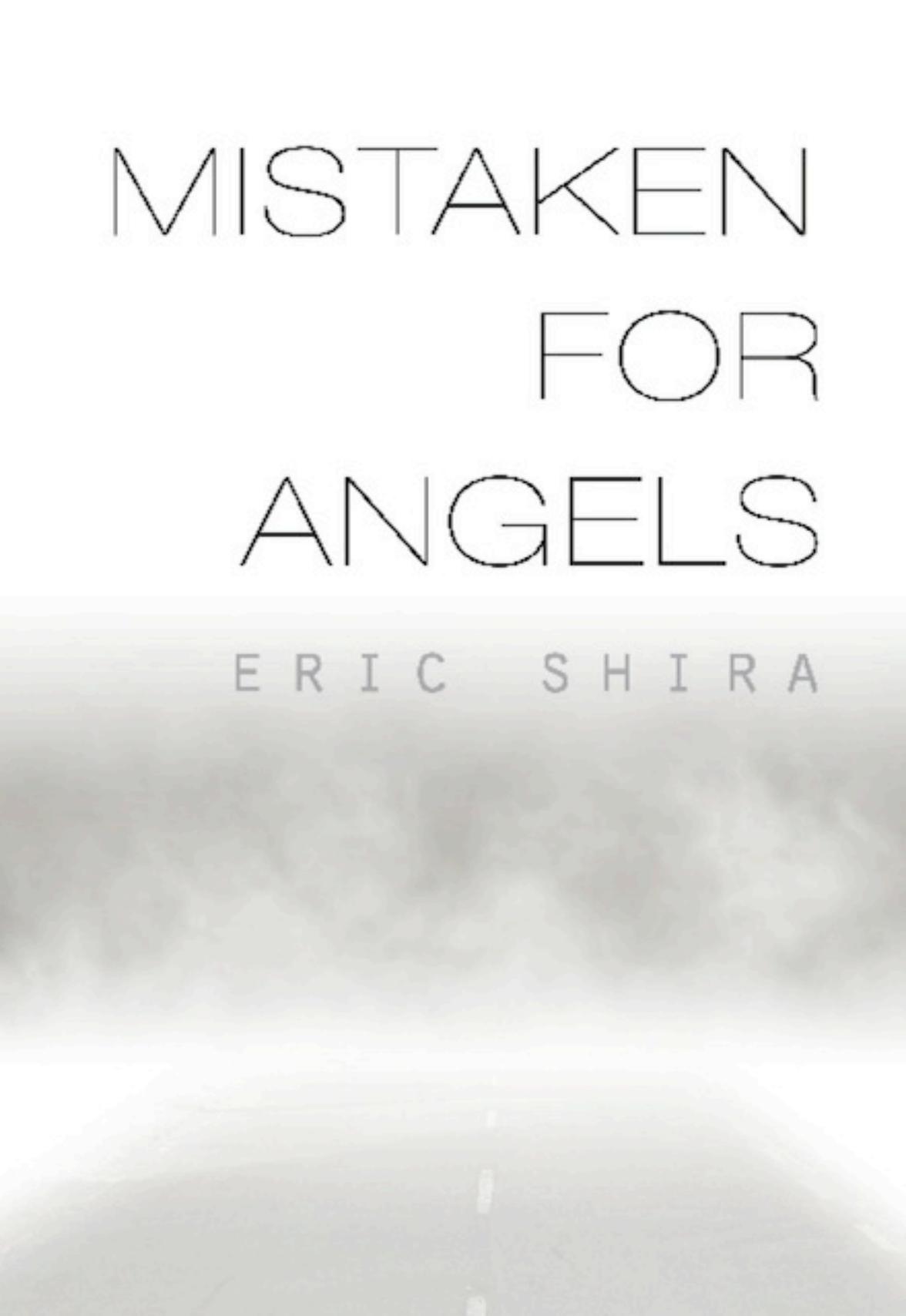


MISTAKEN
FOR
ANGELS

ERIC SHIRA





Newlyweds Joe and Sofia escape unemployment and hopelessness in Portland, Oregon by shouldering their backpacks and setting out to start a new life somewhere near the crashing waves of the Pacific coast. Their trip takes on a life of its own as they learn about themselves, each other, and the folks they encounter while searching for the heart and soul of America during the recession of 2009.

Mistaken for Angels

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Mistaken for Angels

Eric Shira

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ISBN 978-1-62646-868-9

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2014

First Edition

-TWO-

Starting a journey like this we will need adequate supplies. On a limited budget however, we will have to pick and choose our wares carefully.

One thing Sofia and I have been completely unified in is shoes. Walking is going to be a big part of the trip, either on the highway or out in the mountains searching for the holy grail of camping spots. If some toothless hillbilly local gives us directions to a magical site and says, *“Sure there are waterfalls at this campsite, fruit of all types on the trees, and slow defenseless pigs, perfect for making pork chops and bacon—but it’s a bit of a hike,”* we will be prepared to get there. There will be no saying, *“Damn, if only we had better footwear.”* Our feet are going to be able to walk many miles in sand, gravel, asphalt, off-trail, uphill or down and hopefully in good shape while doing so.

I know right away what they need to be.

I take poor care of myself for the most part but I have the feet of a baby, so keeping them as such is going to take Merrell Chameleons. I owned a pair once and they were the best all-around shoe I have come across in these past 29 years of life.

But the only place I know that is certain to carry these shoes is a store called Outdoors ‘R’ Us, which is a problem for me as I hate the people who work in the store and most of the people that shop at it.

I have a social anxiety disorder. A rough description of the disorder is that I can’t stand being around assholes, and ORU will be chock full of them. Yuppies and self-promoters from one wall to the other, and even if you are capable of tuning these parasites out, you would be face-to-face at any moment with a dirtbag sales person.

“Hey, I know all there is to know about hiking, camping, fishing, surfing...you name it, if it’s in the outdoors I have it mastered.”

Eric Shira

Me, if I were a sucker: *“Really? Then I would like to pay 50 dollars more for that tent, heck make it a hundred.”*

Hell no!

I wouldn't even be in this situation if not for Bear Grylls, the guy from *Man vs. Wild*. Normally I don't care about TV talking heads, but I'll take anyone serious who will drink water out of elephant shit. That's the commitment to the great outdoors I'm after. Survival in its raw and true form. I know I am capable of gnawing a baby deer's jugular if starving in the woods, but I hope deep down that I will never have to drink poop juice.

Bear had shown me the way. I'm a watcher of people I respect and this man has earned it.

The camera only went down a split second while watching his show, but the thought jumped into my head loud and clear as he was eating a yak eyeball.

“I wonder what kind of shoes this guy wears?”

Then I see them. Confirmation landed: Merrells.

They look like something a hip alien might wear and as comfortable as sticking your foot in a warm pie from the first wear to the last. Get in a kicking fight with a kangaroo, stomp hippie necks all day long, or walk up a bear's back. You won't feel a thing or lose your footing while doing so. They've even got Velcro fasteners for you daft hipsters or retired crab fishermen that have lost too many fingers on boats. Hell! Even if you're just plain lazy. There are no strings to tie, just slip your foot in and make things happen.

It will be a rough trip into the store but I'm sure you can see that my obsessive force will overcome the fear of dealing with these camping-supply pederasts.

As we enter the store we are zeroed in on instantly. A salesperson approaches us like we are small cuddly animals she has never seen

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before; what she doesn't know is that we are badgers. She is bending over for the soft petting and is about to lose an arm.

These ORU bluffers are supposedly all about being "green:" caring about Mother Earth and being good to nature. Yet they have the hardcore gear to get you places no one has been before, helping you stomp some new paths and kick some nature ass.

The store lady goes in for the petting, "Can I help y..."

Cut off! *Never!* I think and pass right by, hand covering the side of my face.

Out of my way! I'll find my own seal clubber, thank you very much.

"Go, Sofie, go! These rotten atheists will seal our doom."

Shoving her past is like trying to get a four-year-old into the doctor's office for their annual shot.

We have spoiled one of their attempts at wrecking my shopping experience, but the next jackal can't be far behind. These bastards are out for blood, scanning the horizon for fresh meat. I hope to be out of here before another encounter happens, but we need a few other things and the probability of no further confrontation is looking slim.

Let's see...what else do we need to buy? Oh yeah, everything.

We don't have anything yet.

We planned to get most of our gear through Craigslist or from yard sales. But if this place has the right price on something we need then we will buy it and be done (taking the whereabouts of our purchase to our graves, of course).

First we approach the only possible racks that might fit into our budget: the clearance racks. The racks where the Yuppies (people with more money than common sense) say, "*No way...if it wasn't good enough for someone else then there's no way it's good enough for me. Since I can afford this week's edition, this week's edition is what I must have.*"

Eric Shira

The first of these clearance racks are cleverly located inside a large tent that is set up just to help you get that true outdoor feel. Inside the tent are backpacking packs which will definitely be a necessity on this trip. We flip them and turn them. These things look quite nice, with built in back massagers and cappuccino makers, now what about the price?

Finding the first price tag is a slap in the face...150 dollars.

Mind boggling what poor sucker might have paid that price. But what of the clearance price?

Just then the portly outdoors expert that met us at the door shows up for round two and fills us in that those are in fact the clearance prices.

She's probably thinking to herself, *"These poor white trash. They will never be able to afford a true adventure of any type. What are they doing here?"*

I shudder at the thought of more help from this dream rapist and bringer of bad medicine. We need to be off. I grab Sofia's hand and back to it.

"Thanks...thanks...thank you."

"Out of my way heifer! Before my foot caves in your kneecap."

Anxiety strikes! This might have been a mistake. Are we in over our heads?

We need to leave, but not without the shoes. No more dilly-dallying. Upstairs and to the source.

Precious sanity is being wasted down here. I am completely sober and it's in short supply. I start to notice as we go up the stairs just how many occupants are in the building.

My chest tightens but I hold strong. Some things we could buy used, from the comforts of our home on the Internet for a brief exchange.

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But used shoes are no different than used condoms to me. Shoes are assaulted by sweat and gunk, and something already sweated and gunked in cannot be cleaned completely.

The shoe racks are extensive and there is a sales person seemingly by every rack. A meeting will be imminent. I am quick in grocery stores and can be in and out with an entire meal worth of groceries in five minutes, paid for. Meat, veg, side, and lately, strong drink. Thank god for self-checkout stands. I am efficient and swift when moving through the grocery store and have never liked at the end of the finish line to have a scowling sales clerk judging me for buying a six pack of beer with my eggs and bacon at 6 AM, which is the starting time in Idaho for booze sales.

The self-checkout computers are always short and to the point. “Have you scanned your card today?”

Yes. I never liked the thought of Albertson's grocery knowing my nutritional history, but the discount the card gave was too much to pass up.

“Do you have any coupons?”

No. Press the finish button, cash goes in, changes comes out and I am outside puffing three cigarettes, one after the other, wiping the faces out of my mind.

It will not be that easy in ORU. They want people there personally to size you up. Sofia walks to the women's shoes and I walk to the men's. Luckily for me the salesman on my end is occupied, leaving me free to scan the rack. I eavesdrop on a conversation as I survey the shoe rack.

Salesdick to brain-dead slug: “Yeah, so these shoes should be perfect for you. I've owned three pairs myself.”

This guy is a true con-nazi. I know we will go head to head when—agony!—my shoes are nowhere to be found.

Eric Shira

Sofia comes over and holds out a small pair of Merrells, as I had sold her on the concept of these magic shoes earlier on. She has found a good pair on clearance.

“Good job hun, try them on, any Merrell that fits you should fit like a glove from the first wear to the last.”

Just then the slimy salesdick weasels up behind me, apparently listening in on a private conversation between husband and wife.

“Well this guy seems to know his shoes.”

I want to drop him with the Vulcan neck pinch, collapsing him and making him void his bowels right on the sales floor. Before I can do so I need vital information.

“Where are the size 12 Merrell Chameleons?” I ask, hoping he will turn around and run in back to grab them for me, letting us be on our way.

“Sorry bro, we are all out, but we could special order you some and have them in roughly two weeks.”

At these words I wish the ORU trip could end right this second, but Sofie is content in trying on her new treasures. Despite my hatred for ORU I would never interrupt something as intimate as I had hoped this first Merrell experience would be for my wife.

So I bend over and take the shaft.

Alright Fuck-o, here we go... “What have you got to show me that is comparable?”

He goes straight for the most expensive shoes on the rack. “These ones will cure plantar warts and clip your toenails as you walk.”

I can let this windbag blow hot air as long as needed if it buys time for Sofie's shoe happiness. I don't want a different shoe, but this guy thinks he is good enough to sell me a sweater in the Sahara desert. I've been a salesman a time or two.

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To him, I could just be an eccentric tight-wadded millionaire. With the right words he would cap me for a couple grand worth of commissions, awarding him his employee of the month picture up on the wall for six months running, earning him a shot at the new assistant managers' position.

As he rants and raves about some brands I can't even remember the name of because I am not listening, I see it. Something that looks very similar to the Chameleon.

Cutting him off mid-sentence I say, "That one, size 12." *Try not to trip on your tongue heading back there.* I turn to Sofia.

"What do you think?"

"Yeah, I really like these ones."

"Then box them up and let's get the hell out of here."

Just when I think I see daylight at the end of the tunnel, we are blitzed by the female shoe saleslady.

"What are you two doing?"

I want to say that we have just joined a new group that smears oil back on baby seals and birds after shipwreck cleanups and that we need shoes that keep good footing when doing so, but Sofia beats me to the punch.

"We are going on a very long backpacking trip."

"Where are your toes at?"

They are connected to her foot, now leave us alone.

Sofia, dazed by the orgasmic sensation from her feet, dives in for a sales pitch swim.

As I open my mouth to block the brainwashing that is about to take place, the salesdick is back again. He hands me the non-Chameleons.

Eric Shira

ORU's power is wearing me down, next thing I know I am trying them on.

The salesdick luckily spots fresh meat in the form of another customer, asks if I'm OK and moves on to line up another sucker.

Sofia comes back to me and says, "The lady says I need a shoe one size too big?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"She had me walk down the plastic mountain and my toes touched the front of the shoe."

Infuriated, I hop up in the shoes I am trying on.

The lady squawks some nonsense about feet swelling, but I am distracted and intrigued by the bogus excuse for a simulated downhill trail experience that is more pathetic than the tent simulation for outdoor hardships.

This piece of rubber is going to, in their minds, show us how shoes are really going to feel on a two-week hiking trip from a three-foot-high, six-percent-downgrade kiddy slide?!

I turn to the lady. "One full size bigger?!"

She starts in again with the swelling talk and it is too much.

"Grab your shoes hun, we're going."

I kick off the Chameleon wannabees in the direction of the racks, and back on with my sandals.

Salesdick: "So what did you..." (cut off)

"Not interested in my size or a size bigger for that matter."

Sofie has a confused look on her face; she knows something set me off, but what?

So I fill her in as we walk downstairs and towards the cashier.

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“What a crock of horseshit. I’ve never heard of anything so stupid in my life, so until our feet swell we’re supposed to flop around in clown shoes? Give me a break.”

As I finish up with my mini-tirade a sparkling, shimmering gleam hits my eye, like a shiny new penny fresh out of the mint. But its sparkle is much more valuable, like that of a diamond. It’s almost like hearing a hello from the voice of a long-lost friend. I put on the brakes and head straight to it, pulling Sofia behind me.

It’s a Gerber hatchet. One of my friends had this kind of hatchet. It was as sharp and sturdy as they came.

It’ll be a perfect tool for this trip, good for cutting branches off trees or defending loved ones from freaks and wild animals in the woods.

But it gets even better. It is a hatchet-knife combo, with the knife sitting magnetically secured in the handle.

How to scare Sofia into seeing that this was the tool for securing our well-being in the days ahead? First I start with the logistics.

“We will need firewood and if we’re starving a knife would make an excellent fish gutter and sure, I’m a tough guy but there could be some real weirdos out there.”

At the time I figure that I have her duped, but later on I realize she wanted me to have it, sales pitch or not. I also buy a Navy Seal survival guide, and Sofie amuses herself with mental images of me building cougar traps and snaring myself, suspended upside down from a tree.

She is probably not far off but I am happy to have it. We swipe the card, she gets her shoes and I get my hatchet. As I open the door to head outside I hear a tranquil and comforting voice I have never heard before.

“Hello Joe, my name is Gerber.”

“Umm...hello, Mr. Gerber.”

Eric Shira

“I have a feeling we are going to be great friends, Joe.”

“Me too, Mr. Gerber, me too.”

Sofia gives me a queer look seeing me peering into the bag with my lips moving and no words coming out.

She must be thinking, *“Poor fella, they really got to him in that store. He’s gonna sleep well tonight.”*

The next day we meet up with a man by the name of Trevor to buy some gear he is advertising on Craigslist. He is in his late 30s with dark short hair and glasses, and he carries a disturbing amount of women's camping clothes as well as some gear for me. We later wonder if things had deteriorated with the lady in his life and maybe she just hadn't made it back from one of their trips.

We acquire everything we need from this possible murderer including a new tent, a pack for Sofia, water filters, rain gear, etc.

I even find my Chameleons at an opposing store for half the price of what I had expected to pay. Then at an Army surplus store we find sun hats that are quite possibly the dumbest-looking hats I've ever seen. They even have a stupid name...BRONER.

We are ready.

-THREE-

We're at Craig's, our home for the past few months until this hot July day. The smug bastard smiles through his thick coke-bottle glasses and crooked, slimy, hyena teeth. The only things he is missing this morning are his horns and devil trident.

He knows we are going to fail and he is enjoying himself to the max. We know we are going to fail too but not so soon. Craig seems to enjoy our anxiety as much if not more than his morning beer. Rotten swine!

This is not the encouragement we need to start this trip. An offer for a 20-mile ride out of town would have been a much nicer gesture.

I know he is waiting for the, *"Alright Craig, we give up. Can we please stay here another night?"*

NEVER!

Just about every one of our friends has made us feel like we were a nuisance. *"No no, don't leave Portland. But you can't stay here."*

To hell with this, we know we are good people. We are leaving in the next hour, 90 degrees or not, 70-pound pack be damned, we are out of here. What are we waiting for?

Well then...let's to it. *"Open the gate you toad or I'll kick it through for ya!"*

As we walk down the tiny slope of Craig's yard, the fear pounds at my head like a pissed-off gorilla with a zookeeper waving bananas outside of his cage. Waves of it rush like a river underneath my legs like it's going to carry me away at any moment.

But there are no rocks to hold onto, and if Sofie sees me waver she will surely feel it too.

Eric Shira

So I walk with my head held high and proud, stupid hat and all. I'm sure we appear out of our minds to any spectators. We will probably fit right in with the crazies around Pioneer Square.

"Where are these weird assholes headed? They are right in the middle of Portland, with enough gear to make it to Alaska on foot."

My fears fade slightly as we start putting one foot in front of the other. My arms loosen, with the heavy bedroll in hand. Determination pushes the fear back.

The worst case scenario is we will fail. But at least we will have given it a shot, which is more than I can say for the people standing behind that fence at Craig's.

We arrive at the crossroads of MLK and Failing. The pack is painfully heavy and I'm relieved to find that a garbage can is the perfect height to brace it and pop the straps. *Ahhh...* I look at Sofia and she has already got my gaze and the thoughts within it.

Staring at each other like, *"This is really freaky,"* but neither of us is willing to turn back. Enough said.

"Do you have the money for the bus?"

I pat frantically and remember it's in the easiest accessible pocket I have, left front. Out it comes. I straighten it a time or two and then show her. "Got it right here."

We both do the eyebrow shuffle and I peer over her shoulder and down the road.

The bus is coming.

"OK Sofie, this is going to be it. If the bus is packed just try and fit up in the front where we don't have to pass too many people."

As the bus pulls up it is just that, packed to the brim with people that must be thinking,

"No way do those lunatics think they are fitting on this bus with all of that gear."

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As we enter I jerk my pack around clumsily, hitting it against everything from my waist level down. It is new to me and a pain to maneuver. As I yell to the bus driver that I will bring the money right over, I am too nervous to realize he is sitting in his chair only a couple of feet away. Sofia braces my bag while I head towards the money machine.

The bus driver asks, “Where are you guys headed?”

“The Oregon coast, sir.”

“How are you getting there?”

“We are taking the bus as far as it goes and then hitchhiking.”

“Well consider this my contribution.”

I have only put two dollars (out of four) in the machine when he hands me both tickets. He continues, “It’s not much, but every little bit helps.”

“Absolutely, thank you sir.”

It isn’t much money at all but the gesture makes me grow two feet taller. My chest puffs out like the Incredible Hulk’s. I am ready to kick some ass.

What a cool cat. He says, “Yeah, I used to hitch all over the U.S.”

“Nice one. Do you by chance know what the hitching laws in Oregon are?”

“Well I don’t actually but I think you’re OK as long as you’re not on any interstates. You guys ought to head up through Beaverton on this transit.”

“That’s our plan, we were going to try to make it out through Forest Grove.”

“Yep, that’s the way for sure.”

Ding, the bus stop indicator says this is where we transfer to the Blue Line. Here we go...

Eric Shira

“Well thanks again sir, you take care.”

“Yeah, you guys take care also.”

As I turn to Sofia there is a man in the handicap seating area. He looks out of his mind, maybe some mental condition. Then he speaks:

“May the road rise up to meet you, may the wind be ever at your back. May the sunshine be warm upon your face and may God hold you in the hollow of his hand.”

I pause momentarily and look him in the face. He is in a wheel chair. Crazy or not, mentally impaired or not, the guy is right on point with words we need to hear.

I learn later the words he spoke were a piece of some Irish blessing. Between him and the bus driver, we are now stoked for this trip. Other people have only voiced worry. These perfect strangers are giving us hope.

We hop off not looking back, not because we are ungrateful to the ones behind us, but because they have given us hope to look ahead. We can tackle any obstacles that get in our way, and any person in our way will get crushed. Or maybe just tackled.

We wait for the train five minutes, maybe less. When we board, the train is packed. But I know now that these people are just obstacles, or perhaps they need to be here to see some hope in the form of two average kids headed out to discover this country.

These nerds need the strength that comes from hope, to be able to stand up for themselves in their cubicle world, so that they can say, “*Not today, bub*” when the boss comes up to give them shit because he’s having a bad day.

Yeah, that’s why we are stuffed with these squares.

A teenage stoner puts in his two cents, “You’ve got way too much stuff.”

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The voice comes out of nowhere and interrupts my imagination, which my good wife and others know can be dangerous, like waking up someone sleepwalking. It confuses and pisses me off a bit.

My eyes shoot into his like daggers. Even as laid back and easygoing or stoned as he might be, he can tell by the look on my face to choose his next words very carefully.

Obviously he had not been around when I grew into the Hulk so I will go easy on him. “Yeah, well, we got a long trip ahead of us and as you can see I’d like to keep my wife comfy.” What I really want to say is, *“I’m not a weakling like you and I can carry all this shit while fighting three lions and taking a nap.”*

The stoner has a companion sitting with him. He has long blond hair and is dirty, must be a late adopter of the Kurt Cobain style. He seems a bit more sensible in speaking to us. “Yeah, I had a hell of a time getting picked up. I haven’t been hitching in forever, man. Hopefully you guys will get picked up though.”

I think, *“if you twats looked as dirty as you are here in town where showers exist then I can understand why no one would pick you up. Maybe the drivers were afraid of stained seats or that they could not afford gas plus the 20 car fresheners it would take to erase your stench from the car.”* Sofia and I are as clean as if we just had walked out of the shower and brushed our teeth, because we did right before we left. We have already thought of this concept. Try not to look like a Bonnie and Clyde duo.

Give the people of this great country a chance to be part of the story.

Thoughts of the ride givers: *“Yeah, we picked up these goofy-ass Germans or something. Totally saved their lives probably and showed them a real piece of AMERICAN hospitality.”*

Nice. Live it up, guys. Whatever you believe, we will be ready and waiting.

Eric Shira

Stoner and Blondie go over their past road woes as Sofia asks the blond boy where he was from.

“I’m from Texas originally.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Just working and living.”

Neither of us inquires too much into Stoner’s past but he tells us anyway. He is from the East Coast and has followed a bunch of hippies around, smoked tons of weed, ate plenty of drugs, and plans to continue this as long as he can.

The duo gets off downtown at Pioneer Square, where a curious mix of tourists, downtown workers, and street kids make for a heady urban scene among the trees and office towers.

I am relieved when they get off, as I am sick of hearing the going-nowhere-fast discourse and them being so damn comfortable with it. Off to smoke some weed and grab some free handouts and they don’t care who knows it.

A homeless person walks down the aisle of the train after it starts moving again. I get ready for the old song and dance: “*I don’t have any spare change.*” (Because we really don’t. The little money we have left is on our bank card.) To my surprise he asks every single person beside and around us, but he leaves us alone. The packs have made us invisible to his hobo radar. This guy figures we are already running some scam of our own and leaves us alone.

Sofia and I look at each other in amazement. We have unlocked the beggar’s code!

Don’t bitch about people for asking for your change. Confuse and mislead them. All you need to do to never be harassed by a change junkie in the future is to simply carry a really heavy pack along or if you have a bad back, carry a bedroll.

We ride farther and farther, stop after stop. The computer voice announcing the stations fades into the background as reality sinks in

that we are getting farther out, further ahead. Moving forward will have its challenges but now even heading back would be a pain. It is really happening and we feel ready for it.

When pulling into Beaverton, we accidentally get off one stop too soon, but immediately see a bus waiting outside to Forest Grove, which is where we need to go anyway.

It departs as we walk toward it, so while we wait for the next one I try to locate some cardboard for making hitchhiking signs.

As I am looking from dumpster to dumpster Sofia yells out, “The bus is coming!”

I rush back over and notice she has pulled a few things out of her pack. Even though it’s only a few items it will take a bit to reload. Still jogging back towards her I holler out, “Sofie, you start stuffing that gear back in! I’ll carry my pack over.”

I grab the monstrosity, not attempting to get it on properly at all; instead it bends me back and rips me a brand new hernia. Sparks fly as the pack’s aluminum frame scrapes, bouncing a time or two on the concrete. I make it up to the open doors proud of myself with the expression of, *Look dad, I got an A on my report card and all this time you thought my name was Dumb Ass.*

The bus driver gives me a look like my dad would give me: *Hurry your ass and I’m not even slightly impressed.*

“C’mon man, I’m not gonna wait all day.”

This guy is not my father though, and he does not fit in the “You might be an asshole but I still have to respect you out of a blood bond we share” category. So I look up at him, stand the pack on the entry steps, and say, “Well, if you thought it sucked waiting for me, you’re really going to get pissed when you realize my wife’s not here yet and I’m not leaving without her.”

That’s when the bus driver tries to bend my mind with his eyes, but a well-known Average family trait is our ability to look into someone like this bonehead and put the fear of God into them.

Eric Shira

But this guy has already started his piercing stare into me and is doing his best not to break the concentration.

A crazy competition has begun.

When Sofia arrives shortly behind me, slightly confused possibly by the silent staring contest taking place before her, she already knows I am out of my mind.

She breaks the standoff with, “Well, I’m ready. Let’s go.”

The bus driver sends the look out with a sneer that says he is silently the champ. As I walk by and flash my ticket I catch the last glimpse of his eye, thus winning the eye fight. I laugh to myself and can see him up front shifting around in his seat trying to shoot it back through the large rear view mirror, thus making me a dumb shit and forfeiting my champion status.

No damn way, this staring competition trophy will leave with its rightful owner, and it does just that. Later when I calm down, I hope he doesn’t beat his wife or kids or kill himself when he goes home.

But these are chances you have to take in life when riding buses and heading on trips.



Newlyweds Joe and Sofia escape unemployment and hopelessness in Portland, Oregon by shouldering their backpacks and setting out to start a new life somewhere near the crashing waves of the Pacific coast. Their trip takes on a life of its own as they learn about themselves, each other, and the folks they encounter while searching for the heart and soul of America during the recession of 2009.

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