

Blog #1660

Hi DJC, Do You Remember This? (The Bus Trip,  
True Story #1)

Note: I might make this a series of true, meaningful memories from probably the closest friendship I ever had. My once-upon-a-time best friend, who'll almost certainly never see this, would know who he is. Every story is completely true, to the best of my recollection and from my perspective, obviously; nothing in them will ever be intended to embarrass or upset my friend in any way, and I assume he shares the memories very similarly. For anyone else who might be reading... please let me know what you think. All these snapshots are very significant to me, but do I write them well enough to make them worth reading for anyone besides myself (or maybe Darrell)? Your feedback will help me do better. Thanks.

For me, the beginning of this story — a snapshot of a friendship — begins around 1am the night before the trip begins, as we tried in vain to sleep a few hours before our big adventure. We slept in my living room that night (I don't remember why, do you?), I on the couch and you on some cushions on the floor next to me. This part stands out just because Purr, the jet black stray kitten we ~~found~~<sup>rescued</sup> together and called "our cat" (maybe that rescue is another story to tell?) jumped up and nestled into my blankets first, then yours, kneading and purring so ferociously that we laughed for an hour at how impossible it was to sleep with her vibration and volume. ☺

Your mom showed up before the sun did, coming straight from her nursing shift to drive us to the Greyhound Station. Hey... I bet that's why we slept in the living room — since she was picking us up at that ungodly predawn hour, maybe we'd planned to sleep close to the front door in case we were so deeply crashed out that her knocking wouldn't wake us all the way down the hall, in my room. But we were already awake, with barely 4 hours of sleep, all hopped up on anxiousness for what was going to be our biggest adventure yet, at that time. We got our stuff — my dufflebag, your backpack — and headed for the bus depot. Are you remembering the memory yet? If not, you will soon!

No one was around when your mom dropped us off about an hour before our bus arrived. The sun was just coming up by then, revealing the usual dreary, chilly overcast of ~~most~~<sup>most</sup> Ventura summer mornings, and the streets were empty and quiet at 5am on a weekend. I vaguely recall going to the Carrows on California St., the one perched above the 101 freeway, but I don't remember any details. You probably had pancakes (with less syrup than I'd prefer) and a hot cocoa... that would've been typical, right? I'd likely have gone for french toast and a cold chocolate milk. Honestly, though, I don't remember breakfast at all, but I clearly remember continuing down California St. and out onto the pier in the thin, gray morning mist. The only people in sight were 2-3 grizzled old

earlybird fishermen shooing seagulls away from their bait buckets, but when we got about halfway out, you noticed the 4 people in wetsuits heading down the deserted beach and straight into the cold ocean. With my binoculars, we watched them swim straight up the side of the pier, then you noticed something else: "Dude, check this out! There's something swimming with them!" I took the binoculars and saw the sea lion tagging along. The group soon caught up to us, so we walked alongside them to the end of the pier, wondering how far they'd go. Around the pier, no doubt... a long swim! But at the end they just turned left, then kept going, out in the open ocean some 400 feet off the beach. What the...? Lol! We watched the 4 people-plus-pinniped until even our binocs weren't enough to see them clearly anymore, then it was time to catch our bus.

The itinerary was set — Ventura to El Monte, then a local bus out to San Dimas, which would drop us off within walking distance of our destination: Raging Waters! Remember the day now? 😊 It was exciting, our first big trip totally on our own, and I don't think either of us had ever ridden a Greyhound before. Had you? Tons of SCAT busses all over Ventura and Oxnard, sure, but no long rides in a bus with padded, reclining seats. We found a row way in the back, next to the bathroom, about as private as possible, and by the time we reached Camarillo we were both knocked out. In fact, the only memory I have from the ride is around Moorpark or Calabasas, some stop where I was just conscious enough to notice a tiny, rural post office with tall pines all around, the sun finally out and shining, and my arm totally numb because you'd fallen asleep on top of me in the limited space we had. I'd half-wanted to get up and take in the scenery, but my utter exhaustion plus my reluctance to needlessly wake you up kept me from trying. I was zonked out again in minutes, and when I finally woke back up we were on some unfamiliar freeway near El Monte, in an area I didn't recognize at all. It was pretty exhilarating: Best friends, out in the world without a safety net.

The El Monte station was big and intimidating. We were supposed to catch a city bus, but for some reason we decided to try one of the taxis queued up at the terminal. Do you remember why? I sure as hell don't! I suppose it was 2 parts novelty (Let's take a TAXI!), and one part impatience (another half-hour wait? A dozen more stops? Ugh, let's take a TAXI.). The bus would cost around \$4... how much could a taxi cost? \$6? \$8? I figured we could spend up to \$10 and still be ok, just a little less for food is all, and for sure it wouldn't cost ten bucks anyway. So we picked one. Do you remember this? Out of, oh, 5 or 6 taxis, we picked one... one with a driver who spoke only Spanish, lol! Why?? Again, I don't remember. Maybe it was how the car looked — remember the deep, purple velvet seats and headliner? Lol! Everything was so new and exciting to us (like your amazement at the cushioned slot machine seats the first time you saw inside a casino in Las Vegas 😊 Another story I should write later...). Anyway,

I gambled that my very limited Español would get us through, and besides, we knew where we were going, right? I can still hear the commercial in my head: "Raging Waters, where the 210 meets the 10, in San Dimas!" So simple... we were fine. Just fine. Let's hop into that deep, squishy velvet!

We got onto the 210 — so far, so good. We watched for signs signalling the 10 freeway, or even the park itself. We watched. And watched. I tried to ask how far the 10 was (fuck! How do you say "how far" in Spanish? *Cuanto luego?* No, that's not it. Arrgh!), and it became clear that the language barrier was much bigger than our optimism and my self-confidence admitted. I tried to ask about the water park. "Raging Waters?" "No, no se." "Parque de agua?" "No, I don't know. Maybe." We watched the fare climb past 7, 8, 9 dollars. Shit. But we had to be close, right? We'll see it by \$10 for sure. \$10 passed. \$10.50. No signs. Eleven dollars. "10 freeway?" "Si, si — 10 freeway." "How far?" "10 freeway." — Sigh — twelve dollars. I did the math. Soon we weren't gonna be able to eat anything, and we were getting perilously close to the unthinkable — not enough money for the bus tickets home. At \$12.50 we pulled the plug. Still no signs we were even close, no water park, no 10 freeway — had we even gone the right direction? We took the next exit, depositing us in a quiet, nondescript residential neighborhood. As we got out, I tried with every Spanish-connected neuron in my brain... "agua? Slides?" I made a sliding motion with my hand. "Fun? Slide? Divertidos??" He stared uncomprehendingly. "Agua!???" "Oh, si! Si, agua..." YESSSS! Whew! He gets it! Then our driver went to the trunk — was he getting a map? — and pulled out a gallon bottle of Arrowhead Spring water. Damn.

Damn. That was it. \$12.75 gone, and we were stuck on some anonymous corner in central suburbia... what city, even? We were alone, no clue where to go next, no cellphones back then, and no extra money as the cab disappeared up the street. Do you remember that hopeless feeling of despair, of defeat? Well, that's how I felt, anyway. I threw my duffel bag up in the air in frustration. You were silent. What could we do next? Just walk. "Walk?," you said. Yup, what else? "Walk where??" I don't F'n know, Darrell! We're the same amount of lost! Pick a direction. Left or right? We had no choice besides left or right.

So, we walked. We discussed knocking on random doors to ask for directions, but before we reached that point we passed a house being remodelled, so I asked a worker who looked approachable. It was a hail mary for us, but the guy had good news — we were close, and even going the right direction. Whoo Hoo! Was something finally going right? He tried to give us directions, but we weren't quite grasping them (something about a dam, if I remember right), so he finally said he needed to go more or less that way anyway, and he could drop us off near the parking lot. Per-

fect! Except... did we trust him? We looked at each other... should we roll the dice, again? I wonder what was going through your head at that time. What was your concern, if any? How did you see the situation? On my end, I made some rough calculations — nice neighborhood; construction guy in someones home (so someone trusted him); looks ok; didn't offer a ride until after we failed to grasp his directions... and in the worst case, could I take him? Could we? The same teenage über-confidence that had already put us in a non-English-speaking taxi and gotten us stranded in an unknown town with critically limited funds told me... sure! You got this! Lol! So — whatcha think, Darrell? "If you want to, ~~fine~~ ok with it." Alrighty then — let's roll!

Our new buddy dropped us off even closer than he'd promised, so we'd bet right. Things were looking up! Now we really had to face the money issue, though. We had enough, but 2 adult tickets would ~~leave us~~ <sup>leave us</sup> almost nothing to spare. Then we caught another lucky break... remember the big family with the extra kids' ticket? For barely half price, they'd bring you in with them, but you'd have to pass for 11 and under, and at 13, you didn't really look the part. With your blond hair and blue eyes, you also didn't look very related to the distinctly Mexican family you were with, lol! But it all went fine, of course, and now we could afford to eat. Olé!

So, there we were, a bit late, a bit frazzled, and a bit broke, but we'd made it! The waterpark mecca of Southern California. Do you remember the feeling? We got a locker and changed into our swimshorts, then hit the slides. I really can't remember a lot about our time in the park... I know we hit the tallest, steepest slide, and also the dark, enclosed, fast tube ride. Unfortunately, I also recall a long, slow, open-air tube ride too, where we had some argument before we got on. I don't remember what we fought about, just that I didn't enjoy that ride and I felt bad after it. You and I argued a lot, but I always hated when we did, and my #1 priority was always to make up as soon as we calmed down. Like always, we mutually forgave and forgot pretty fast, and ~~we~~ <sup>then</sup> we slid pretty much everything that was slidable. By closing time, I definitely wasn't ready to leave... but then, neither of us could've known how much adventure still lay ahead at that point, right?

We changed clothes then walked from the park to a strip mall, asking a liquor store clerk when and where we catch the next bus to El Monte. With about 2 hours before the Ventura-bound Greyhound departed, there was no huge rush. But then the clerk said, "No more city busses. Last one left 20 minutes ago." What the...?!? Jeezus Freakin' Christ, not again! We were stuck AGAIN! Now what? In the parking lot we saw a cop car. Who knows why we decided to talk to them, but talk to them we did, and what happened next became one of my favorite memories, despite having the unfortunate effect of improving my opinion of cops so much that I'd end up giving them the benefit of the doubt for the next 13 years or so, during which that foolish, naïve generosity and good faith would cost me my life — twice. But that's also another story.

Upon meeting us, those two cops' first instinct was, of course, doubt and suspicion — their natural mindset. But, after our names raised no red flags in their Big Brother machine, they accepted our story: we really were just two teens from far away, stranded in a bad part of town at night after a long day of fun at the waterpark. No parents involved, just bus tickets. It wasn't implausible, and they took pity on us. They made some calls and learned that a bus would be stepping off the freeway in about 15 minutes, so they drove us to the stop, which was a super-shady island in a super-shady neighborhood, all orange streetlight and graffiti-covered cracked asphalt and litter, just steps from the freeway. They told us the bus would come soon, wished us luck, and left. Then things got a little scary. I can't speak for you, but I know I was kind of sketched out. At one point, a group walked by — no problems — but all I could think was "gang members." Might've just been my bias, though. Anyway, we waited, and waited — no bus. It started looking bad again. A lot of time passed, and eventually the cop car came by again. "You guys still here?" Umm... yep. They made another call and learned the bus was running late. They asked if we'd had any problems. "Nape. All good." Sort of. "Do you guys have enough money?" I said we were fine, but the passenger cop was already rooting around his shirt pocket, and he insisted we take the 7 ~~or~~ 8 dollars he found. We really could use it, so... ok. Thanks! They left again, and we waited. And waited. No more gangs, no more cops. Just waiting. Then, finally, the bus. Yes!

As we boarded, the door still open behind me, we were suddenly flooded with light, then that siren sound — Whoop WOOD! — blue and red flashing... the bus driver looked scared, and we spun around to see the two cops pulling out from behind some hedges a few houses away. They waved — they'd been watching us! Honestly, that was one of the best feelings I'd ever had. Really warm and fuzzy. Almost sadistically misleading and tragically maladaptive, but at the time, it just really felt great.

From there, things went pretty smoothly, at least until our stopover in Hollywood. Remember that? At around 10pm, we learned that the next bus to Ventura wouldn't be ~~until~~ <sup>there until</sup> almost 3am. Three am.? Seriously? Five freakin' hours?? But then again, being stuck in Hollywood could be fun, too. Plus, the Hollywood station felt like an airport, big and bustling. Exciting.

I got an urge for chocolate milk that night, remember? But none was sold in the terminal so we decided to take a walk. There had to be a liquor store close by. Outside the terminal felt like another universe, nearly midnight but looking like mid-afternoon, full of people and bright lights, and the night air so warm. Where was a liquor store, though? We just picked a direction and walked, something we actually did pretty often, ~~and~~ <sup>come to think of it.</sup> Just head off and expect to find something good. Kind of a metaphor for life, eh? Anyway, we didn't get far — feet, not blocks — before some guy offered to escort us, assuring us that we didn't want to be on the streets alone at that time of night. It felt wrong right from the start, and I knew I was a lot more comfortable

alone on any city streets than with that guy. Maybe he was harmless and just being decent, in fact he probably was, but I followed my gut that night... "Hey Darrell, you brought your wallet, right?" I knew you didn't have one, and I was counting on you to know I knew that. You looked at me strangely but I cut off any questions by talking more. "Dude, I sure hope you brought some money, cuz mine's in the bag inside, still!" You got the idea. "I didn't bring anything — I thought you had it!" "Hey man, sorry, we gotta go back real quick. We'll be back in like 3 minutes, just hang out and we'll find you." Except... nope. Not coming back. I really doubt we narrowly escaped a mugging or something, but the risk wasn't worth it. So, we stayed cooped up in the terminal for the next 3 hours, with no chocolate milk.

We did meet a girl, though, or ~~you~~<sup>you</sup> did, actually, who was at least somewhat entertaining. She was around 16-18, about my age, and travelling alone. She showed off her keychain can of pepper spray, remember? She said to stay close to her and we'd be safe... I kind of think she really meant it the other way around. Anyway, I ended up in the giftshop, reading a big picture book about the Northridge earthquake (remember THAT night?? Another one to write about later), then passing out from exhaustion. I remember you waking me up for our bus, then finally we got home around 4am, almost exactly 24 hours after we started our journey... and just like it began, your mom was there to pick us up. I've always thought of that whole experience as unforgettable — how about you?

Take care, man. I really do miss you, and even though you'll probably never know this is here, I hope you wouldn't mind my sharing a few of the happiest memories of my life, some fun times with my best friend.

I realize this kind of writing can be boring for anyone besides the author, like hearing someone describe their dreams, lol! Sorry. I've written as if directly to my friend Darrell, but he'll never read it, so the main reason for it is something like... truth. I don't know how else to explain it. My life is likely a total loss at this point, but maybe the worst part is that know-nothing 3<sup>rd</sup> party assholes have gotten to re-write my own history, and my friends' histories, too. I can't stomach that. I may never get to live again, but I did live once, and the reality of that life, the integrity of it, has to be preserved at least a little bit. That's what these memory stories are for — to tell the truth of a life, and of real friendships. Truth matters to me, and if it interests you too, please feel free to make any comments or ask any questions. I'm happy to provide more context, fill in gaps, and reply to any criticisms anyone may have.

Thanks for reading.