to San Francisco. It's a fourteen-hour journey, setting off at 06:00.

A dozen people board the coach, and ninety minutes later, we reach the dreaded US border, where the immigration officers prove once more they went to the school of arseholes. To my surprise, after many failed attempts, they let me in, again!

We stop in Seattle for three hours, so I hop in a taxi and head to the famous tower that looks like a flying saucer mounted on a telegraph pole. It's under renovation, but I can see Mt. Rainier, an active volcano that last erupted in 1854, in the distance.

The coach departs the station on time and arrives in Portland at 17:30. We have to wait for forty-five minutes while the drivers change over.

After an hour, we are still in the terminal, and something's happening. Some of the passengers look upset that we are running late. But there seems

more to it. There's a negative air about the terminal. I approach the young girl I saw on the coach. The Canadian is of Asian descent with glasses and thick dental braces. She must be about eighteen or nineteen.

'What's happening?'

'The coach has been cancelled,' she says.

'Why?'

'The driver's sick.'

'Is there a replacement?'

'They're organising one now. It will take maybe another half an hour.'

I decide to stretch my legs and go for a stroll. I leave the station and stroll a few blocks. Homeless people are everywhere, pushing trolleys of dirty luggage, jacking up on heroin, and creating a cacophony of strange noises. It's a rundown area with boarded-up shops and grim buildings. There's not much to see, so I return to the station.

The Canadian girl approaches me in my chair and says, 'There's no replacement until tomorrow!'

I stand up slowly. 'Really?'

'Yes. I have a university open campus tomorrow morning. I can't miss it. It's why I'm going to San Francisco.'

I'll also lose one of three days in San Francisco. Some passengers have resigned themselves to spending the night in the station. Some have left to find hotels. I refuse to do either and pace towards the counter. The girl, her name is Linda Xia, tails me.

'Are there any car rental shops nearby?'

The woman behind the counter looks at me with disinterest. 'No, not around here.'

Should I pull the walk to Kathmandu masterstroke and walk to San Francisco? It's only 650 miles. I just need a packet of biscuits and copious amounts of water.

'What's happening?' says a male voice.

I whirl around to face a young man I spoke with on the coach earlier. His fair eyebrows knit together underneath the rim of his grey baseball cap, and he blinks slowly like he's trying to bring me into focus. 'So, what did the lady say?'

'There's no coach until tomorrow.'

His nostrils flare like he's investigating a smell. 'Yeah, I heard.'

'I'm thinking of hiring a car and driving to San Francisco.' I look at these two youngsters. 'Do you two want to chip in and come along?'

This time his eyebrows go up. 'Seriously? Drive?'

My mind is already made up. I don't need to stand around discussing details. Just execute the plan. I've done sixteen hours in one day in this country before. What is ten comparatively? But I don't want to pay for the entire car. It will cost a small fortune. Hence my invitation to these young strangers. But the conversation is not moving in the direction I hoped. Linda seems semi-keen. Jake, the boy, is thinking about it.

I pull out my phone, set it on international roaming, and search for car rental shops. There are several at Portland Airport.

Once they understand I'm going with or without them, they make up their minds and agree to tag along.

On the train heading to the airport, Jake tells me he has a hunting knife in his bag and has just been dismissed from the army for poor discipline. Rule number one, before offering to drive cross-country with a stranger, ask them about military dismissal experience and possession of large knives. Come to think of it, now I know he has a knife, I realise he looks a little psycho, despite a friendly innocence about him.

It's 21:00 when I'm handed the hire car keys at the airport. I'll need a lot of caffeine for the next ten hours of driving. Pity these two don't have a licence, not that I'd feel comfortable with either of them behind the wheel. I assume they're both going to San Francisco as that's where the coach was heading, but Jake isn't going to San Francisco. 'Where are *you* heading?'

'Home. I live in Salem. It's on the way, about an hour from here.'

Rule number two, never assume anything about people who've been dismissed from the army and are carrying large knives.

We reach the next town in no time and drop Jake off in a car park where his dad is waiting in his car. Jake is grateful for the lift and wants to connect with me on Facebook.

Rule number three, never connect with people on social media if they carry large knives and have been dismissed from the army. I'm glad he's gone. A lot of melodramatic garbage was spilling from his mouth, to which I listened politely but not attentively.

Before I jump back on the interstate, I stop at a drive-thru in the same car park and order a cappuccino and an extra-large cookie. Linda orders a rainbow-striped Frappuccino.

We drive in silence, eating the cookie, drinking our drinks. Sharing this car with a teenage stranger and driving through the night is odd. How did this happen? It hadn't occurred to me, not until Jake left, that she might feel uneasy. Does she think I'm a perverted psychopath?

She stares forward, not making much eye contact in the beginning. I steal sideways glances at her, much like a forty-year-old psycho might do, trying to gauge how she might be feeling. If she's nervous or scared, she doesn't show it. That means nothing.

I don't even know how old she is. 'How old are you?'

'Fifteen.'

Half a cookie sticks in my throat. I swallow hard and shove it down as the flush in my face turns nuclear, scorching my flesh.

I grunt through a mouthful of crumbs, keeping my voice light in case I freak her out. 'Fifteen? How come you're travelling alone?'

'My parents couldn't come.'

'Why not fly from Vancouver?'

'The coach is cheaper.'

And that's when it hits me that I'm driving with a minor, and suppose I crash tonight and we die, and Momoko learns that I was driving through America with an underage girl without any context. Another disturbing thought pushes into my tired mind because if I do crash and we die, what will the police think when they find I'm transporting a minor across state lines, possibly breaking laws? Those computerised eyeballs inside Portland International Airport will have captured me, providing evidence of my movements to the police, but they'd never hear my story, and my sincere act of kindness may become twisted, labelling me with perverted criminal intent. How do I get myself into these situations?

A whole range of dark scenarios must be racing through her mind, let alone mine, so I attempt to allay any fears she may have by showing her pictures of my kids, well, specifically pictures of me *with* my kids so she doesn't think I've pulled some random JPGs off Google. I have to push aside any inclination to joke, saying, *don't worry, I'm not on any sex offender lists,*

or asking her whether she still has both her kidneys and, God, just imagine what her parents might say, they would say if a stranger invites you into his car, *don't go*, that's just common sense. Yeah, this is her fault, not mine. Why did she agree to this? Don't blame me, okay, I'm just the driver. She blows her nose, and I wonder if she's crying, though I can't hear it in her voice, the snot sounds like the kind that accompanies tears and, I know, some nice music might help, what do kids like these days, the Wiggles?

We have been driving for five hours. It's gone two in the morning. I'm driving with extra care now, given the circumstances. But my eyes are dry and heavy. I rub them repeatedly, trying to squash the tiredness out of them and clear my mental fog.

The car trailing us slips in and out of view. There's hardly any traffic, but enough that we don't look like the only vehicle on the road.

It's light when we reach Sacramento. The sun is a yellow eye scorched in a blanket of blue. We're getting close now, but I have to draw on mental strength reserves to stay awake. I pull into a rest stop car park to relax my eyes for twenty minutes. We're about two hours away from San Francisco.

When I come back to myself, I'm lying fully reclined in the driver seat, unsure why. I bolt up and observe the landscape. Full-grown trees hunker alongside a vast stretch of lush countryside, with birds perched on the limbs. Linda's wide awake. She's probably too scared to close her eyes.

We get back on the interstate, and I wind my window down. The cool breeze kisses my tired face and pushes down inside my shirt like a cool hand, a refreshing wake-up, a reminder of life.

As far as positive signs go, the sign above the interstate declaring San Francisco is only eighty miles away is the best I can hope for.

We cross the Bay Bridge, glimpsing San Francisco Bay to our right. The city skyline is now dead ahead.

I drop Linda off at 10:00 outside the university, where a few clusters of students are forming. She brightens up, relief and excitement pouring out of her. She looks at me with sleepless eyes and says *thank you*. That's my good deed done for the night. Driving a stranded young girl 650 miles to university. I wonder if she'll tell her parents about this. I won't be telling mine.