

Chapter 1

JUST THE TICKET

MONDAY, 30 NOVEMBER 1998

I'm twenty-one and leaving England. I know nothing about the world, and the world knows nothing about me. I'm coyly gazing in its direction, but it disinterestedly glances back. I don't even know what I don't know about it. A lot is going on right now – wars in the Congo and Kosovo, forest fires in Indonesia, Greece and Cyprus, floods in Bangladesh and Peru, deadly tornadoes in Florida, landslides in the Caribbean and numerous protests in Pakistan and Malaysia, but I'm completely oblivious. My knowledge of geography is dire, my understanding of history limited at best, and I have little cultural awareness outside the bubble of my hometown.

As I said, I know nothing about our beautiful, fragile world, this mote of dust floating in a sunbeam. To me, it's mysterious, magical, impossibly huge to comprehend and thoroughly intimidating.

The November morning is crisp and bright. Mist has formed on either side of the M3 motorway, blanketing the landscape. I've taken the airport route so many times on drop-off assignments, it's like the worn trail between my bedroom and the bog.

Kate, my sister, who turns sixteen in three days, is sitting quietly in the back of the Granada while my mother is driving to London Heathrow Airport with the seat warmers cranked up to a bum-boiling max. They're more anxious than *me*. My parents are people who live secure lives and can't understand why I've decided to chuck in my good life in southern England to galivant around the world. There are several reasons why I have to go. For one, I'm drowning in routine. Two, as pleasant as British summers are, I'm not genetically designed to endure six-month winters. What's more, there's something exciting about uncertainty and acquainting myself with new countries, cultures, currencies, cuisines and customs – anything new. Two of my best friends are Iranian and South African, and my last two girlfriends were of Indian descent and Italian, so perhaps a subconscious cultural influence is also driving my decision to disconnect from the matrix.

When I began work in the PCMS department at Barclays International House, the UK's largest bank, my parents were so proud. Before the bank, I had drifted from job to job, all offering little or no prospects. I was spoon-fed a narrative that you should have your life figured out when you finish school, meaning I was expected to build my future at Barclays and edge my way up the career ladder. The best thing about it was the social life: curry nights, team-building activities, football comps and beach barbecues. You name it, Barclays paid for it. Everything in between was boring office work. Nine-to-five jobs can come with a bad stigma, but many are fulfilling. Barclays is not one of them, so I'm not going to spend my working life in this fourth-floor corporate office. It's all too predetermined. I mean, I was nineteen when the bank started pressuring me into starting a pension, forcing me to plan the end of my life. I'm a terrible planner, can't plan next week, let alone retirement. At the same time, job security is a swear word in the bank. Changing habits in global banking have put Barclays in decline, and institutions are learning how to dress up mass redundancies in friendly language by calling job cuts *downsizing* or *corporate restructuring*.

So, after several years of dithering and infuriating the hell out of my parents with my indecisiveness, I decide to quit the bank and go globe-trotting. I won't miss the silent march of bankers going into the Barclays foyer or the afternoons that pass at half-speed while my mind daydreams at 200 miles per hour to atone for the imbalance. I *will* miss the sausage

baguettes in the eighth-floor restaurant, the social side of bank life and the lifelong friends I have made.

Last night, my sister gave me a silver St. Christopher necklace. St. Christopher, whose name means Christ carrier, is the one-time Catholic patron saint of travellers. Catholics still believe his image is the best amulet to carry when travelling. Not only is Kate's gift fitting, but it's one of the most thoughtful presents I've ever received. That's Kate for you.

Singapore, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Hawaii and USA are printed on two sets of tickets slotted into my Thomas Cook wallet stuffed inside my black-and-blue Adidas rucksack, but I'm full of self-doubt, and the ticking clock inside the Granada is a prelude to loneliness and fear. The two-hour drive to Heathrow is not nearly long enough. I want to stay in the car for as long as possible with my family, where it's safe, even if my backside *does* suffer third-degree burns.

'Are you sure you know what you're doing?' Kate asks.

No. 'Of course.'

The first time I gave travel any real thought was three years earlier during a conversation with Jason Reader. We were both fresh out of sixth form, unemployed and broke, and didn't know what to do with our lives.

Jason is like the brother I never had and one of my best friends. My easygoing pal has hardly changed over the years, a man with boyish good looks who lives by his morals and always takes great pride in his appearance. He likes to smell nice and slathers himself in deodorant and aftershave, before and after sport. And butter fingers never fails to spill a drink. He's notorious. If something can spill, he'll spill it.

In my bedroom discussing our futures, he once again looks good and, once again, smells like a tart's boudoir.

'I wanna get away from here,' says Jason, pacing across the carpet, his curly hair neat and firmly gelled.

I nod. 'I'd love to go to Australia or South Africa to see Tristan.'

'Tell me about it,' Jason says. 'Let's just go.'

I nod again, slowly producing a smile. 'Yeah, let's do it.'

We *don't* do it. Despite the false bravado, I don't push the detach button for three years, ending a long spell of procrastination. During this period,

there were no diary entries or advent calendars marked with big red crosses. Long before Google and Wikipedia, I did no research and saved no money. But the idea was there, trapped in the back of my mind like a small strand of spinach caught between my teeth. After all, purpose gives our lives meaning and right now, I have no purpose. I merely have the advantage of perpetual bachelorhood. All my friends are in relationships, but now I'm a free man. Nobody knows me overseas, and I can completely reinvent myself if I want to. I can even use a pseudonym.

And that's the choice I make. Marriage, children, career, mortgage and fucking pensions can all wait. I want to shake myself free from the coils of routine gradually constricting my young life.

I want to live, not just exist.

Ah yes. The fun bit. Telling my parents I'm leaving England to travel solo around the world for six months. I don't know how to break the news. Phone call from the other side of the world? Post-it-note? Get Kate to do it? I know Mum and Dad will do their block, and I'm right. They look at me, asking themselves how anyone can lack such common sense.

'You *are* joking? Please tell me you're joking.' Hands on hips, Mum shakes her head in slow motion, disbelief in her eyes. 'Have you thought this through? You've got a good job at the bank, a stable home, why throw it all away?'

I'm not sure how to reply. I'd scripted a speech, but the words buzzing around my head are like flies. I need to catch a few, put them into a sentence and say something profound, but my traitorous brain lets me down. 'I want to see the world.' *Lame.*

And then the interrogation starts. I understand her concern. I do. Most travellers are worldly, resourceful, knowledgeable and well-prepared. I'm none of these. I'm under no illusion that this trip will change me, but I will need to be careful and not say the wrong thing to the wrong person or turn up at the wrong place at the wrong time because there is a rather substantial section of my prefrontal cortex missing, a crucial chunk that plays a key role in rational thought, and this won't be fully developed until I'm twenty-five, according to neuroscientists. Meanwhile, for at least the next four years, I'm prone to impulsive, reckless behaviour.

'It's only for six months,' I say.

‘It won’t be just six months, will it. You’ll want to go again and again.’

This is a wonderful quality of Mum’s. She’s always right in the way mothers usually are.

We arrive at the airport. The two-hour drive has been a tense countdown to this moment. It will be a journey to forget in the short term, but one I will remember fondly in the future as it’s such a pivotal moment in my young life.

And now I’m climbing out of the Granada, leaving a hot imprint where my arse has been, and lumbering into terminal three in blue jeans and a white polo shirt Mum and Dad just brought back from Turkey, carrying my backpack, ticket in hand, heart in mouth, brain in a constant state of emergency, and Mum asks if I have everything, and I have to think, okay, let me see, favourite shirts and T-shirts, few pairs of jeans, couple of pairs of shorts, including my blue Poole Town pair, enough socks, enough pants, nice shoes, casual shoes, a sweater or two, no coat, did I bring toiletries, I think not, but I can get them later, can’t I, Asia has toiletries, doesn’t it, too late, the backpack I borrowed from Andrea is packed and ready to go, weighing a measly twelve kilos. How about my Adidas rucksack? Well, it contains my Sony Walkman, a big box of cassette tapes, passport, tickets, itinerary, anti-malaria tablets, camera, APS films and sunglasses. Because memory is often fogged and monochrome against the living moment, I also have a diary for recording valuable information such as places and people I meet, hoping this will compensate for a shamefully inadequate memory, ultimately helping me to write this book.

‘Call me when you get there so I know you arrived safely,’ Mum says.

Mobile phones and the Internet are not common commodities in 1998. Postcards, handwritten letters and payphones are still the norm. I mean, only twelve years ago, I watched World Cup 86 on a small black-and-white television. However, the least I can do is allay my mother’s concerns with a phone call. ‘I promise.’

Now, where’s the check-in counter, okay, thanks, Mum, glad you’re here, what would I do without you, wait, what, you’re not coming with me, oh yeah, only got the one ticket, but I don’t know what I’m doing, so, Mum, promise you’ll always be by the phone in case I need to call you, yeah, you

promise? Then I join the long queue and slowly shuffle forward, glancing over my shoulder at a tearful mother and sister, both fearing my adolescent naïveté will lead me to trouble sooner or later. Unable to look at their faces any longer, I look towards the check-in counter, oh God, it says Singapore Airlines on the overhead sign, and I cannot abort once my backpack is swallowed by the carousel, which will feed into my plane, flight SQ0319 to Singapore, and now I'm a writhing mass of angst and self-doubt, aware it's too late for regrets, even though it feels like I'm saying goodbye to my family forever, that my life is slowly coming to a tragic end.

'Next, please.'

I walk hesitantly to the check-in clerk, dragging my backpack across the dusty floor. I give her my passport and ticket with a trembling hand.

Checked in, I say goodbye quickly to my family, not wanting to dally at this point in case I change my mind, so, quick hug, yeah, see you in half a year, yeah, I'll be fine. Swallowing to hold back my heavily conflicting emotions, I head through security, trying to reassure myself that I will be back in six months, just in time for the British summer when the rain gets warmer.

For now, I'm on my own.