

## Chapter 1

*In which the Author expresses some Dissatisfaction with the State of his Life, ponders briefly prior Adventures and Misfortunes, and with the aid of his Beguiling Girlfriend, decides to Quit the Life that is known to him and make forth with all Due Haste for Parts Unknown.*

One day, I moved with my girlfriend Sylvia to an atoll in the Equatorial Pacific. The atoll was called Tarawa, and should a devout believer in a flat earth ever alight upon its meager shore, he (or she) would have to accept that he (or she) had reached the end of the world. Even cartographers relegate Tarawa either to the abyss of the crease or to the far periphery of the map, assigning to the island a kindly dot that still manages to greatly exaggerate its size. At the time, I could think of no better destination than this heat-blasted sliver of coral. Tarawa was the end of the world, and for two years it became the center of mine.

It is the nature of books such as these--the travel, adventure, humor, memoir kind of book--to offer some reason, some driving force, an irreproachable motivation, for undertaking the odd journey. One reads, *I had long been fascinated by the Red-Arsed Llama, presumed extinct since 1742, and I determined to find one; or I only feel alive when I am nearly dead, and so the challenge of climbing K2, alone, without oxygen, or gloves, and snowboarding down, at night, looked promising; or A long career (two and a half years) spent leveraging brands in the pursuit of optimal network solutions made me rich as Croesus, and yet I felt strangely uneasy, possibly because I now own 372 (hardworking) kids in Sri Lanka, which is why I decided to move to a quaint corner of Europe, where I would learn from the peasants and grow olive wine.* And typically, the writer emerges a little wiser, a little kinder, more spiritual, with a greater appreciation for the interconnectivity of all things.

Let me say at the top here that I didn't have a particularly good reason for moving to Tarawa. There was nothing Quaker-ish, Thoreau-ish, Gauguin-ish (as you wish) about my taking a little leave from Western civilization, which I thought was fine mostly, particularly as manifested in certain parts of Italy. True, I had worries. News You Can Use, the peculiar link between consumption and identity, professional athletes who strike, Cokie Roberts, the Lazarus-like resuscitations of Geraldo Rivera's career, and the demise of the Washington Redskins

as a team to be reckoned with all gave me pause and even some anxiety regarding the general course of Western society. However, these issues seemed insufficient to justify a renunciation of continental comfort. I was simply restless, quite likely because of a dissatisfaction with the recent trajectory of my life, and if there is a better, more compelling reason for dropping everything and moving to the end of the world, I know not what it is.

It was the summer of 1996 and I had just finished graduate school in Washington, D.C., which is where I'd met my girlfriend, Sylvia. Both of us had studied international relations. I focused on Eastern Europe (think triumph of good over evil), and Sylvia concentrated on Western Europe (think agricultural subsidies), for which she has been teased mercilessly. While Sylvia passed her semesters with determined ambition, I drifted through, racking up modest grades, until finally there was not an exam left to be taken, not a paper to be turned in, and I was discharged. Job offers were not forthcoming, most likely because I didn't apply to any jobs. Nor was I particularly adept at what is called networking, which is highly encouraged among job seekers, but perhaps not entirely useful for reticent souls utterly flummoxed by what career to pursue.

Instead of getting a job I went to Cuba, which as expected was interesting, and this delayed for ten more days my entry into the ranks of the employed. I traveled there impulsively, deciding one day that Havana was where I really wanted to be, and within a week I found myself on the Malecon, the seaside avenue, saying yes to cigars and no really, I didn't want to meet their sister. In Havana, I danced in the salsa manner. I rode in a Studebaker. I had long rambling conversations with handsome, middle-aged women about the troubles in Cuba and I learned from them where on the black market in Habana Vieja I could find a chicken. I smoked a marijuana cigarette with Havana's bad element. I learned that Che is ubiquitous in Cuba, and that for most Cubans he is something more than a fashion statement. I learned much else besides, and I didn't even speak Spanish, dredging up instead a hybrid patois composed of schoolboy Latin tossed with French spoken in the accent of Ricardo Montalban.

One may wonder how an unemployed ex-graduate student with no means whatsoever was able to afford a trip to Cuba. The truth of the matter was that I couldn't afford it. However, in an act of colossal misjudgment, American Express had agreed to give me a credit card. American Express, of course, was not accepted in Cuba itself. This is because Cubans are Communists and we are not allowed to trade with

Communists, unless they are Chinese Communists. American Express, however, was very helpful in obtaining the full-fare economy-class Washington-Newark-Mexico City-Havana round-trip ticket on AeroMexico, as well as one night's accommodation at an airport hotel in Mexico City, after my last twenty dollars were used to pay an unexpected departure tax in Havana. ("Mais ca dise dans la guido por visitor, no departure tax.") Since I was resoundingly broke at the time, what cash I did have came from defying the tenets of my lease and subletting my one-room apartment to an intern contributing his time to restoring values in America, which apparently lost them, probably in the sixties. He lived in my apartment for one month (cleanliness, apparently, was not a value worth returning to). Since I spent only ten days in Cuba, this left three weeks of unresolved residence needs that needed addressing, which led to an interesting conversation.

"Hi, Mom."

"Uh-oh."

"I'm going to Cuba tomorrow."

Pause.

"I'll be back in ten days, provided that Castro doesn't arrest me and the INS lets me back in. Ha-ha."

Pause.

A whispered aside. ". . . he's going to Cuba tomorrow." The family dog, a beagle, howled.

Bob, my stepfather, got on the line. "Maaaaarten," he said, which he does whenever I'm doing something unreasonable, something that will upset my mother. "You know your mother doesn't like Communists. But listen, since you're going, let me call my friends at the Agency. You could do some freelance work for them."

Offline, my mother's voice, plaintive. "Bob!"

It was Bob's method of diplomatic, benevolent stepparenting, suggesting something more outrageous than what I had devised, so that in comparison, my own reckless irresponsibility seemed suddenly like a moderate course of action. I was grateful for this. I promised my mother that I would not act on Bob's suggestion. It would be

foolhardy, I said, to spy for the CIA. I assured her that I would refrain from engaging in any activities that could lead to my spending the rest of my days withering away in a Cuban gulag. In return, I received three weeks of accommodation in suburban Washington, meals included, which worked out well, I thought.

Alas, I soon discovered that a daily wake-up call from a collection agency is a remarkably unpleasant way to begin one's day. These are not warm, friendly voices delicately reminding you that your account is just a trifle overdue, but intimidating snarls threatening personal ruin, and while they didn't precisely say that they were sending Vinnie over and that I might soon have some mobility issues, it was implied. Also, these calls didn't impress Sylvia much. And so I made another phone call.

"Hi, Dad."

"Uh-oh."

"Well, it's like this--"

"No."

"It appears that this particular situation might have certain ramifications regarding--"

"I believe at this point you owe me \$180,000."

A gross exaggeration, but effective. It was time, at last, to do something about my income stream, such as, for instance, obtaining one. Like many highly educated people, I didn't have much in the way of actual skills, with the notable exception of forklift operator, at which I did not excel. My lack of excellence in forklift operations, however, did not prevent the manager of the produce market-plant nursery emporium where I labored after high school from sending me forth onto Rockville Pike, one of the main arteries linking Washington, D.C., with the Maryland suburbs, where technically, forklifts should not be-- as I soon learned--because when forklifts take a corner a wee bit too fast they tend to tip, which can lead to hundreds of watermelons rolling across the intersection with Montrose Road, followed by said watermelons being chased by a very embarrassed forklift operator wondering whether this, finally, would be the last straw before he was fired. Other skills included housepainting, which I could no longer continue on account of an accident that had made climbing a ladder an

experience too terrifying to contemplate; and waiting tables, which I had done at numerous establishments along the Eastern Seaboard, for numerous years, and I just felt that I could no longer serve the numerous assholes that frequent restaurants in a courteous, efficient, nonhomicidal manner.

While it is true that my grasp of the situation in Macedonia and my familiarity with the Czech Republic's privatization program could, potentially, have led to a professional job, perhaps even a good professional job, I chose not to pursue employment in the field for which I had spent many years acquiring knowledge because . . . because, well, I didn't really have a good reason. It just didn't seem like the right thing to do, possibly because to obtain a professional job requires much letter writing and phone calling and boot licking, which comes suspiciously close to being a real job in itself and this I was in no mood for. Instead, beset by fiscal realities, I turned to Jenny and Debbie, kind yet firm managers of a temporary employment agency. They interviewed me, quickly discerned that I was not quite bereft of brains ("Put the following states in alphabetical order: Utah, Arkansas, Idaho, and Nebraska"), that my knowledge of software programs was scant ("But it says on your resume that you are proficient in Word, WordPerfect and Excel"), and that despite three typing tests I could never exceed twenty-nine words a minute, which was most unfortunate because the temp agency determined wages based on typing speed. And so after six years of exceedingly expensive, private school tertiary education combined with the amassment of some interesting and potentially job-relevant experiences elsewhere in the world, I became a minimum-wage temp, an experience that need not be recounted with much detail, though I will note that to be a temp is to have all the illusions and conceits of youth shattered, which was useful and necessary though disagreeable.

My temporary job assignments varied, taking me from law firm to trade association and around again, and always I would be led to the ominous file room and told with the patient civility reserved for the learning impaired that I was to make some order of the files. In the few assignments that lasted longer than a week I was offered the opportunity to enhance my skills and I would be taught how to answer the phone while others were on their lunch break, and even how to order office supplies, which I should note is usually very complicated indeed. Occasionally, I lamented my poor typing skills, but I refused Jenny and Debbie's well-meaning offers to take the typing tutorial offered by the agency, fearing that such a move would lead me inexorably toward a career that depended on my typing speed.

Instead, I found myself quietly stagnating, slowly approaching the pathos of self-pity--pathos because I was twenty-six, in the full blossom of youth--until one morning I meandered away from the day's job, entered a cafe in Georgetown, ordered a large coffee, freshly squeezed orange juice, a poppy seed bagel, toasted, with lox and cream cheese, and read a newspaper with the mirth of one who has time to linger over the Home and Garden section. Jenny and Debbie were not pleased. "Not showing up for an assignment makes us look bad," said Debbie. "I'm afraid we're going to have to let you go."

It is an unfortunate reality for innate idlers that our modern world requires one to hold a job to maintain a sustainable existence. Idling, I find, is immensely underrated, even vilified by some who see inactivity as the gateway for the Evil One. Personally, I regard idling as a virtue, but civilized society holds otherwise and the fact remained that I still had to get a job. And so I soon found myself involved in the exciting world of publishing. I was an associate editor for a small publishing firm in Washington, where I worked on a reference book that detailed the work of lobbyists. The first half of the book, which was essentially a Yellow Pages for influence peddlers, was comprised of listings of companies and countries and who they retained to purchase favors from the guardians of democracy in the heart of the free world. The second half of the book listed all lobbying firms and lobbyists and their clients, as well as the "government relations" staff of corporations that saw the need to maintain offices in Washington. The job consisted of sending out questionnaires, following up with phone calls, confirming lobbying data at the Justice Department, and plugging in the results into a computer database that crashed twice daily. I amused myself by matching the names of the Washington representatives of the Bosnian Serbs, the Mobutu regime, various Somali warlords, and Nike with the guest list of state dinners at the White House. Remarkably, however, there were some who did not take kindly to having their lobbying activities made public, which led to some coarse language directed my way over the telephone, and I would like to say here that I wish the "government relations" staff of *(Deleted by Legal Department)* nothing but ill will, and that I have it on good authority that the ingredients of a *(Deleted by Legal Department)* include canine fecal matter.

While this job included health insurance as a little perk to compensate for its serf-like wages, there was no disguising the fact that I was still treading water in the river of life. I had some notion of wanting to write, though little inclination to actually write, which sometimes led me to believe that I should develop other notions. An obscure literary journal had just published a five-thousand-word essay I had written,

and while I was pleased to have something published, the \$50 and two free issues in compensation for three months of evening work seemed, somehow, inadequate. I kept sending essays, trifles, queries to national magazines, and while often the editors would respond with a kind, encouraging note, even a phone call, they still, sadly, continued to publish the petty ruminations of windbags long past their prime instead of fresh new voices with interesting things to say. (Not that I'm bitter.)

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