

Straddling the 'HOUND



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Straddling The 'HOUND
ISBN 978-1-927755-47-1 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-927755-48-8 (ebook)
Cataloguing information available from
Library and Archives Canada.

Printed on acid-free paper.

Agio Publishing House is a socially-responsible enterprise, measuring success on a triple-bottom-line basis

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Straddling the 'HOUND

The Curious Charms of Long-Distance Bus Travel



TREVOR WATSON

Agio 
PUBLISHING HOUSE

DEDICATION

To Carl Eric Wickman (1887–1954) of Hibbing, Minnesota.
As a young man he failed as an iron-ore miner and Hupmobile
salesman. Undeterred, he went on, at the age of 40, to found the
glorious *Greyhound Corporation*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to my publishers Bruce and Marsha Batchelor
of Agio Publishing for their understanding,
great help and unflagging good-humo(u)r.

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PART ONE

To Weed and Beyond



I'll start by saying this: I have always been entranced by the idea of travel. I love the idea of looking around the world, looking it up and down, inside and out. Often I have felt I wanted to woo the world, to wrestle it to the ground, to romance it, to know it intimately, break it into little pieces and suck out its marrow.

When I was a little boy there was a world map on my wall – a 'Full-Color Mercator Projection' it was. I can remember wondering what it would be like to sail, say, between Celebes and Borneo, stopping here and there along the way to meet the locals. I'd heard the area was thick with pirates and I'd worked out a rough plan for dealing with them. The plan involved much derring-do on my part, leading to an uninterrupted series of victories. I found the idea thrilling, and still do.

My motive for travel is basically an inquiry into how people in different places view life: how they conduct their own lives, what they think about, what they consider worth spending their lives upon. What do we have in common with one another, and what might I encounter that is alien or shocking? After forty years as a physician, I've never lost my sense of wonder in the human heart and mind; it's an interest that continues to grow.

John Steinbeck wrote that whatever this travel-affliction is, it is altogether incurable. He spoke of "the ancient shudder, the dry mouth and vacant eye, and how four hoarse blasts of a ship's whistle still raise the hair on my neck and set my feet to tapping."

It is a lust, a longing, a hunger, a thirst, an addiction, a yearning, a calling, an obsession, a compulsion, a demanding appetite that howls to be appeased. All attempts at appeasement have, so far, proved futile.

When I was a young adult, my parents – neither of which was so afflicted – said that my passion for travel was something that "had to

be simply got out of your system.” When the urge comes on me now, it seems reasonable to plan a dozen journeys in a row, and breezily assume they could all be pulled off without a hitch. Really, though, that’s like attempting to eat a dozen meals in rapid succession – basically nuts.

In another sense, the love of travel is like the love of music. I have met a few people who are not moved by music, just as I’ve met people who don’t understand the appeal of travel – they’d rather “stay put.” To my mind, you can no more get the travel bug out of your system by traveling, than you can get song out of your heart by singing.

Naturally, there’s a word, derived from the Greek, for this overwhelming love of travel: it is *hodophilia*: love of the path or road. It would be a great name for a travel company. You’ve got to love those Greeks.

In a lifetime of travel of one kind and another, it occurred to me some months ago that I had not taken a long *bus* trip for ages. It took me a while to remember just how long it had been. In fact, it was the summer of 1969, when I was 22, a journey from Athens to London. The ticket cost \$35, a complete give-away, I remember thinking. It was an incredible test of endurance – sitting up all the time – and I arrived in London feeling deathly ill. I think it was the ice in the glass of milk I drank in a bar in Calais while waiting for the Hovercraft. Or it may have been the *ersatz* orange juice I bought from a vending machine on the Autobahn outside Munich. My stomach reels at the memory.

When I began this book I was 64, and had lost none of my zest for exploring new places and asking nosy questions of perfect strangers. I didn’t know a thing about long-distance bus travel in North America, so I did some investigating. I learned that a good way to proceed is to buy a ‘Discovery Pass’ from the storied Greyhound Bus Lines Incorporation of Dallas, Texas. I decided a 15-day pass would be about right and went ahead and ordered one. For days I watched the

mail closely, like when I was a kid waiting for something for which I had 'saved-up, and sent-away.'

I asked a number of friends and relatives if they'd like to accompany me. The typical response was, "Eeeee-ew, are you kidding? Didn't you hear about that crazy guy on the Greyhound who decapitated his seat-mate a couple years ago – ate some of him, too? Not me!"

I had indeed heard the story. It's true and horrific beyond imagining. In the summer of 2008, near Portage LaPrairie, Manitoba, a carnival worker named Tim McLean was on his way home on the bus and was murdered in the most gruesome manner by Vince Weiguang, computer engineer and undiagnosed paranoid schizophrenic.

However, such experiences must occur less than once in a lifetime, so I thought it would be a pretty safe bet to enter the Greyhound netherworld. Nevertheless, I resolved not to be at a loss if I got into a tight spot, and equipped myself with a Victorinox Swisstool, a shrieking electronic alarm, pepper spray and a rapier-like steel walking stick. Let any aspiring decapitator beware of meddling with me. In any case, this was my thinking on the subject at the time.

Accordingly, I set out on a dark and rainy Thursday morning, the 9th of February, 2012. I felt a bit keyed-up, like a fellow who had decided to go sky-diving and was having serious second thoughts. I live near Victoria, BC, so my wife drove me to the ferry terminal near Sidney. Bless her heart, she was delighted for me to be undertaking an unusual project. Besides, she was probably glad to get me out of the house for a couple of weeks. On the ferry I could catch a bus and proceed smoothly to the Vancouver bus station, on Main Street.

I was surprised to find security personnel scrutinizing the bags of the departing passengers. I wondered how thorough these chaps were going to be, because the defensive items mentioned above were expressly forbidden according to a pamphlet entitled *Greyhound Security Precautions*. Through the motions they went, with appropriate facial expressions, grave and suspicious. However, in spite of all their

frowning, rummaging, huffing and puffing I somehow got through their screening process with everything intact – every single thing – right under their noses. It was a wonderful example of mock-thoroughness. I was off to a good start.

In due course we crossed the border at Blaine, Washington. I had never crossed the Canadian-U.S. border in a bus before. We were frog-marched by armed officers into the Customs and Immigration hall and asked the usual intrusive questions. From their tone and demeanor I was half-expecting to be herded into a confined space, shaved and deloused under arc lamps.

Of all things, the officers were most interested in how much cash over \$10,000 any of us might be carrying. Among Greyhound passengers, I'll bet this has never happened in recorded history, but still they keep looking. I idly wondered what the protocol was if they were so fortunate as to catch anyone trying to bring in such a bale of cash. Would they delay the whole bus? How could you ever catch up to your traveling companions? Maybe I'll try it with *Monopoly* money sometime, just to see how they handle the situation.

As part of the routine these officers x-rayed our bags. One bag after another went in and out of the machine... nothing was turning up. They'd almost finished with us and were looking pretty glum. Then they came to the backpack of the girl ahead of me. Suddenly they perked up – something must be afoot. They had indeed discovered something: firm radiological evidence of contraband. In actual fact, it was an apple... a solitary, ordinary apple... but it was clearly the event of the day for them.

Naturally, they confiscated it on the spot. The poor girl herself was trembling at this point, and I suppose she was hastily preparing some kind of defense in her mind. In the end, however, she was not charged, but escaped with only a warning, stern and official. I wondered if the officers filed a report on this offense, or whether they discussed the

case over beer after work, or with their wives at home in the evening. You couldn't pay me enough to do that job.

As we buzzed down I-5 toward Seattle, it occurred to me how carefree this type of travel is. No worries about driving, navigation, mileage, mechanical problems, or fatigue. Why, you could chat to your neighbor, sleep, eat, read, and plan your next move, all while sailing down the highway, seated comfortably upon leather, at seventy miles an hour – for pennies a mile. How much easier could travel be?

I figured if I had taken full advantage of the pass, I could cover about 1000 miles a day for \$23 – one of the true travel bargains of all time. You don't even have to find a hotel... you can just keep on rolling all night if you want. You can clean up at a truck-stop in the morning, and get a couple of toothpicks to prop your eyes open.

I like those big colored printed sheets they give you in coffee shops along the way. They're called *The Coffee News*... local ads and events, horoscopes, jokes, famous quotations and a quiz. I found the following on my first day. The originator of the statement was not given, but it strikes me as wonderfully true:

The privilege to work is a gift,

The ability to work is a blessing,

The love of work is success.

As night fell we approached Seattle. As we went through Everett I saw off to my right, on a dark and rain-swept corner, an old-fashioned red neon sign saying simply: *TOYS ... OPEN*. It seemed particularly melancholy to me... some little toy vendor, Mr. Bill Widgett, as I imagine him, sitting alone in his shop, working late, perhaps dusting the toys, talking to them, stewing vaguely about Toys 'R' Us... holding on by his fingernails, trying to scratch out a living that dismal winter night, hoping a customer might come in.

Eventually we made it to Seattle, where I needed to transfer to another coach. I took a look around at the people in the terminal. A very rough-looking lot, to be sure, the motliest-looking assortment I'd

ever seen in my life. Most looked like convicts being transferred from one penal institution to another. These people looked like the extras in *The Shawshank Redemption*. I checked my pepper-spray; I switched off the safety.

One chap particularly caught my eye; he was as stocky as can be; his neck must have been 20 inches around. He was, I imagined, Carlos “Chopper” Ramirez, out on weekend parole. He had cryptic messages tattooed on his neck and bald scalp. His head actually seemed suffused, as though it was about to explode. Oddly enough, he had – of all things – a huge golden *polo* medal hanging around his neck. I’ll bet you anything it was stolen, or maybe won in a knife fight.

I had chosen Olympia, the state capital, as my stop for the first night. The condition of the bus depot was utterly deplorable. For one thing, it was locked – indeed padlocked – from the outside, like a shed. There was a huge sign, in blue and white, with the letters B-U-S arranged vertically, like children’s blocks. The B was burnt out; the U was flickering; the S was fine. The effect was rather disquieting.

I disembarked, and got my bags from the cargo hold. There I was, standing alone in a strange city on a rainy winter night, not knowing quite what to do. I was expecting a taxi to be easily available, but there was none to be seen all up and down the rainy street. I noticed a seedy convenience store down the way and I made my way toward it.

In I walked, shaking my umbrella. I approached the middle-aged Chinese woman at the till. She was watching a video. She looked bored, but appeared annoyed to be disturbed.

“Say,” I said cheerily, “I just got off the bus and need to call a taxi. Can you suggest someone I might call?”

She looked up and scowled; she evidently disliked the riff-raff that drifts over from the Greyhound station – mostly shoplifters and drug dealers, in her books. She said not a word, but pointed to a phone book across the store. I called a company called Capital Cab; I asked to be

picked up at the Greyhound depot. I thought I heard the dispatcher laugh as I hung up.

I walked back to the depot, studying the shadows, juggling my bags and umbrella. When I arrived there was actually a cab waiting, but not the one I'd called. The driver was Ray, a lean, friendly man of about 65. Of course he offered me a lift, but I decided to wait for the Capital man. He was there in a minute. I started to feel as though things just might work out, after all. At least I was out of the weather.

In the light of the next day, the Olympia bus station was not quite so foreboding as it was the night before, and a lot more interesting. The woman at the ticket counter, I suspect, had a number of endocrine issues.

She asked, "What do you want?"

I explained with a touch of pride, that I had a pass, in fact a *Discovery Pass* – as if I was likely a charter member of the *Platinum Elite Greyhound Society*.

She was evidently quite unimpressed.

I sat down, a bit crestfallen, and awaited events.

A gaunt black man about 60 then came in, hoping to get on the next bus to Denver. He had an enormous black bag.

The woman said, "So what's in the bag, bud?"

He replied that it was a fold-up bicycle.

What ensued was a thoroughly distressing dispute over whether this bag should be treated as luggage, or as a bicycle. Luggage was free; a bike was \$45; he had a ticket, but no money for baggage. You see the problem. He had checked with Greyhound on the matter, and they said that it could go as a suitcase – but she wasn't buying it. She said she was "way too busy" to check with head office herself. She enjoyed her authority, throwing that considerable weight around. They were deadlocked.

Then this interesting man – for whom I had much sympathy – pulled out his cell phone and began to call his children in different

cities, asking for a little help. He must have called four or five of them, most of whom apparently stonewalled him, for reasons that can be imagined. Eventually he pieced together commitments for the required sum, and arrangements were made to wire the money to Western Union in Olympia by four that afternoon. Throughout, the agent treated him disgracefully, in spite of the fact he was very polite with her. It was a small indication of what it must be like to be poor and black in this society.

At this point I thought it wise to use the facilities, and I tried the door to the *Gents*. It was locked. Unfazed, I approached the battle-axe and asked for the key. From the back room she produced the key attached to a grubby white plastic flyswatter.

I told her I'd nail any flies I happened upon; she was not amused. However, she said that because I was the first one to use the facilities that day, I had to turn on the light. Fair enough, thinks I. She then proceeded to give me detailed directions as to how to find the switch in the dark.

"Right in front of you is a wall, see," she said. "You reach around the left end of the wall, see, and there's a switch. That's the light switch." She gave the directions slowly as though she were a long-suffering teacher, and I her slowest pupil.

As we pulled out of the Olympia depot my eye was caught by an establishment across the street, where, come to think of it, I might have stayed the previous night, had I known of it. It was the Olympia Inn, and its sign boasted, among other alluring features, *FREE TV*. This was clearly a cutting-edge sort of place. Another feature of this spruce place were the numbered plywood diamonds in various faded colors affixed to the doors. Really sharp.

The scenery along the highway south of there was soggy and dull. Everything seemed the same color, an amalgam of green, grey, brown and black. It was the kind of prospect that makes you want to look away.

It was then I noticed an interesting passenger ahead of me on the left. He was a giant of a guy with a full grey beard and for reasons unclear to me, he was wearing red plaid pajama-bottoms. He had a half-smoked cigarette behind his right ear and appeared to be mumbling to himself, and grinding his teeth. Could this be another highway head-hunter? Not a bit; I later learned that he was an injured commercial fisherman, who was just in from the Aleutian Islands the day before.

My thoughts were diverted by a woman behind me talking at the top of her voice on the phone. She was talking to the parole officer of her lover-boy who had recently failed to show up for a court-mandated appointment. He was thought to have possibly absconded, which I thought was pretty much a sure bet. The woman – I reckoned her name was Shawneeza – was quite agitated. She let it slip – silly girl – that he had “lit out for North Carolina,” and wasn’t planning to come back anytime soon.

“I need him to come back,” she said. “Besides, the kids need shoes.” I pictured him on an east-bound Greyhound at that very minute, on the outskirts of Omaha, with a big smile on his face.

The driver of this particular bus was a remarkably rude piece of work. When I showed him my pass, he snatched – and I *do* mean snatched – it from my hand and demanded, “Where you goin,’ man?” “Well, I never...!”

He never wasted an opportunity to be rude to a customer; I was watching how they reacted, reading their faces. It was as though Rule #1 for this lad was to alienate as many passengers as humanly possible in the time available. He was almost like a caricature of a rude person, like the ‘Soup Nazi’ on *Seinfeld*. I think of him as the ‘Bus Nazi.’

Because this bus was new and had Wi-Fi, I sent an e-mail to Greyhound head office describing my dismay concerning the conduct of the driver of bus #86317. My guess is that my complaint got automatically deleted somewhere in the ether. I considered slipping the man a note, but I thought that might make him... *snap*. He’d have

swerved into the oncoming lane, or perhaps over the nearest cliff. It would have served us right.

And speaking of WiFi: Greyhound offers *Free WiFi* on selected buses and routes. I rode on many buses that claimed to have this feature, however, most were entirely free of WiFi.

In Eugene, Oregon a disabled woman of about 45 got on the bus. She had a service dog with her, a Siberian Husky. The driver very reluctantly made adjustments to accommodate them, grumbling all the while. I spoke to this woman and discovered that she was epileptic. The dog had been trained to detect a subtle change in breath-odor, which signaled an imminent seizure. The dog would raise the alarm, the woman would take an extra dose of her anti-convulsant, and the seizure would be averted. Very neat indeed; I'd never seen such a thing before. The dog's name was Max, a lovely fella.

We were about to get on the road again when it became obvious that the bus wouldn't go into gear. After perhaps thirty attempts, the driver arose and began to leave the bus.

A passenger called out, "Is everything OK with the bus?"

He snarled, "No, everything is not *OK with the bus!*" With that he stormed out. Out of the corner of my eye, I think I saw him kick a tire.

After about half an hour in limbo, the word went out that we were to be sent a "rescue bus" from some distant place. Now I know a sinking ship when I see one. It was mid-afternoon and I decided that rather than waiting to be rescued, and then travel late into the night, I might as well grab a motel and start fresh in the morning. The other passengers – one of whom was a dead-ringer for Charles Laughton in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* – did not have this option. They had to use their tickets on the next available bus. So off I went into the rain in a Eugene Budget Taxi, a shiny orange minivan. The driver was an intelligent and articulate man by the name of Gary; we chatted the whole time, mostly about motorcycles, with which I have had a life-long love affair.

Later that evening I shuffled across the parking lot to Denny's and ordered one of their "skillet dinners." It turned out to be a perfectly delicious melange of chicken, broccoli, potatoes, sour cream and onions. It was the closest thing to *home cookin'* that I'd had for days – two, precisely, but it seemed much longer than that.

In the morning I called Budget again and in a few minutes came a heavy knock on my door that made me jump... such service! The Budget man was a stubby and swarthy hombre originally from El Salvador, he told me. He carried my bag to his car – which was a budget rig, for sure. It was a twenty-year-old faded heap of a Crown Victoria, just about a goner. The steering wheel cover, originally cheap and dreadful, was worn to the extent that what had once been leatherette was dirty foam rubber. Never mind, this was just the vehicle to get you into the right head-space for riding the 'hound.

The word budget, incidentally, is derived from the Latin word *bulga*, meaning a small leather bag, and is related in some obscure way to the word belly. It forms an odd juxtaposition with Taxi.

A very pleasant chap he was, too, the patriarch of a multitude, he told me. Until six years ago he was a roofer, but a serious fall cut short that career. He landed on bark mulch, otherwise he would have been killed, he said. Being a cabbie provided enough income for him to make occasional trips to the old country. He'd recently been there for two months and had had a great time. However, he said, there were about 15 murders a day in his city, although he'd seen nothing himself.

I wandered around downtown Eugene to pass the time before the bus left. An interesting business caught my eye. It was, in fact, The David Minor Theater and Pub. I'm not quite sure how it works, but the marquee showed that there are four shows a day, and I imagine you can get a beer and a meal while you sit in the dark on comfy chairs and watch the movie. Seems like a wonderful idea to me – an idea whose time may have come. Sure beats watching all the anonymous sports in the ordinary pub, or eating goopy popcorn in an ordinary cinema.

At the appointed time the bus pulled out. Today's driver was a stickler for the rules, and hence I thought of him as 'Reg.' He read us the amplified version of the entire Greyhound constitution, I think: all about alcohol, drugs, profanity, cell phone etiquette, musical devices and breaking wind. He followed up with the one about having to wear shirts and shoes ("for sanitary reasons"). Strangely, he omitted any mention of pants; I guess he gave us some credit.

"And remember," he said, smiling into the mike, "they're cell phones, not yell phones." I liked that one.

A word about the Greyhound dress code: the men and boys all wore basically the same outfit, almost as if it were a uniform: dark-colored hoodie, jeans and running shoes. Most of the fellows who looked like pillars of the Greyhound community also wore what Canadians call toques, pronounced 'too-kes,' and what are called 'stocking-caps' in the U.S. The way the women dressed was unremarkable, and certainly not as stereotyped as the men. In terms of men's grooming, I would say this: if you really want to fit in, wear a greasy mullet and a scraggly beard.

Another observation: almost all the riders – including the driver – were smokers. These people were clearly pretty hard-up, many unemployed, but boy, could they smoke! At one stop, Reg, a smoker himself, announced, "No smoking this side of the Coke machine." He made up rules as he went.

If smoking were permitted on the bus it would be suicidal just to be there. If I were a politician and asked what I intended to do about poverty, banning tobacco would be a major plank in my platform. On average, I reckon, it's \$150 a month up in smoke, plus, of course, resulting medical costs. Getting the votes of these guys, however, would be a hard sell.

We soon passed Roseburg, where I'd intended to spend the previous night. I was attracted to the name of the town. In reality, it appeared a scruffy and dismal place. I'm an inveterate reader of signs as I travel;

many are amusing to me. Roseburg offered several signs that caught my eye, so it was not a dead loss. A shop, barely standing by the look of it, was called The Other Hand. Then there was the Pepsi sign with M-O-T-E-L hand-lettered on the bottom half. It makes me shiver to even think of spending a night in the place. It reminded me somehow of the Bates Motel in *Psycho*.

Just down the road was a huge billboard advertising the local Casino that had signed Herman's Hermits to perform at a date in the near future. I remember this group from when I was in high school in the sixties. I liked their simple ditties just fine. Judging from the billboard, lead singer Peter Noone hadn't changed so much as a hair in 45 years, and his teeth were whiter than ever – blindingly white, rather like stumps of chalk.

Onward we rolled, to Grant's Pass in southern Oregon. I saw a sign there which is as bad a business name as one could choose: *Lawless Roofing*. Pardon me, but I believe I'd be more comfortable dealing with another firm altogether, preferably a zealous respecter of the laws of physics, especially those concerning gravity and osmosis.

Somewhere near there I saw another business, this one engaged in the art of the tattoo. Now I have seen enough tattoos to last me several lifetimes, and I confess, I don't know what on earth the appeal is. Upon inquiry I discovered some historical details about what seems to me a lamentable practice.

The word *tattoo* is derived from the Samoan *tatau*. The first written reference to the word itself appears in the journal of Joseph Banks, the naturalist aboard Captain Cook's ship HMS *Endeavour* in 1769: "I shall now mention the way they mark themselves indelibly, each of them is so marked by their humour or disposition."

Later I learned that the island of Great Britain takes its name from tattooing. *Britons* according to one account means 'people of the design,' and the *Picts* – meaning 'painted people' – from the north of that

island were famously tattooed blue. Even today, Brits are the most-tattooed people in Europe. I love knowing stuff like that.

The history of tattooing is fascinating. Forcible tattooing was done as identification in Nazi concentration camps. Roman soldiers were required by law to have identifying tattoos on their hands in order to make it difficult to hide if they deserted. Gladiators and slaves were likewise tattooed; exported slaves were tattooed with the words *tax paid* and it was a common practice to tattoo *Stop me, I'm a runaway* on their foreheads.

As Robbie Burns said, "Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn." More like millions, at this point.

Emperor Constantine banned tattooing the face around AD 330 and the Second Council of Nicae banned all body markings as a pagan practice in AD 787. The Latin word for *tattoo*, interestingly enough, is *stigma*.

Tattoos seem to correlate to certain other unfortunate phenomena such as incarceration, drug abuse, single motherhood, probation and drunk-driving convictions. Tattoos are also apparently related to the economic necessity of traveling by bus. On my way today I saw a tattoo parlour called *Nukklheadz*, which seems to me a wonderful piece of self-parody.

Enough about tattoos! I hope never to think of them again.

Today I noticed there was hardly any conversation on the bus. It appears that about 90% of passengers are traveling alone. Most spend a great part of their time plugged into headphones, presumably listening to music. I actually found this discouraging and somewhat annoying. When your seat-mate has his earphones in, he's sending you a pretty clear message. My guess is that a lot of these people have pasts they're not keen to divulge to strangers, especially nosy ones like me.

My across-the-aisle neighbor was a seemingly untroubled soul. He had been eating junk food all day. Discarded wrappers surrounded him. He was a headphone guy; his head bobbed sleepily. I wondered

what tune he was listening to. About four in the afternoon he opened up an interesting product – candy, I guess – called *All Fired Up*. He kept on bobbing his head. His incendiary snack seemed not to be firing his brain a bit.

Most of the talking you hear comes from someone on a cell phone. It usually goes like this: “Honey? I’ll be at the depot at six... OK... yup, chicken’s fine... I love you, Honey... bye.”

By late afternoon, Mt. Shasta came into view off to the north, through the windows on the right side of the bus. There it was, the most splendid sight: a gorgeous white giant thrusting itself into the bluest sky you ever saw. Steam trailed from its peak. At 14,179 feet, it is the second tallest volcano in the Cascade Range. *Shasta* is derived from Russian, the language of early settlers in the area. It suggests: ‘white, clean, pure’ or ‘happiness, luck, fortune, felicity.’ I’ll wager they liked it here a good deal better than the Steppes.

This struck me as just the place to stop for a night or two. The nearest bus stop was in Weed, in Siskiyou County. The name of the place itself excited my curiosity. When planning this trip, I learned that the town has about 3,000 residents and was named after lumber baron Abner Weed. He founded the town because the winds were good for drying lumber.

The bus depot was a most modest affair, even among bus depots. It was, in fact, a log cabin with a flat roof perhaps a bit larger than a garage. A few of us got off the bus and shambled into the hopelessly cramped structure. The only touch of modernity was a small electric sign in the window saying *Open*. I learned that the place opens only when a bus is expected – not the sort of business that would support its owner in much style. The proprietor put on the coffee in anticipation: 75 cents a cup.

When I reached the counter I asked the beefy female agent, “Where’s the Motel 6?”

She answered, raising her nose in a northerly direction, “Oh, it’s a long way off – maybe 3 miles.”

I said, “Well I guess I’ll be needing a taxi.”

“Ain’t none,” came the reply. Her mind was clearly elsewhere.

Now I subsequently found out that Weed itself has shops, restaurants, motels, a mayor and council, a college, brewery, a drunk-tank, law courts, police and fire departments – but curiously, not a single taxi. A curious omission, to be sure, and a hot moonlighting opportunity for the Greyhound staff, between buses.

There was nothing for it but to walk – I figured an hour. I really didn’t mind: the weather was fine and I’d been sitting on my duff all day. I remember walking three miles along a highway when I was a boy and found it quite tiring. In reality, the motel was scarcely a mile away and I had just warmed to my task, when to my delight, I arrived. There it was – that big, friendly red, white and blue sign. I could hear Tom Bodett: “We’ll leave the light on for ya.”

One thing about Motel 6 is that the rooms are all identical, wherever you go, so it’s like arriving home at the end of the day. Call me crazy if you will, but that’s how I feel about it.

Later, just before dark, I went for a walk around town. The part along Historic Highway 97 is rather unremarkable, but if you go into the old part of town, under the newly refurbished iron archway with W-E-E-D welded to the top, things began to look a lot more interesting. I plunged in and soon encountered a dog that didn’t seem to like the look of me. He looked a little like Old Yeller, just before they put him out of his misery. I fingered the pepper spray, but decided against it. I simply changed course slightly, avoiding any unpleasantness.

The downtown buildings were old, but well-built of brick. You could tell the place had once been prosperous, but the prosperity appeared to have moved on down the line. These buildings housed a few starving businesses, closed for the day – or perhaps for the duration. I read somewhere that “taxable sales within the city are somewhat

limited.” I passed a forlorn flickering sign announcing the availability of *Cocktails*. Above the sign, against the darkening sky, was a depiction in red neon of a martini, complete with olive and swizzle stick. The idea of spending ‘happy hour’ there gave me the jimjams.

Across the street from the cocktail lounge stood a building that looked like a disused art-deco movie theatre. Near its front door was a poster under which was printed *Now Playing*. The movie was, and I swear it’s true, *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman*. It showed a woman standing astride a highway overpass filled with cars. She had long wavy hair and a heaving, creamy bosom. Her dress was hiked up. She was picking up cars and tossing them around with impunity, while tiny men in fedoras looked on fretfully. She looked more like a fifty-yard woman to me.

I later learned that this is indeed a real movie, a sci-fi outing released in 1958, directed by Nathan H. Juran, no less. It stars no one I’d ever heard of. One reviewer fondly called it a “bad film of incredible notoriety” – a “proto-feminist cult film” – whatever that may mean. *Rotten Tomatoes* gave it a score of 75%, while commenting that, although it was one of the worst sci-fi movies ever made, that didn’t prevent it from being ‘thoroughly enjoyable.’ And to think, had I not gone to Weed, I probably never would have learned any of this. I began to feel a bit giddy, as if I was in a rather pleasant episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

I continued to walk toward the end of the town. There I found an enormous building, a warehouse originally, I think. The immense sign announced this was, in fact, *The Weed Mercantile Center*. A beautiful mural stretched along the wall facing the town depicting a wonderful old steam locomotive pulling rail-cars laden with enormous logs – redwoods, likely.

The only other person about was a woman of slight build, about 70. She was wearing black earmuffs and smoked a very long cigarette, perhaps a Virginia Slim.

She looked me up and down, smiled, and asked, “Out for a walk, are you?” She didn’t say, but I believe her name might have been Blanche.

I briefly told her that I’d read a bit about Weed, and the place interested me, mostly because it was near Mt. Shasta. “Are you local?” I asked.

“Yup. Sixty-two years... right here,” she said.

We chatted a bit longer and then parted pleasantly.

On the way back to the motel half an hour later, I stopped in at Ray’s Superette to see what I might get for supper, for I had decided to ‘dine-in.’ I cruised the aisles and to my surprise, rounded a corner and ran smack into Blanche, still in her earmuffs, apparently considering the purchase of a bottle or two of wine. We recognized one another and said hello a bit awkwardly, and I carried on. I later met her at the cashier and I was pretty sure by that time she was starting to think of me as “that weirdo drifter that come into town on the Greyhound... Up to no good, likely... maybe I should call Sheriff Pickens. Better safe than sorry.”

The cashier was a young black woman with the astonishing name of Markeshia, according to the tag on her apron. I learned somewhere that the parents of each black daughter in the U.S. try to give her a name different from any other black girl born in that year. I have no idea how this information is administered, but the system seems to be working. The name Markeshia may be unique in history, for all I know.

The most interesting establishment on Main St. had a catchy name: it was the Hi-Lo Restaurant Motel & RV Park. An antique neon sign – all swirls of red, green, yellow and blue – glowed magnificently in the dark. The place fairly dripped nostalgia. The sign noted that the Hi-Lo had been *Serving Friends Since 1951*. Perfect.

I peered in through the misty window into the rosy glow and saw throngs of happy diners chowing-down. Above, mounted heads of deer, moose and bobcat looked on glassily. I walked in, feeling completely

alien, but enjoying it immensely. Country & Western music was playing, something about crying, lying, cheating and dying. I asked to see the menu. The waitress was most obliging.

“Sure, honey,” she drawled; she didn’t bat an eye.

The menu featured real stick-to-the-ribs fare. I decided I’d return for breakfast.

Back I went to the Hi-Lo in the morning and had a truly memorable feed of hot Italian sausage, scrambled eggs, hash browns and buttered sourdough toast and jam. Thus fortified, I thought I’d attend a church service, but from one end of the town to the other, I found no evidence of one, which I found disappointing and surprising.

I opted instead for a walk out to the College of the Siskiyou, on the east side of town. There I found an enormous deserted campus – not a soul around – with decent-looking, dark-stained, low-rise wooden buildings. I wandered over to the track and first-rate grandstand and sat on a cold aluminum bleacher reading Taylor Caldwell’s *Great Lion of God* for a while. I was feeling a bit lonely at this point, for the first time since I left home.

The College of the Siskiyou describes itself as “one of the most beautiful campuses in the state... established in 1957... publicly-funded community college... classes began in 1959 with 67 students... now 4,000... excellence in firefighting, nursing, music...” and so on.

My view is that this college in Weed is so isolated, and the town itself so lacking in diversion, there’s precious little else to do but study. On special occasions you could, of course, head to the Hi-Lo for the Blue-Plate Special, or maybe catch *The 50-Foot Woman* again.

I had brought a minimum of baggage with me – ‘travellin’ light’ – for once in my life. The problem with that is that you have to seek out laundry services fairly often. Therefore, when I saw the washer and dryer at the motel, I went to assess the situation – costs and so on. To my considerable surprise and pleasure, I learned that cleanliness was on offer for 75 cents a pop.

The other part of this is that you have to decide how to carry this out without exciting a charge what my old Dad called ‘indecent exposure.’ I’m pretty sure they lock you up for that in Weed. This is one way of doing the laundry when you only have one outfit: completely undress... then don your bathing suit and windbreaker... proceed to the laundry and get the washer going. Then return to your room for a breather. Half an hour later, you return to the laundry, pop the wet clothes into the dryer, and retire to your room once again. So far, so good. When you imagine your load is dry, retrieve your clothes in a plastic bag, return to the room, and put them on. The pleasure of donning clean, hot clothes is better than a trip to a spa – and all for \$1.50.

The only snag with all of this was that the dryer was a bit harsh. In fact I noticed my barely-broken-in Tilley hat had a nasty rip in it across the front. Well, I don’t mind traveling by bus, but I do draw the line when it comes to wearing ragged clothing. Therefore, I decided I needed to repair this damage forthwith.

When you’re alone in a motel room in a forgotten town at night, you have plenty of time to solve problems as they arise. I proceeded thus: I whisked down to Ray’s again and bought some adhesive tape, a packet of 40 needles and thread. I returned to the motel and fashioned a very neat and inconspicuous patch for my beloved Tilley. Thus, my respectability was restored for a mere \$2.14.

I learned that they brew good beer in Weed, and I decided it would be a shame to leave town without trying some. At seven o’clock I wandered over to the Hi-Lo and ordered a bottle of Abner Weed’s Amber Ale. It went down very smoothly. I then proceeded to devour their Seniors’ Turkey Dinner, which was delicious in all respects, a complete gastronomic bull’s eye.

Another fact or two about the Weed Brewery may be in order. Their product is known as ‘The Legal Weed.’ Apparently the owner of the brewery had been in a protracted dispute with the federal government – the Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, to be

precise – about making so bold as to call beer *weed*. I believe he won the lawsuit, a triumph of wit over bureaucracy. Another of the brewery's witticisms is, "A friend in Weed is a friend indeed."

Weed... what a fun town.

As you might imagine, the shops along the main drag were replete with souvenirs positively exhausting all the plays-on-words of *weed*. Numberless T-Shirts, mugs, pencils, erasers, key chains, flashlights, shot-glasses, hats, rabbits' feet, kaleidoscopes and do-dads with something like, *I LOVE WEED* emblazoned upon them. I wonder what old Abner would have thought. I reckon he'd have been delighted.

Next day was Monday. It was time I was pushing off south again. The bus was scheduled to depart at 0800. My alarm went off at 0545. It took me fully 45 minutes of hard work to get out the door and aim myself toward the Hi-Lo. It was a dark trudge; snow was falling at weird angles – just so it hit any exposed skin. I put up my umbrella. I wondered if the bus was going to make it through the snow. In any case, the Hi-Lo was warm and cheery and had only a few customers – locals, for sure at that hour. I was feeling a bit rushed, so I just ordered a ham and cheese omelette, spelled *omelet*. And what an enormous creation it was: roughly the size of a pillow, and packed with miles of cheese and what appeared to be the major parts of an adult pig.

After bolting this huge thing, I loosened my belt and got on my way. I hustled up the hill towards the depot. It was snowing harder than ever and I had a headwind. It reminded me of a picture I had seen in a Frank Netter anatomy drawing in medical school of a fellow who had just eaten in a restaurant, and went out into a blizzard with two suitcases. It showed him turning blue, in the process of having a heart attack.

After a thoroughly bracing walk, and with rosy cheeks, I stumbled into the little depot. I was the only customer. The coffee was on; I wondered if it was fresh or left over from the midnight bus. The proprietor was a phlegmatic soul, and testy to the point argumentativeness. The

kind of guy who if you said “good morning” to him, would retort, “What’s so good about it?” I’ll call him ‘Bud.’ After my eyes adjusted to the dim interior, I saw a huge dog lying just behind him. This was Rudy, and he was a Rottweiler. It’s interesting what breed of dog a certain person chooses. A Rottweiler was a perfect choice for Bud. The funny thing was that Rudy’s personality was all pussycat. Rudy and I hit it off just fine, much to Bud’s disgust.

On my heels was a young fellow in his early thirties, small, wiry and pleasant-looking. He said he had followed my tracks in the snow. King Wenceslas flashed through my mind. He said he was trying to get home to his mother’s place. He was unable to get a job and needed to take refuge for a while. I asked him what he ordinarily did, and I gathered he was good at working on complicated small machines. His last job was assembling machine guns for a ‘businessman’ who imported them from Eastern Europe.

“Not much of a market for them these days,” he said sadly.

I wondered if he had a letter of reference from his former employer in his pocket. Such a reference might do him more harm than good.

Moreover, this fellow had a serious problem using his right thumb, which pretty much disqualified him from his customary work. He said he couldn’t afford the required investigation and treatment. This struck me as tragic and uncivilized. He couldn’t work because he was disabled and he couldn’t get treated because he couldn’t earn enough to pay the exorbitant medical bills. Therefore, he was going home to mother. In any other first-world country this would not be happening. Still, he was a cheerful lad – Scott was his name – and we talked on and off all that day.

Next to come in, in a whirl of snow, was a vivacious, extroverted woman named Katherine. She was about sixty and was, I learned, a semi-retired high-school teacher from Dixon, west of Sacramento. “It used to be spelled D-i-c-k-s-o-n,” she noted.

She wore an elastic brace on her right wrist. I displayed some

professional curiosity about the wrist injury, somehow letting it slip that I was a physician. Well, did that ever put a fire under the conversation! Pretty soon we had a bustling out-patient clinic on the go in the Weed Greyhound depot. Bud was keen to show me his war wounds.

“See this one here, Doc?” pointing to a dint on the left side of his skull. That’s from ’Nam in ’68,” said Bud. “The Tet Offensive... Hell on wheels.”

This, to me, pretty much excused his sourness.

It seems that Katherine’s husband’s great-grandfather was John Muir (1838–1914), one of the patron saints of the environmental movement, an early advocate of wilderness preservation and founder of the Sierra Club. Katherine noted tartly that she thought old John would disapprove of most of the political positions of the Sierra Club today.

The bus was an hour and a half late getting in, what with all the putting-on and taking-off of chains. The chains are of course applied to the drive wheels, which are actually forward of the rear-most wheels on these buses, something that was news to me. Again, the arriving passengers looked a deprived, furtive lot. I had heard that California has been releasing loads of convicts, more for reasons of overcrowding than good behavior, unless I miss my guess.

Actually, of course, they were nothing of the sort. They were in fact a multiracial group of high-spirited folk in toques, hoodies and backwards baseball caps – smokers all, full of quips and raucous mirth. Bud wished us god-speed.

So long, Weed. I was missing it already.

Scott, Katherine and I sat near enough to one another on the bus that we could converse. The subject of baggage arose. People pay lip service to ‘traveling light’; certainly most of us do nothing of the kind. Katherine said the best number of socks to take with you on a trip is three. I’d always thought of socks as existing in pairs, but not so, this clever woman. “Sure,” she said seriously, “you wash one sock each evening, dry it overnight, and then put it on in the morning. That way,

your socks are pretty clean all the time. I asked her if she thought the socks should match one another. Somewhat desirable, she suggested, but not strictly necessary. In fact, if they don't match it's easier to keep track of what sock to wash, when. She struck me as a no-nonsense pioneer kind of girl, the kind that comprised the backbone of the Old West.

Two seats ahead of me on the right was a man who kept turning in our direction and tossing out the odd comment with a smile. I moved forward so we could talk. He told us his name was Hans and he was the son of an American Jewess and a Mennonite from Switzerland. On the bus there's no telling who you'll find. He informed us that he was, in fact, a Messianic Jew, which seemed entirely in keeping with his family background.

He told us he was making a pilgrimage to Bethel Church in Redding, just a few miles south of where we were. He was an ex-soldier, a veteran of campaigns in Vietnam and El Salvador. He mentioned that he was disabled with PTSD, and the VA was very slack in looking after his medical and financial needs. Moreover, he'd had two hip replacements, several cardiac stents put in and had recently suffered a stroke affecting his short-term memory. He was going to Bethel Church to seek divine healing – something that happens frequently there, he told us.

At this point Katherine joined the conversation. She was a Catholic, she said. Her background was Irish, her maiden name was Kilkenny. Hans said the previous year he'd had a near-death experience that took him to the gates of Hell, which scared him out of his wits and had affected him profoundly thereafter. Katherine said she didn't believe in Hell but quickly added she thought Hell was 'here,' pointing out the window. The scene outside was lovely, all forest, sky and snowy mountains.

I said that I thought Northern California was far too attractive to really be Hell. She fell silent. I asked her if she thought her disbelief in Hell really determined if there was such a place or not. I'm told

some people don't believe Idaho exists. That doesn't change the fact that there it sits, large as life, in a neat slot between Washington and Montana.

I added that if she calls herself Catholic, the teachings of Christ need to be held in high esteem, and certainly He believed in the existence of Hell. She continued to furrow her brow – likely wishing it was time to get off the bus. As we neared Redding we decided we'd pray for Hans. The three of us joined hands and did just that.

This man radiated joy in spite of his afflictions; I really took to him. When we parted in Redding, he said, "See you later," and raised his eyes and smiled.

I was sad to see him go, but very much warmed by having met him. Altogether a marvelous day so far, and it was only lunchtime.

We got a new driver in Redding, one Karl Jones, according to his lapel badge. He looked and spoke for all the world like Rush Limbaugh. This thought kept me amused throughout the tedious announcements. I had hoped to make it to Madera that night, but we arrived in Sacramento an hour and a half too late for my transfer. Never mind, I thought, I'll spend the night here and set out fresh in the morning. I called the Motel 6 just down the street and, learning it was a mere ten-minute walk, set out directly.

While I was preparing to cross an intersection, I heard someone come up behind me and say my name. I jumped a bit and then saw my new friend, Scott, and his seat-mate, Richard, approaching me from behind. We were all headed in the same direction, and I was glad to have their company because the neighborhood was pretty rough, and seemed to exude an electric edginess. I got the distinct impression that I had better keep my wits about me. Richard had a very scarred face and I suspect some brain damage. I thought he must be ex-military.

He said, "We've got your back!"

I found the expression comforting, and immediately felt perfectly safe there. They said they were, "Goin' for a beer."

I carried on and checked in. At the desk I was greeted by a huge, unfriendly black man. His attitude was something in the line of, “What do *you* want?” He assigned me a room, and I asked him if I was on the quiet side of the building, which had but two sides, one of which faced the freeway. “One of ’em,” he said cryptically.

As I walked to my room I passed a young black couple standing by the pool. It was the off-season, and the pool was empty and deserted. He was about 25 and she 16, I figured. He caught my eye and asked, “How are you, sir?”

I said I was well, thank you.

Encouraged by my responsiveness, he smiled at me and asked, “How’s the trip going, anyway?”

I felt a growing unease that was somehow intensified by the fact he had a gold canine tooth that glinted in the late afternoon sun. I was pretty sure what all this friendliness was about, and I gave the young couple a miss. They must have attracted some business shortly thereafter, for when I drew back my curtain ten minutes later, they were gone.

The Internet at the hotel was ‘down’ and against my better judgment, I decided to walk to McDonald’s and use their free WiFi. The sun was just about gone; my antennae were straight-up. I looked over my shoulder at the motel as I walked away. Several people, including the man on the front desk, were watching me intently from their windows. The oddest sensation came over me, as though I’d become the target of a conspiracy.

As I walked briskly along armed with my walking stick, imagine my surprise to hear my name again. Sure enough, it was Scott and Richard, fresh from their pursuit of refreshment. I asked them where they had gone.

Scott said, “Oh, we just bought some beers at the 7-11 and drank ’em in the bushes.”

This statement surely illustrates the flexibility and thrift of a true Greyhound. I was proud of them. It was coming time for them to get

their bus and I walked them back to the depot and said good-bye to them – for the third time.

When I reached McDonald's I looked up at their sign and got an update on how many burgers they had sold so far. Now, I don't know who tallies them all up, but so help me, the sign said 85 billion. I started to fantasize about all this meat. Let's see... at two ounces a patty, that works out to be 10,625,000,000 pounds of beef.

Thought of another way, supposing you can get 500 pounds of hamburger from each critter, you'd need 21,250,000 cows, steers or bulls to pull this off, a sizable herd, to be sure. You might be inclined to think that this must be all the beef there *is*, but you'd be wrong. At last count there are something over a billion and a half cattle in the world, mostly in India.

Alternatively, if you put these burgers side by side, they'd reach a distance of 5,500,000 miles: that's 233 times around the world. If stacked, allowing for an average thickness of 3/8 inches, they'd reach a height of 100,000 Mount Everests. I am, however, on the verge of a digression.

A little later I bought a pint of milk at the nearest convenience store. On the way back in the dark I had to walk through a gloomy underpass. I could see out the other end and did not realize until partway through that in the middle of it was an enormous black fellow in a black hoodie. Naturally, all I could see were the whites of his eyes. Though tingling with excitement, I didn't break my stride and uneventfully made it back to the room with my milk.

I used some of it on my cereal and placed the rest on the cold pavement outside my door. When some time later I went to get more of it, I noted with some alarm that the milk had been moved. It now sat, about eight feet away, on top of the air conditioner. I retrieved it with some suspicion and found that it was full. I took no steps to determine what fluid now filled my milk carton, but it takes little imagination. I just

left it there. It's hard to explain, but in the entire trip I only experienced the approach of what felt was *evil* once – and this was it.

That night I put a bunch of furniture against the door and engaged my burglar alarm. I was preparing to retire at about 10:30 when there came a great pounding on my door.

“Waddy want?” I growled, trying my best to sound fierce. I didn't look through the peep-hole... that's a good way to get shot in the eye, I'm told. In any case I assumed malign intent, but it may just have been a pizza-delivery fellow with the wrong room number, who knows?

There was no response.

All in all, it was a very interesting day, and I slept like a top.

The next morning I called my old friend, Jan, in Bakersfield. This is a man I'd met in Israel a few years ago who asked me to look him up if I was ever in his area. He is a surgeon. He was most gracious and insisted that I stay with him for a few days. I agreed to spend that night at his place and he said he'd pick me up at the depot that evening.

It was a relatively quiet day as we bussed through Stockton, Modesto, Madera, Fresno, Visalia, Porterville, and finally reached Bakersfield at about five. I was fumbling with my phone, trying to call my friend, when I heard my name being shouted. Sure enough, it was Jan. He had parked just out front, and soon we were in his car, ready to go. I saw him slip something into the glove compartment. I don't know why, but I asked him what it was.

“Oh, that,” he said, “that's just my nine-millimeter Glock. I'd never go into a Greyhound terminal without one.”

He lived 25 miles west of town in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains – a place called Hart Flat. This is the exact place described in *The Grapes of Wrath* that the Okies fetched-up, looking for work. The place the migrant workers camped is today a vast expanse of tawny grassland. Jan noted that this was a ‘very conservative area,’ which is code meaning that the locals hate the President, own lots of guns and have a year's supply of food in their bunkers.

The homes were scattered over a huge area. Each homeowner had perhaps 15 acres separating him from his neighbor. Maybe it was the mood I was in, but there seemed a distinct feeling of unhappiness and paranoia in that affluent but strangely unappealing neighborhood.

One of the drawbacks of 'democracy' in the U.S. is that most people don't seem to approve of the man or party in power – "I never voted for him, never would." Most people who say they are in favor of democracy usually disapprove of the outcome of the process. It's an illustration of what Churchill said about it: "Democracy is the worst form of government except all the rest that have been tried." My feeling is that the average person is, in effect, in favor of a dictatorship – with himself doing the dictating. I get a big kick out of human nature.

My friend, his wife and I spent a very quiet and pleasant evening together. He said he had to be in the operating room at seven the following morning, so we had an early night.

I was up at quarter to six and soon ready to go. I waited in the living room for a long time. All was quiet. All at once... instant pandemonium erupted. My friend had been 'on call' all night and had accidentally switched off his alarm clock. In due course, he awoke naturally, saw the time and panicked.

There was no time for breakfast; out the door we ran. We zoomed back to Bakersfield with the wheels of his Prius barely touching the ground. We averaged 80 mph and treated each stop sign and red light with disdain, as if we were an ambulance. He was torn as to whether to go straight to the hospital, or to drop me at the Greyhound. He was already late for the surgery and noted, "I get charged \$60 for each minute I'm late!" What a system!

However, hospitality trumped the hospital and he took me to the bus station, near a store called The Wooden Nickel. The name of the place made me smile; it reminded me of my old Dad who always told me not to take any of those, no matter what. I bought breakfast in the station from a large radiant black woman that called each customer

(including me), “Dear.” That simple word really warmed my heart. It’s hard to explain, but it was what the Bible calls ‘a word in season.’ I was alone, a long way from home, heading into the unknown and it made me feel just right, and I told her so. I bought more than I intended to, just to make her happy.

Someone asked her what kind of day she was having and she smiled and said, “Why, my day has been just one blessing after another.” I was glad to be in the same room as she was.

Well, I needed to meet my buddy Wally in San Diego that night, so I figured I’d better get on with it. There are two buses from Bakersfield to San Diego, one requiring a transfer in LA, one not. I figured I might avoid bloodshed or other inconvenience in LA if I took the latter. My choice of bus that morning proved more important than I had imagined. I’m not sure how the folks on the other bus made out, but the experience on our bus that day was completely unpredictable – wonderful in spots – and ended up by making this day the most eventful and interesting of the whole trip.

What I didn’t know is that the bus I so cleverly selected was not Greyhound at all, but one of the seedy Crucero fleet, bound for the Mesa Central de Autobuses in Tijuana. In the last few years, Tijuana has become a leading center in the principles and practice of decapitation... sacks of heads, all over the place, I was told. I imagine all this mayhem keeps loads of people busy matching individual heads with their original bodies. I found myself wondering if they found a particular head and not the body, the funeral would require a very small casket indeed.

The bus was shabby, and pretty much packed. There were the usual garden-variety Greyhounds, plus what looked like a few migrant farm workers, clutching Walmart bags, munching tortillas, heading home. I found an empty seat on the aisle about half-way along the left side of the bus. By the window sat a large man of about 45.

“OK if I sit here?” I asked.

He nodded slightly. I took the seat.

After a minute or two of silence, I asked, "Where you headed?" I thought this was a reasonable attempt at conversation... friendly-like, not too nosy.

"Ell-ay," came the reply. Period... that was it. No further information, no question, nothing. The conversation I'd hoped for was still-born; my heart sank. I reckoned it was going to be a long, quiet ride; I fished the novel out of my pack and began to read. I became aware of widespread coughing. There must have been about six passengers hacking at any given time. I squirmed a little... TB? Valley Fever? Mold?

I smelled the strong scent of tobacco coming from behind me. I turned around to see from whom this emanated, and I was startled to see a Buddhist monk gazing serenely out the window, complete with shaved head and saffron robe. There's absolutely no telling who your fellow-travelers will be on the bus.

After about twenty minutes of this, I noticed my seat-mate started showing some signs of life. "Did you hear that 'pop' sound?" he asked.

I hadn't.

"Blowout," he said.

The bus pulled over and drew to a stop on the shoulder. I remember thinking I was glad we were not in a plane. The flustered little Mexican driver went to investigate. The tires were inflated, although pretty much worn-out. He decided he'd better check the engine compartment. Many of the passengers got out to take a look; several had opinions on what might be wrong. Most of the chatter was in Spanish. After a minute or two the driver determined that a spring clip had failed on the high-pressure hose to the turbocharger. He said, "I got no tools!"

I thought the fact that he was unprepared for the most elementary mechanical repair entirely in character with this outfit. I truly believe that the corporate maintenance policy for these big bus lines is to drive their rigs to death, or at least until they break down at the roadside.

This, if you're counting, makes two breakdowns since leaving home a week before.

I felt for my Swisstool – which, of course, according to regs I ought not to have had on my person – and offered it to the driver. He fiddled around for quite a while, practically standing on his head in the engine compartment. There were many grunts and Spanish expletives. After he was clearly out of ideas, and with skinned knuckles, he gave us bystander-advisers an odd smile and a shrug of his shoulders. We were, as we say at home, *hooped*.

Throughout, we got the distinct impression that the driver did not want to seek professional mechanical assistance, even though we were actually at a truck stop with full repair facilities. It was as though any repair costs would be deducted from his pay, or perhaps he would get sacked for breaking the bus.

Somewhere in there I chatted briefly with the monk, who was a world-class cigarette smoker when the system permitted, such as during mechanical breakdowns. He was from Thailand, and lived in a monastery in Los Angeles. I tried some Thai phrases on him, for example, “Hong nam u-tinoi?” (“Where’s the toilet?”) He smiled inscrutably, and exhaled in my face. I later saw him catching a ride from a trucker who’d stopped for fuel. His serenity and patience evidently did not extend so far as to waiting for our rescue bus to arrive.

Eventually, and after much discussion, head-scratching, calling head-office and the like, it was decided to consult a mechanic. On cue, a mechanic mysteriously emerged from the shadows, like he was expecting to be called upon. He was a tall, slim man, with a far-away look in his eyes, a man I thought we could count on. He looked a bit like a rider of the range – like Clint Eastwood in *High Plains Drifter*, come to think of it; I could imagine him twirling a box-wrench like a six-gun.

The upshot of the foregoing was that a part was required and, sadly, unavailable at that time and place. Moreover, the mechanic insisted

that the vehicle was definitely unsafe to operate – much too slow for the freeway on which we had been traveling.

Decision-making is an interesting and unpredictable process in this type of situation. After listening to the mechanic carefully, and nodding sagely, our little driver, flying in the face of expert counsel, ordered us back on the bus. He had decided to take us back to Bakersfield. He was, you might say, prepared to *wing* it.

We moved along the shoulder at a snail's pace. I didn't mind; I was kind of having fun at this point, and everyone was talking and joking about the ridiculous turn of events. I used my GPS to determine our speed. At first it was 30, flat-out; then it was 27, then 21. I imagined we were in a plane losing altitude, hoping to clear that range of mountains ahead.

Through all this, my seat-mate had been free with his opinions, and not the taciturn type I had originally taken him for. He was, in fact, a long-haul trucker who'd lost his license "for impaired" some years before, so he felt qualified to advise us on all matters concerning the road. He said there are loads of accidents on that freeway where slow-moving vehicles get clobbered from behind by enormous trucks operated by wide-eyed drivers on *bennies*.

This information introduced a strain of considerable anxiety among those within earshot. Just behind us sat a black woman who listened carefully. She was about 40, six feet tall, very well turned-out, mostly in red. Suddenly, she sprang to her feet and bolted to the front of the bus. This is getting interesting, I thought. Then in a voice that would have raised the dead ten miles away she bellowed, "You, drivah! You stop dis bus right now 'n' call fo' anudder one! Eee-mediately, o' I's gonna sue yo' ass!"

The effect was electrifying on all of us, especially the poor driver, who by that time had likely decided on a career change. By some odd chance we were just feet away from another truck stop, namely, Bear Mountain Plaza – not a bear or mountain anywhere near there, by all

appearances. In any case, #60544, flagship of the mighty Crucero fleet, sailed limply into port.

We soon learned that a rescue bus had been dispatched from Los Angeles and was expected in a couple of hours. I spent the intervening time wandering about the place chatting to the staff, reading, checking the merchandise. The maintenance man in the restaurant was a fine fellow, with a warm smile and good eye-contact. He was taking a break and drinking from a thermos with the inscription *The Lord has promised good to me* on it, which rang a bell with me. I thought it might be from Psalms, but it's not. In fact, it is from John Newton's *Amazing Grace*:

The Lord has promised good to me...

His word my hope secures.

He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.

In due course our rescue bus arrived, just about as decrepit as the one we were abandoning. The two vehicles looked like litter-mates. There were laughs all around as we piled in. I sat with the same lad I'd been with earlier. For some reason, he seemed eager to tell me a good deal about himself. I'll call him Alonzo Ruiz. As I mentioned, he was a long haul trucker, the type of vehicle known as a 'semi,' or 'tractor-trailer.' He told me he'd lost his license 'for impaired' almost three years before.

This is how it happened, most unfairly, of course – to hear him tell it. It seems he was out on the road somewhere with his cargo, and decided he needed a break. Up ahead was a casino, one of hundreds that line the highways of North America. Alonzo, it seems, was not averse to a bit of gambling, and he was feeling thirsty as well as tired. Well, one thing led to another, and he eventually emerged from the casino several hours later pretty sozzled. Shocked at how late it was getting, he decided he'd better stay in the casino parking lot for the night. To avoid the bright lights he thought he'd better move his rig to a far corner of the lot. And, what kind of rotten luck do you think tripped

him up? Just as he was driving a mere stone's-throw, down swoops a Highway Patrolman with a Breathalyser machine.

Well, he was good and busted at that point. The three-year license suspension suggested that this may not have been his first offense, but I didn't press the point. I asked him how he supported his family these days. Apparently he has a brother who is a carpenter near San Francisco and he had found some work with him. He noted that his wife was a manager at a Mexican supermarket in Riverside, and somehow they kept afloat. He said it would only be another month and he'd be back on the job in earnest. "Easy to get a trucking job," he said, "but the pay sucks. Awful competitive, and you're always in a hurry. Still, I'm happy to be going back."

Ahead of us to the west stood the Sierra Nevada; this range of mountains is known as 'The Grapevine' to long-haul truckers in that area. As we labored up the eastern slopes, I noticed quite a number of emergency runaway lanes. Alonzo said truck brakes fail 'all the time,' and these lanes are in constant use in that area; and he would know.

In a while we approached what looked like a strange factory, a dismal, dusty emplacement, set way off to the right of the highway. I thought it might have been a nuclear power plant, or a place for recycling tires, but Alonzo said, "Oh, that? That's San Quentin."

I straightened up in my seat; who doesn't have ideas about San Quentin? It ranks way up there with Alcatraz.

I saw lots of black-and-white movies when I was a kid about San Quentin; they all had to do with the activities of its charming and ingenious inmates: fist-fights, riots, fake guns carved out of soap, squirming through ventilation shafts or sewage pipes, and home-made knives they called shivs. By the way, *shiv* is from the Gypsy word *chivomengro*, any sharp or pointed implement used as a weapon. Jailbreaks were, of course, the main thing on the minds of these lads – many were planned and attempted, though very few realized. A tiny hope is all you've got at San Quentin, I guess.

I later learned that San Quentin Penitentiary is, in fact, many miles away, in Marin County, on the ocean near San Francisco. In any case, it gave me a chance to think a bit about the prison system in California. In the most recent year for which I could find figures, there were 170,000 inmates in adult prisons in California. This is a rate of incarceration is about one in every two hundred state residents.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has been much in the news lately because of the terrible crowding of its prisons – many over official capacity. This has led to many early – some would say *unwise* – releases. I'm not sure how the convicts are actually selected for release under these circumstances; maybe there's a lottery system, or perhaps they play *Monopoly* and can actually redeem the *Get Out of Jail Free* cards. If the state builds more prisons in future, will these early parolees be called back inside to finish up? Perhaps they discharge the lucky ones with a few bucks and a Greyhound ticket out-of-state.

We rolled along, down the western slopes. Somehow, the subject of toilet paper came up. Toilet paper is seldom thought-of, except when there is none to be had. It then becomes of paramount importance, more than the economy, more than climate change, more than radical Islam. A fellow across from me said when he found himself in need, he would use one of his own socks. He didn't say what he did with it afterward. It's clear to me that if you 'go Greyhound' enough, sooner or later, you'll have opportunity to talk about anything the human mind can conceive.

In many countries, especially in Asia, you are expected to provide your own toilet paper. In North America, people have grown accustomed to having it provided by the management. The quality of free toilet paper in the US is excellent, pretty much as good as you'd have at home. I remember once being on the biffy at the British Museum, and noticing that each wee rectangle of crinkly, shiny paper was imprinted *Property of Her Majesty's Government*. I'm not sure if Her Majesty actually knew about this, but if she had been informed, I'm

sure she would not have been amused. For her sake, I hoped the toilet paper at Buckingham Palace was a good deal less harsh. I believe the practice of embossing the toilet paper in government WCs has since been discontinued. Maybe the ink was allergenic.

According to my sources, the first outfit to mass-produce toilet paper in the New World was the Perforated Wrapping Paper Company of Albany, N.Y. This company apparently had quite a line, among them: *Wrapping, Waxed, Anti-Rust and Carbolated Papers*. In an 1886 ad the company promised that by using this wonderful stuff 'Physicians' and Plumbers' bills' would become a things of the past. Moreover, 'Clogged Pipes with Consequent Impure Air and Disease' would be banished forever. And what a deal! A roll of 1000 sheets could be had, *Wrapped Securely in Tin Foil*, for fifty cents, postpaid. A medicated product, claimed to prevent hemorrhoids and other itches was available for a modest additional charge.

In due course we rolled into Greater Los Angeles. Alonzo directed my attention to the scene on the left side of the coach. There it was, up on a slope, the HOLLYWOOD sign that I'd seen so many times in films. The letters are somewhat out of line, like they had been placed by a crew of dopers. More likely, the poor alignment is due to tectonic shifting because the hillside sits upon the Pacific Ring of Fire. I read there are something like 10,000 earthquakes in LA in a year. Los Angelinos apparently take these things in stride, but it must desensitize people and affect the local mentality a good deal, like living at the foot of Mount Vesuvius.

Incidentally, the sign was erected in 1923, and built to last 18 months. It is comprised of letters 50 feet high and 30 feet wide and originally spelled *Hollywoodland*, the name of the swanky housing development there. Sadly, in the summer of 1932 an unemployed 24-year-old starlet named Peg Entwistle threw herself off the *H* in a fit of despondency over being unemployed. The day following her suicide, a job offer arrived in the mail.

About sundown we rolled into the LA Greyhound depot. I understood this bus would stop here for a short time, then shove off for San Diego – no need to transfer. I felt like stretching my legs and checking out the L.A. Greyhound depot, which I figured was bound to be chaotic and colorful. I stepped down onto the platform, and what do I see on the luggage trolley? My very own pack that someone had unloaded from the baggage compartment under the bus. “What’s this?” I thought. “This is supposed to stay aboard, because this bus is going to San Diego.”

I immediately seized the bag and dragged it inside the bus, resting it on my lap, thinking of how fortunate I was to have spotted Greyhound’s error. Several minutes passed, and it began to dawn on me that I was the only one on the bus, and it was entirely dark inside and out. I sprang to my feet with a sense of alarm and rushed to the front, where I found the little driver, after the most stressful day, doing paperwork by flashlight. I asked him what was going on. His eyes grew wide and he exclaimed, “Oh, Sen-yor, you need to be on the other bus, the one that’s just leaving.”

Well, I fairly flew out of the old bus onto my new one. I thought I had all my belongings, but to my dismay I soon realized that I’d left my wonderful, enormous novel aboard the old bus. I hope it fell into appreciative hands.

The episode of being on a dark, empty bus reminds me of those stories you hear about some airline passenger who is allegedly asleep when the plane lands and, to her horror, awakens hours later, still in her seat, in a darkened hangar. These somnolent people – whose stories to me are universally preposterous – normally end up wailing about their emotional trauma to the media. The object, of course, is a fat cash settlement to calm their nerves... the *green poultrice*, as we say in my line.

I briefly wondered, because of my state of upset, if I stood a chance with Greyhound, and decided, no... no point... I wouldn’t get a cent.

I imagined I'd get a letter from head office in Dallas advising me to "tell someone who cares."

On we went through the great, dark, sparkling conurbation of coastal southern California known as the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana Metropolitan Statistical Area. Recent figures put the population at 15,000,000, which makes it the twelfth largest city on Earth, fitting neatly between Manila and Calcutta, though less than half the size of Tokyo. In any case, it seemed endless. By the way, I'm giving Tokyo a miss.

About nine we arrived at the bus station in San Diego, which is right downtown, at 1313 National Street. I was less than a mile from the hotel where I'd agreed to meet my buddy Wally that night. The streets were well-lit and empty. The prospect of walking seemed safe enough. I'd just shouldered my pack, when to my surprise, my cell phone rang. After a moment of wondering who this could possibly be, I decided it must be Wally.

"Hello, is that you, Wally?"

Well, it wasn't Wally at all – it was my friend Alonzo from earlier that day. In the afternoon I had lent him my phone to call his wife, and now that he was at home in Riverside, he retrieved my number and decided to check up on me.

"Are you OK?" he asked, with what seemed to me real heart. I assured him that I was fine, and planning to hoof it to my hotel, no problem. "Do ya need anything? Is there anything I can do for you?"

I replied that I appreciated his concern, that everything was under control – but if I hit a snag, I'd call him. We rang off. I can't express how touched I was at his taking the trouble to call me. It was a very nice piece of ambassadorship, I thought. Here I was, a lone stranger in a strange land, and he, an LA-Hispanic defrocked long-haul trucker, was thoughtful enough to honestly welcome me to his part of the world. The call lightened my heart; I set off with a bounce in the direction of the Solemar Hotel.

I was, in general, impressed by the humor, generosity and open-heartedness of many of my fellow-travelers. There was a quality of what I might call *rough goodness* in the ones I got to know as we rolled along. I had encountered this feeling before – in the characters of Steinbeck’s early novels – *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat*, particularly. It’s strange but true that someone you’ve just met will divulge things to you that he wouldn’t tell his wife or close friends.

I moved through the empty streets at good clip, on high-alert. The hotel where we were booked was a swanky spot, oodles of stars, unaccustomed to having guests walking over from the bus depot. I’d been on the road for a week and looked it, I imagine. I had my pack on my back and my patched and stained Tilley on my head. Not wishing to provoke the management, I paused for a moment to see what changes might be in order before I came in view of the liveried doorman.

My pack is a marvel of engineering; it is, to be sure, a *hybrid* piece of luggage called a rolling backpack. As well as the way I was carrying it on my back as I approached the hotel, it has a handle so it can be carried like an ordinary suitcase. But the best part is that it has two wee wheels on it, and a handle for pulling it along. This may not impress you too much, but I can tell you – the front desk hotel staff makes a firm class distinction between a guest who comes in rolling his bag with alacrity, as against one who trudges in with a backpack.

Accordingly, I straightened up: chest out, stomach in, Tilley stowed, rolling my tidy bag. The staff positively lit up to see me.

“Yes, sir,” said the night manager. “We have your room ready. Mr. Hasker has already arrived.”

Up I went in the gilded elevator feeling as though I’d entered another world. I approached our room. I slipped the card into its slot. Wally was on his bed watching a huge television. We greeted one another enthusiastically.

“Did you have a good trip?” he asked.

I smiled, took a deep breath and began with, “Wait till I tell you....”

PART TWO

The Road to Key West

