

Strange Conversation

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INTRODUCTION

“Each contact with a human being is so rare, so precious, one should preserve it.”

-Anaïs Nin

One of the most fascinating events to descend upon my hometown of San Diego is Comic Con, which describes itself as "a nonprofit educational corporation dedicated to creating awareness of, and appreciation for, comics and related popular artforms." Attendees travel from all over the world for sneak previews, exhibits, and celebrity Q&A's; often while dressed in costume as their favorite fictional film and comic characters. I've never attended the convention myself, but I enjoy walking through the streets in front of the venue as an observer, sharing the sidewalks with Storm Troopers, aliens, and foot-dragging zombies. It's a bizarre experience, but overall, it thrills me to see so many people in their element, even if it's an element beyond my comprehension.

Once, while waiting for a friend, I walked into a grassy area and hoisted myself up onto the low hanging branch of a tree. A pale bespectacled man in a Jedi uniform soon walked past and when he looked up at me in my green sundress, I smiled. He walked over, and cleared his throat. "You look just like a fairy, sitting in that tree." Then he ran away.

That is the sincerest compliment I have ever received.

There is a tendency in most parts of the U.S.A. to look down at our toes rather than risk awkward eye contact with a stranger. I think we miss many bizarre and beautiful moments because of it. Each person we encounter is a conglomeration of experiences and quirks that are unique to them alone in the universe. I'm trying to learn to listen.

The following is a collection of conversations or experiences with strangers, both home and abroad. Almost entirely unsolicited, each exposes little pieces of someone's story. Their ideas, kindnesses, prejudices, hurts and dreams. Some may have mental illnesses, some are drunk or angry, some nostalgic or lonely. But their stories matter. In listening to them, they've become part of my story. In and writing them out, I unfortunately add prejudices and ideas of my own. The best I can do is to remember that I'll never know what built those stories. I'm not privy to the details that laid the foundations for these moments of strange conversation. And neither are you.

CHAPTER 1: STRANGE CONVERSATION

“Don’t let us forget that the causes of human actions are usually immeasurably more complex and varied than our subsequent explanations of them.”

-Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

Route 2, Golden Hill, San Diego, CA

"Hey, can you do me a favor?"

I turned and offered a weak smile to the source of the voice in front of me. It belonged to a woman with greasy curls and features obscured by crooked lipstick and far too much blue eyeshadow. She rummaged through a pink pleather purse and handed me a tattered and dirty scrap of paper.

"Can you take this number? This is my name, here. Can you just call this number? Call it when I get off the bus. It's my parole officer, just tell her you saw me here on the bus. That's my name. Just call that number."

I stared down at the name and four digits scratched across the paper. Before I could protest, she gathered up her things and rushed off of the bus.

"Thank you," she shouted toward the open window. "You're a doll!"

Route 10, University Ave., North Park, San Diego, CA

"Do you like going to the library?" the man behind me asked in a nervous and hurried voice; peering over the seat to look at the open book resting in my lap.

"Yeah, sometimes," I said.

I usually pay close attention to bus conversationalists, scribbling notes onto a napkin or the back of a receipt as soon as we part ways. Today, though, my book seemed more interesting. He hovered in expectation, though, waiting for something more. After a long pause, I finally asked, "What about you, do you like the library?"

"Yes," he replied, relieved. "I go to the library in Santee. But not very often, because I have to work a lot. Nine hours everyday. But not today. Today I am getting off the bus at 30th Street. That's my stop."

I nodded and looked back at my book as he continued the monologue. A few minutes later he pointed to a bus bench advertisement at a passing stop, promoting a raffle to win a dream home.

"I could've won a house you know. But I didn't enter. I think it was something like \$150. What a rip off. I'm glad I didn't win, though. Too much paperwork."

Market, La Habra, CA

I set my purchases next to the register at the small produce market, going over the shopping list in my mind.

Spinach, peaches, oatmeal, bananas, peanut butter, eggs, onion.

"One tomato?" the woman behind the counter asked incredulously, holding a red roma up to the light.

"Yes."

She grinned, and burst into hysterical laughter.

Bus Stop, University & 32nd, San Diego, CA

The man pacing back and forth behind the bus bench had curiously opted to face the warm summer day in black leather pants, a black and gold snakeskin suit jacket, and a black fedora. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, studying the jacket, but looked back at my book when he stopped pacing and sat down.

"Scuse me," he slurred, "In walking distance, do you know any good places to eat around here? I don't usually eat much, but today I am just hun-ger-y."

"No, I really don't eat out too often," I replied.

"Why not, you don't trust people?"

"No, I just don't eat out too often. I get burritos from that restaurant right there," I pointed down the street toward the red rails of the restaurant's porch.

"You trust them, then?"

"Well, it's right by the bus stop, so I always go there."

"I don't trust people, especially nowadays," he explained, staring off to the other side of the road. "They're liable to spit in your food or something."

"Oh, well, I know there are a few restaurants down that way," I offered, unsure of what to suggest to someone who viewed the world so suspiciously.

"Yeah, but I don't know which one to go to."

"Well, there's an Italian place, they have a lunch special. I've never been there, but I saw it on a sign."

"I wouldn't know what to get at no Italian place!" he protested.

"You could get pasta."

"Pasta!?", he shouted with disdain, "Like spaghetti?"

"Yeah, spaghetti is good," I mumbled.

"I had spaghetti two nights ago! I don't want none of that. I want to get me some Chinese food. Do you know any place with Chinese?"

"No, not here. I've seen a sushi place down on that corner," I pointed, "but not Chinese."

"I need everything on my plate to be dead," he stated, clapping his hands together on the last word. "You know what I mean? You eat that stuff?"

"Yeah. It doesn't always have fish, though. My favorite is cream cheese and avocado and sweet potato."

"That sounds good. I am just so hungry today, though. And I can't be cooking for myself."

At that moment, another man walked past the bus stop, and shouted "Hey, show me some love!" They slapped each other's hands, and the hungry man in the snakeskin coat walked away.

Bus Stop, Swift & University Ave. Eastbound, San Diego, CA

Around seven on a Sunday morning, I sat at the bus stop next to the donut shop near my house, watching the early morning sun rays peek over the buildings and jacaranda trees. A few others, including a man in a brown mechanic's uniform, already waited there; the latter cloaked in the musk of stale alcohol. He turned to the rest of us and grinned excitedly, breaking into monologue.

"I just got an apartment. I was on the streets for six fucking months, and I saved every penny I got. I even picked pennies up off the ground. But I got in a fight with my wife, an argument. She just wants to go her own way and it pisses me off. But at least I got my apartment. I was on the streets for six fucking months. I ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for six fucking months. But I saved every penny I got. And now I got an apartment and a crock pot and stuff."

"This guy down the street, he has an auto detailing place. He let me work for him, and I saved every penny. Now I got an apartment. But there ain't nothing in it. What am I supposed to do, sit at home and look at nothing? It's okay, though. My Dad, he said he'd send me a T.V.. I called him and he said, 'You did this yourself, son? I'm proud of you. I'm going to send you a T.V.' That's something."

"I was on the streets for six months. Six miserable fucking months. But now I can say thank you Lord. THANK YOU LORD!"

"This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice. Rejoice!"

The 7:15 bus pulled up to the stop, and he walked away from it toward the orange glow of the sunrise. As I stepped up onto the bus, he turned around and with a huge sloppy smile shouted, "You have a good evening."

CHAPTER 2: THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

“If you're in trouble, or hurt or need - go to the poor people. They're the only ones that'll help - the only ones.”

-John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Bus Stop, 30th and Lincoln, North Park, San Diego, CA

The bus bench nearest the grocery store rests in the blue-cool shadow of a jacaranda tree. The afternoon sun, blocked by the shade, failed to dry the morning's light rain and a spattering of fallen blossoms and water droplets covered the seats.

A portly man stood behind the bench, with his rolled blanket under one arm and a battered red suitcase in the other. His clothes were dirt-stained and ragged, and he had a harsh manner to his face that set me on edge.

I found a place to stand on the opposite side of the bench, resting one foot on its dewy edge. He studied me through reddened sleepy eyes, so I looked away uneasily and busied myself with counting the cracks in the sidewalk.

"You wanna sit down?" he offered.

"Oh no," I sputtered, startled by his words. "It's a bit wet."

"I'll take care of it, hon." He walked over to the row of newspaper dispensers to pull out a thick stack of complimentary employment guides.

He spread them across the wet bench and gestured for me to sit down. "These sure ain't doin' me any good." He laughed a loud and rumbling laugh, letting the sounds roll out from somewhere deep in his stomach. "No ma'am. These sure ain't doin' me any good!"

Orange Line Trolley, La Mesa, CA

The second day of January was colder than I'd anticipated. I rummaged through my suitcase and added several layers of clothing before boarding the trolley from the train station downtown. Eager to get home after an exhausting overnight trip to the Rose Parade in Pasadena, I settled into my seat wrapped in a cacophony of mismatched knits and opened a book.

The car was unusually empty on that particular day, but at the next stop, a thin middle-aged man in a mechanic's uniform climbed the stairs and sat across from me. He looked tired and worn from a long day's work, and sank heavily into his seat as the trolley moved forward.

I returned to my book, but glanced up again as the man opened his wallet and inspected as if looking for a bill that wasn't there. He folded it gently and replaced it in his pocket, and searched his other pockets until he found a handful of coins. He laid them out in his palm and counted to himself, it looked to be about a dollar. He exhaled sadly and leaned back with closed eyes, clutching the coins in his hand.

I remembered the ten dollars in my own pocket. He seemed like a nice guy, he wore a wedding ring and probably had kids at home, judging by the pictures in his wallet. Maybe he was going through a rough patch. I decided that if my stop came before his, I'd hand him the bill as I walked by. Leaving the book open in my lap, my mind turned to rehearsing what to say to him. "I thought you could use this?" No, that sounded odd, I didn't want him to think he looked like he needed it. Perhaps, "Merry Christmas." It wasn't too far past December 25th for something like that.

Moments later, the trolley stopped, and he rose to leave. As he walked past me, he smiled and held out the handful of coins. "Sorry it's not much, but maybe it'll help you out." I stared at the outstretched hand in confusion. "With what?" I asked.

"Oh, I umm...." he said, sputtering. "I just thought, you know, anybody hauling around a sleeping bag like that might need a little extra help."

"I'm coming home from a trip to L.A.," I said defensively, but caught myself and smiled. "I'm fine. Thank you, though."

"Oh, okay." He walked quickly toward the exit. "Merry Christmas, then!"

CHAPTER 3: STORY

“But how could you live and have no story to tell?”

-Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *White Nights*

Bus Stop, Broadway & 5th, Downtown San Diego

“What’s your shirt say?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s french, it means-”

“You’re beautiful,” he interrupted. “Let me see your eyes.”

I started to lower my sunglasses instinctively, but then registered the comment and looked away. Sensing my discomfort, the man changed the subject.

He introduced himself, extending his hand, then asked my name.

“Emily,” I said, shaking his hand in return.

“Emily, do you have a dollar? I’m mighty hungry.”

“Sorry, no.”

“I ain’t gonna buy drugs or nothing.”

“I really don’t,” I said truthfully, “I don’t usually have a lot of cash on me, only enough for this bus.”

“Well, I got my social security check coming tomorrow. One thousand dollars. And it’s also my birthday! That’s a great birthday present, don’t you think?”

“Happy early Birthday then. How old will you be?”

“The question is not how old will I be, but how old do I feel?” he chuckled. “And the answer is twenty-five, unless I’m trying to sit down. Then it’s seventy-two.”

We sat in silence for a moment, me staring at the folded sunglasses in my hand, and him staring at me.

“That’s a nice purse. I like how it matches your shirt. The same colors, you know?”

“Thanks, I made it.”

“Did you now! That’s great. Really great. Can I see it?”

I turned the bag toward him.

“Aw, come on. I ain’t gonna steal it. I’m sitting down on the ground, and I’m old. I’m not going nowhere fast.”

I realized that this was true, and that the only things in it were a sweatshirt and a library book, so I handed him the purse. He admired the stitching and the pockets, and respectfully refrained from rifling through its contents.

“Where are you headed today?” he asked.

“Back home. And you?”

“Phoenix. Things will be different in Phoenix, I think. I’m tired of sitting out here in the streets. I was living with this nice couple up north, but I screwed that up. They brought me to their church, and everybody was just so touched by my testimony, about how I was homeless and then I found the Lord. This couple, they let me stay with them, and I was even speaking in Sunday school. To the youth. I had my own bedroom, and they just loved my testimony. They were always asking me to share my testimony. But I just couldn’t stop drinking, so they kicked me out. I love drinking, you know?”

“You don’t have any family?”

“I do, but I don’t think they want to see me. The drinking, you know? I just love alcohol too much. But I’ve got my social security check coming tomorrow. One thousand dollars. And I’m going to be on the first bus to Phoenix. Things will be different in Phoenix, I think.”

My bus finally came, ten minutes late, and I waved goodbye before boarding. I looked for him the next day, but now the corner is always empty.

Route 5, Downtown, San Diego, CA

The bus doors closed and a large man in a button-up shirt and a soiled, sun-faded ball cap slid into the seat next to me. He turned to stare at the book in my lap, and the stale sweet smell of alcohol hung in the air between us.

"What're you reading?"

"This," I turned the book over so he could read the cover, 'Living to Tell the Tale,' by Gabriel García Márquez. "It's his autobiography."

"You studying literature or something?"

"No," I sighed, still young enough to feel vaguely annoyed when mistaken for a college student. "Just reading."

"He write a couple of pretty famous books?"

"Oh yeah, '100 Years of Solitude,' 'Love in the Time of Cholera,' a bunch of others."

He looked confused and replied, "No, that's not it. Is he Columbian?"

"Yeah."

"I'm a bit of a writer myself."

"What do you write?"

My question disappeared into the silence as his mind drifted elsewhere, until an abrupt stop of the bus brought him back to the conversation.

"I read some too, short stories mostly. I don't have the attention span for longer things. You ever want to be a writer?"

For some reason, his question caught me off guard, and I stumbled over my words.

"No, well yeah... Uh... maybe. I don't know. I'll probably publish something eventually. Or try to get something published, I guess. But no plans."

"I did some writing myself. After Paris. That was it though, after I finished what I had to write, I never felt the desire to do it again. I picked up this energy in Paris, and when I came back here, did some writing in Mexico. Short stories."

"What did you write about?"

"Oh, everything. Life, politics, living in Mexico, abortion... I had three, you know. All with the same woman. Mexico..." he sighed. "'Todos son ambulantes.' That's how one ended. Another was about picking up girls on the beach. 'Gaviotas.' That was the title. You know what that means?"

"No."

"Seagulls. They'll pick up anything. That's how I was."

He was quiet for a moment, then smiled as the bus swerved around a corner.

"I love when the bus goes around that corner real fast. Kind of a rush, you know."

He remembered our conversation again. "That's how I was. Traveling was my thing. I wanted to go everywhere."

"Where did you make it to?"

"Oh, all over the place. Not Africa, India, or Egypt, but everywhere else. Paris is what really inspired me, though, Europe."

We sat in silence again until he found a new subject.

"I'm gonna get a haircut today. Pretty excited. Go downtown, get a haircut, have a couple of beers, get some lunch, and head home."

"That sounds like a good Friday."

"Is it Good Friday?" he asked.

"No, I said 'sounds like a good Friday,' I should've said 'sounds like a nice Friday.'"

"Isn't it Ash Wednesday?" he asked. "Next week?"

"No, that was two months ago."

"Oh. Did you go and get ashes on your forehead like a good Catholic girl?"

"Nope."

"Not a very good Catholic girl!"

"Nah, I'm not Catholic."

RIDE SAFE (Bus Bench, 30th & University, San Diego, CA)

"When I was a little girl," she began, staring up at the three white contrails growing behind airplanes in the blue sky, "usually there would be a balloon following, advertising something." She sighed. "With the price of gas these days, that wouldn't make much sense anymore. Next year, when the price of gas goes up again, you're going to see a lot more of those around," she said, gesturing toward my bike.

"You're probably right," I agreed, "I sold my car a few years ago and haven't really thought about replacing it."

"I just take the bus. I can't imagine riding a bike around downtown where I live. Bus two is nice, there's a lot of room. That number seven is too crowded, you can hardly breathe."

She glanced back at me with gentle eyes staring in two different directions, and pushed a tuft of wispy gray curls back under her velour hat. A VW bug pulling up to the stop sign caught her attention.

"When I was young we lived up in Merced, we had one of those. My nephew said to me, 'I've never driven in the snow before!'" She laughed softly at the memory, not offering an explanation. "We didn't even think about how dangerous it was, though. We didn't know. You don't think about those things when you're young."

She turned her attention back to my bicycle.

"Be careful with that, though. Drivers these days."

"I know. I usually try to stay off the main streets."

"That's good. These drivers, they're thinking about everything but the road."

Bus 35, Old Town, San Diego, CA

Along the row of seedy strip malls and fast food restaurant that line Old Town, an elderly man boarded the bus and sat in the empty seat next to mine, greeting me with a quick smile.

We rode in silence under the maze of dark highway overpasses that line the Old Town transit station, but as our bus crossed into the daylight, he seemed to snap out of dreamy haze. "You see that there?" he asked, gesturing toward the run-down building in the center of a used car lot. "That used to be a real nice restaurant. We went there sometimes, when I was a boy."

He sighed, and turned to look at me in the seat next to him. "I grew up in San Diego, born and raised. I went to elementary school just down that street there. And I used to run to the river over there and sit and watch and think about things. You can't really do that anymore, too many houses."

His watery blue eyes closed tight for a minute, pulling together the little rows of wrinkles and laugh lines carved into his face by time and southern sun. He tugged at the bill of his baseball hat, and opened his eyes again to point out the opposite window.

"And over there, down by the airport? There was a carnival there sometimes. Ferris wheel and everything." He smiled at the memory, but after a moment a forlorn sadness overtook his face.

"Things sure have changed. I wish you could still run over to the river and sit and think about *that*."

Greyhound Station, Grand Rapids, Michigan

On a bus in Michigan, waiting for the passengers to load, I saw a couple walk up from the street, crying and embracing as if they'd never see one another again. The woman boarded the bus alone. As we pulled away from the station, she answered her ringing phone, speaking through tears.

"No, I promise I'm coming back. I love you too much to stay away." And, "It's only a week, you're going to be fine, I know it."

In Grand Rapids, we had a half-hour wait at the station, and most of the passengers left the bus to visit the restrooms and buy some lunch. I had packed mine, so I stayed aboard, as did the crying woman. I don't know if she could sense that I was curious to hear her story, but in any case, she turned around and started to talk.

"Kind of funny we're the only two waiting here on the bus, and we're both girls."

"Yeah, I guess. Where are you headed?"

"I'm going to see my parents and my family."

"For a long trip?"

"No, just until the 15th, a week, I haven't seen them in awhile. I'm just gonna lay on the couch and watch baseball with my Dad. He got me hooked on the Tigers. About ten years ago, he took us kids to a game. And we sat right behind first base. He caught a ball! And he bought all of us a bat. Mine broke right in half."

She paused for a moment, gazing out the window at the empty parking lot before she went on. "My husband there at the bus station was crying when I left. We've been married two years, and he said, 'You better come back!' I told him of course I'm coming back."

"That must be nice, to know you've got somebody who will miss you that much."

"Yeah. He's my second husband, my first husband used to be abusive, he punched me right here," she pointed to her ribs, "and that's why my right side is caved in. Now he's being abusive to my kids, so I'm trying to get full custody of them. I've been with this new guy two years, and he hasn't hit me once. We met at church, and now we're at a different church."

"Well, it sounds like you've got a good one!"

"Yeah, but he didn't want me to go on this trip! I've gotta, though. I'm having some medical problems. They found a blood clot in my leg, blood clots run in my family. They put me on a blood thinner, and if that doesn't work, I'm going to have to get a shot. I don't want a shot, though, I hate needles."

"I don't think anybody really likes them."

"Haha, yeah. Well, I was at the library the other day and my mother-in-law saw how swollen my leg was, and she said 'You better get to the hospital.' I said 'Maybe tomorrow,' and she said 'No ma'am, we're going right now!' They gave me an ultrasound and they found this blood clot, so my parents said, 'You are coming up here, and we are going to take care of you.' My husband is watching my kids."

"How many kids do you have?"

"Two. They're three and ten. Any my husband has a 9-year-old, so that's three."

She got up to use the bathroom at the back of the bus, then came back to her seat and was quiet for a few minutes.

"There's the other bus coming from..."

She let the sentence fade into silence before standing up to look back at me again.

"This is the second time I've been on these buses. The other time I was living my my uncle, but that didn't work out, so I went up to where my kids are."

"I've never been on these buses before. They're nice though."

"Yeah, but it's hot in here! It's been so hot."

"Yeah. Today seems a little nicer, though."

"Yeah, a lot cooler. I've been sitting inside by the AC all day. When I get to my parent's house I'm jumping straight in the pool I have my bathing suit."

"That sounds nice. I went for a swim in Lake Michigan with my aunt and cousin the other day. It was warm, almost like a bath."

"Yeah, the beach, was so crowded! At the 4th of July, the cars were backed up down the road, and they had to send people away. They were like, 'Oh man! I didn't get to see any fireworks.'" She laughed. "Did you see them?"

"I didn't see any, there was a fire warning where I was at, so they didn't let anyone set off any fireworks."

"Hah!"

She sat down in her seat again and spoke over her shoulder, "Well, I got all my snacks. I came prepared this time. I got my chocolate. Gotta have my chocolate." She held up king size bar. "Ah, it's so good. So good. I just love it. And I got my CD player! I bought it for a dollar at a garage sale, and it works!"

"Wow, lucky find!"

"Yeah," she agreed, turning away and speaking to herself. "Now let me see what CD I've got in here. Ah! Creed!"

She settled into her seat and covered her ears with the headphones.

We didn't speak again, but I saw her get off at one of the next stops. She ran to her parents and hugged them, and they were crying, too.

Route 10, University Ave., Mission Hills, San Diego, CA

“Excuse me,” she said. “Do you have a bus schedule? It takes me three hours to get here, and I’m not sure what time the bus leaves to go back. I wouldn’t want to miss it because my ranch is three hours away and three hours is long enough as it is. I was at church, and now I’m going to visit an older woman who has been sick. I like doing good deeds, don’t you? It just feels... good!”

I reached for my phone and used the GPS to find us, then the route, which left twice hourly at six and thirty six minutes past the hour.

“Wow, you can do all that? Maybe when I get a phone it’ll do things like that.”

“It’s pretty nice. I can check email too. This is sort of my one indulgence,” I explained, feeling a little embarrassed by the extravagance of an iPhone around someone with no phone at all. She picked up on it.

“You know, it is important to let yourself have at least one of those. Indulgences. One of my girlfriends was telling me I should look into getting email. I don’t have any of that out at the ranch.”

She did look as though time and technology had passed her by. She wore a knotted strand of cheap plastic pearls over a denim jumper. Beneath that, she layered worn and faded green velour pants and an oversized white logo t-shirt. An enormous straw hat flopped down around her face, hiding most of her features. An extraordinary mix of delicate old age and childlike energy and innocence. She continued to laugh and prattle on about life, leaning in and resting her head on my shoulder like an old friend whenever her own words struck her as particularly humorous.

It was nearly July, so she inquired about where I prefer to watch the fireworks. “O.B.,” I explained, “is hands-down the best place in San Diego to watch fireworks. After they’re over, everyone brings out a bag of giant marshmallows to throw at each other. Why would you go anywhere else if you can have not just fireworks but also a marshmallow fight?”

She leaned onto my shoulder again and laughed loud and long. “I wouldn’t expect that of you, you know, the marshmallow fight. You seem like such a lady. But then you can never tell. I met another woman on the bus and she seemed like such a proper lady as well, but she had a tattoo on her arm! I wouldn’t have expected that.”

Somewhat eager to disassociate myself from the words “proper lady,” I lifted my left arm to show her the phrase in black ink running across the underside. It didn’t phase her. “Wow, I like that! That’s wonderful. I might get a tattoo of a rose someday. But only for two weeks, one of the temporary ones. That would be bold for me, you know. I was going to be a nun.”

We sat in silence for a moment until the weight of that phrase sunk in. “May I ask what made you decide not to become a nun?”

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I thought I met the love of my life. But he was not the love of my life, and now I'm lucky to be alive." There are a thousand stories in a declaration like that, and though she told me only one, for her privacy I'll leave it to dissolve somewhere in the back of my mind.

"Do you have a flashlight?" she asked suddenly, digging through her purse as we approached her stop.

"No, sorry. Did you need to see something in your bag?"

"No, I meant for you," she replied. "One of those little ones, to keep on your keys and to see the lock at night? And for walking home when it's dark?" At my negative response she presented me with a gold plastic flashlight and combination carabiner, shaped like a bugle. "I bought this, but I don't need it. I have so many. You can have it, for your keys and for safety. But it needs a new battery. It's really bright, though! It can be your first summer present!"

I thanked her as the bus came to a stop, and she stood up and waved. "I just new I would meet a nice lady on the bus today."

I smiled back and looked down at the flashlight, clicking the latch open and shut in my hand. I still keep it. For safety.

CHAPTER 4: CERTAIN MEN

“Being a woman is a terribly difficult task, since it consists principally in dealing with men.”

-Joseph Conrad

Orange & Wilson Ave., San Diego, CA

I often walked to the little supermarket at the end of my block rather than making the trek to the larger grocery stores in the neighborhood.

One day I had been baking bread and ran short of ingredients. I rushed over to the store to pick up some more; jeans and baggy t-shirt covered in flour, hair in a sloppily arranged up-do. As I walked home, a gray minivan pulled up next to me with a clean-cut and handsome middle-aged man sitting in the driver's seat.

"Excuse me, miss" he said.

His gelled hair and polo shirt looked out of place in that neighborhood, and I thought he might need directions back to the nearby freeway. I stepped a little closer to the rolled-down passenger window.

"Do you go out?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" I responded, thinking I'd misunderstood him.

"Do you... you know. Go out?"

"No." I started to walk away.

"Oh, are you sure?"

"Yeah."

I noticed that the van was starting to follow me down the road, so I turned and walked back toward the store so he wouldn't see where I was going.

"Seriously? You don't go out?"

"Yeah, seriously. Can you please leave me alone?"

"Fuck you!" he shouted, and sped away.

Nsambya, Kampala, Uganda

Boda boda motorcycle taxi drivers in Uganda are notorious for asking foreign women to marry them. Five minutes into the ride, mine had already popped the question.

"Sorry, I'm already married," I lied.

"Oh. What's your name?"

"Sarah," I lied again. "What about you, are you married?"

"No. I am still looking. So I was hoping you could marry me."

"I don't think my husband would like that very much," I rolled my eyes.

"Can I have your number though?"

"No, sorry, I don't give it out."

"Why?"

"Because every time I give it to someone I don't know, they keep calling and calling and calling."

"That's because you've been giving it to boys," he explained, "But me, I am a man. I will only call once a week."

"No, I'm sorry," I repeated, "I just prefer not to give it out."

"But then how will you call me if you need a ride home?"

"If I need a ride home, I will find one. I don't usually go to that part of town."

"So you won't give me your number?"

By then, I was rather annoyed, but we were nearing my house so I tried to change the subject.

"How long have you been driving for?"

"Me? For five years. I'm doing very well. I have many customers, I have my house, I even have business cards."

"That's great."

"So I can afford to have a wife, so maybe you should give me your number."

We reached the shops at the corner of my street, and not wanting him to see where I lived, I

stopped there, and paid the fare. After buying some eggs and a few other things from the shopkeeper, I turned to go and saw the driver still parked in the road.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Did you need anything else?"

"You're not going to give me your number?"

CHAPTER 5: OTHERS

“I wish I could say that racism and prejudice were only distant memories. We must dissent from the indifference. We must dissent from the apathy. We must dissent from the fear, the hatred and the mistrust...We must dissent because America can do better, because America has no choice but to do better.”

-Thurgood Marshall

La Habra, CA

"What is this filth?" she shouted, storming back to the register with her receipt waving.

I looked at the paper, and didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"I'm sorry, what is what? Is there a problem with your purchase?"

"No. Look at it! What is that doing there?"

"I'm sorry, were you overcharged?"

"No, just look at the down there, do you see that?"

I glanced at the bottom of the receipt. All returns must be made within 90 days of purchase. Todas las devoluciones deben hacerse dentro de los 90 días de la compra.

"The return policy?"

"Below it."

"The return policy in Spanish?"

"Yes. Why is that on there?"

"So that people who speak Spanish can read our return policy."

"Well, they should speak English. This is America. I don't even know what it says. I don't want to look at that. Cut it off."

"I'm sorry. I don't have any scissors."

She tore off the bottom half and left it on the counter, glaring at me. She stormed out the doors of the store into the streets of "La Habra," California, or "passageway through the hills," named by Spanish Conquistadors in the 1700's.

Bus Stop, University & Fairmont, San Diego, CA

My favorite farmer's market in San Diego is in a part of town known for its higher crime rates. I used to live a few blocks away, but even my familiarity with the place doesn't keep me from feeling as if I should be more alert walking through the streets.

One Sunday morning, heading toward the bus stop with my bag of produce, I glanced at the two men already there, one seated, one standing. Both were clad in oversized jackets with jeans belted at their knees, and as I approached, I pushed my wallet a little further down into the pile of kale and organic apples.

Two of the seats remained empty, one of them broken and the other covered in gum. I stood to the side, a few feet away, and looked down at my shoes, shifting the heavy bag uncomfortably on my shoulder.

"How's it going?" the standing man asked.

"Good," I glanced up.

He smiled at me, and kicked his friend hard in the foot.

"Get up fool. This lady needs to sit down with that big 'ol bag."

Bus Stop, Swift & University Westbound, San Diego, CA

One beautiful sunny afternoon, I sat down at a bus bench where two elderly women were already seated, to my right, dressed in slacks and nice coats. Moments later, another woman approached the bench and sat on my left.

It was spring, and the trees along the road bloomed with yellow and purple flowers, waving slowly back and forth in a gentle breeze.

The first two ladies had been looking quietly across the street, but those sorts of days can never go unnoticed.

"¡Qué hermosa día!"*

"Sí, lo es. Mira el cielo azul!"

"Qué afortunados somos, vivir en una ciudad tan hermosa."

"De acuerdo. Es difícil quejarse de nada cuando ves un día como hoy."

One looked over and smiled kindly at me, and I was about to respond with "Sí. Creo que San Diego está en su mejor en la primavera,"** when the woman to my left leaned over and mumbled into my ear.

"Don't you wish they would just speak English? This is America, after all. They're probably talking about us and we don't even know it."

*

"What a beautiful day!"

"Yes, it is. Look at the blue skies!"

"How fortunate we are, to live in such a beautiful city."

"I agree. It's hard to complain about anything when you see a day like this."

** *"Yes. I think San Diego is at its best in the spring."*

University & Wilson Ave., San Diego, CA

At the end of my old block, there was a large run-down apartment complex. A mix of young families and gruff looking men lived in the building. The latter often sat on the balconies chain smoking and drinking late into the evenings.

I felt nervous walking past their place after dark, and would take pains to cross to the other side of the street or get home while it was still light.

One evening, I was coming home from selling jewelry at a trunk show, well after dark, carrying armloads of suitcases and bags from the bus stop. Because they were so heavy, I didn't want to cross the street, so I looked straight ahead and walked determinedly toward home.

As I passed the apartment complex, one of the suitcases slipped out of my aching hand. A group of men were standing in the driveway staring at me, and one stepped out into my path. "Damn girl, where you going with all that shit?"

I'm sure my face whitened as a sense a panic rose from my gut. I tried not to show it.

"Oh, um, I sell stuff that I make at street fairs and shows and things," I stammered nervously. "Necklaces and earrings and stuff."

"Like a designer?"

"Yeah."

"Cool. But that shit looks too heavy for you to haul around by yourself. Let me help you carry it."

I was too rattled to answer, thinking about the cash box with six hundred dollars inside the suitcase, and not wanting to draw any special attention to it. He took my silence as agreement, and picked up the suitcase. I didn't know what to do other than follow. He whistled as he walked the rest of the block to my gate, then set my luggage carefully down on the sidewalk outside. He tipped his hat and said "Goodnight, ma'am," then turned and walked away.

I don't cross the street anymore.

CHAPTER 6: ALONE TOGETHER

Amtrak Southwest Chief, New Mexico, USA

Most mornings in the observation car of a passenger train were hushed and calm, like a library or cathedral. People sip coffee and stare out the windows at the passing landscape. Even at such rapid speed something about the dim light makes the world seem slower. Between Los Angeles and Chicago, the desert states dominate the daylight hours of the journey- miles and miles of flat vistas and wide painted skies.

A towering man shuffled into the car that morning with sleep on his face, wearing a basketball jersey and layers of gold chains. His width equally impressive as his height; when he sat he stretched easily across two seats. But the morning stillness overtook him, too. Even his enormous presence soon faded into the quiet atmosphere of the car.

We passed barbed wire fences, ravines, golden fields, and distant mesas as the sun struggled to burn through the early gray and looming rainclouds.

Suddenly, his deep bass broke the reverent silence.

"God bless those motherfuckers who made this trip with horse and buggy. By the time they got where they was going they had a couple of kids and everything.

'Where was you born, child?'

'In the desert, on the way here.'"

Nsambya Kirombe Taxi Route, Kampala, Uganda

I am six feet tall, and the back seat of Uganda's taxi van, the mutatu, is notoriously skimpy on legroom. This one was particularly bad. I sat with knees bent painfully sideways and downward, bouncing over the potholes and jagged roads.

At one stop, a lanky South Sudanese man nearing seven feet tall folded into the taxi next to me. He glanced at my knees, then at his own, and sighed, "It's as if we're being punished."

Route 10, University Ave., Hillcrest, San Diego, CA

His odor permeated the bus before he finished climbing the stairs. Conversation halted instantly as several dozen heads turned forward, mouths agape. From the back row an older woman gagged, struggling to keep the contents of her stomach in place.

Someone opened the first window, beginning a chorus of mechanical clicks and slides. Others followed suit, preferring gasps of bus fumes to the nauseating alternative.

The offender slid quietly into the seat next to the front door, eyes trained to the tops of his shoes. A muddy brown stained his denim clothing. He clung tightly to a grocery bag of sandwiches and fruit with the stale and bruised appearance of supermarket cast-offs.

At first no one spoke, shocked by the putrescence of the smell. By the notion that something so foul could possibly emanate from a human being. But the roar of the bus engine drowned out the coughs and panicked whispers, breaking some spell of human decency.

“Holy shit, what is that smell!” one passenger shouted.

“Man, you reek!” said another.

“That is foul, man, what’s wrong with you?”

At the next stop, those not bound by strict schedule fled the bus to wait for another. A few new shocked faces made their way up the stairs and hurried to a window seat. A man in a tracksuit hesitated at the doorway, and frowning, glanced at his watch before stepping back onto the curb.

“Hey buddy, why don’t you do us all a favor and get off the bus,” an angry voice shouted.

“Seriously. I don’t know what you been in, but that is not okay.”

His eyes, clouded with shame, moved from the shoes to the sun-steamed cellophane wrapper of the sandwich at the top of his bag.

“Oh my God,” sighed another passenger. “This is just too much.”

The pattern continued, one painstakingly slow stop at a time until the bus reached his destination. He made his way carefully down the stairs and ducked behind the nearest building. Still grasping the bag of food in the same consolatory way that small children cling to tattered stuffed animals.

A collective sigh of relief echoed through the bus. The driver stepped down from his seat and sprayed the padded chair thoroughly with half a can of Lysol.

“I’m so sorry, folks,” he said as though it were a plea of forgiveness for some horrific crime. “I can’t do anything about that. They won’t let me do anything about that.”

CHAPTER 7: REASONS TO TRAVEL

“Nobody can discover the world for somebody else. Only when we discover it for ourselves does it become common ground and a common bond and we cease to be alone.”

-Wendell Berry, *A Place on Earth*

Airport Hotel, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, the policy for transit visas on the day I arrived was to grant them only in conjunction with a payment for a hotel room, even during the day. This is a great deal for the hotel, but not so much for travelers who want to spend a lengthy layover outside the airport. After a long and uncomfortable flight, nine hours in Frankfurt, another cramped flight, and a five hour tour of Addis; a nap in a clean bed seemed worth the \$50 the room had cost. But the wonders of jet lag will keep even the weariest of travelers awake at inconvenient times. Painfully tired and on the verge of exhaustion tears, I decided to look for a sleep-inducing solution in the pub downstairs.

"Madam, how are you?" the bartender asked.

"I'm okay, just a bit tired. How are you?"

"I'm okay. You have just arrived?"

"Yeah, I'm passing through. I have a long layover, about sixteen hours."

"Ah, that is too long! What can I get for you?"

"Maybe a vodka tonic. I need to take a nap, but it's daylight. I'm hoping that will knock me out."

"Hah, okay. Shall I make it a double?"

"Probably."

As he gathered the glass and ingredients, we chatted about the Olympic games. They were playing on every TV I'd encountered on the journey so far, including the one in the bar. There's something beautiful about the whole world watching the same thing at the same time, we agreed.

He started pouring the drink, but quickly overflowed the double shot glass. At least a full ounce spilled over the ice below.

Glancing up at me, a perplexed look spread over his face as he weighed the options. With a quick smile, he emptied the rest over the ice as well and laughed.

"Welcome to my country."

Queen's Coach Bus, Nairobi, Kenya

Not wanting to walk alone through the streets of Nairobi after dark, I got to the bus early, by about an hour. I sat waiting with the driver and conductor, in my assigned seat of 1E. Not too long after the bus started filling up, a Ugandan school teacher in a black suit and white jacket settled into the seat next to me. He sat stiffly upright in his seat, resting a tiny suitcase on his lap. The border exit and entry forms given out by the conductor disoriented him, so he turned to me for help.

Eventually, he settled in and leaned back a bit. "Wow, this bus is somehow executive," he commented, as if walking into the penthouse suite of a luxury hotel. "Very executive!" I nodded in agreement. It definitely seemed more business class than coach, a nice treat if you're expected to sit in the same seat for the next 15 hours.

As the bus lurched into motion, the conductor walked around handing out styrofoam cups of coffee. Next were packets of glucose biscuits, lightly sweetened cookies with a lemony aftertaste. My neighbor immediately placed them into his suitcase. "I'm saving these for my children."

We wove through the small, night-emptied streets of lower downtown Nairobi, making small talk about our purposes for traveling out of Kampala. As we entered the nicer parts of town, he stopped to marvel at every towering office complex and six-lane road we passed. I got the sense that he'd never seen buildings so tall, and glanced over at his open passport, marked with three sets of stamps. Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda. He ran his fingers over them in admiration, then turned and said to me, "If I die now, it is okay. At least I have really seen something!"