

BORN TO TRAVEL

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BORN
TO
TRAVEL

A European Odyssey



JAN FRAZIER

*Through we travel the world over
to find the beautiful,
we must carry it with us or
we find it not.*

—

RALPH WALDO EMERSON



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CHAPTER 1: THUMBS UP!!

I SAT IN THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE with my shoes off and my legs slung over the arm of the chair. It was my free period, and I was waiting until 1:00 because I had an appointment to talk with our principal, Paul Everett. I turned down the Beatles' music, which was streaming from my Ipad, and munched on the last of my apple.

"It's nearly 1:00," commented Carla, the teacher with whom I team-taught English and history. Actually, it was European literature and European history, but the syllabus called it "Linked English/History." I taught the literature, and Carla taught the history part. It had been a pilot course four years previously and was met with such success that we now taught three courses of it.

"Yeah, I know. I'm going. Wish me luck," I said with a nervous smile.

"Best of luck, girlfriend," Carla replied. "Let me know what happens before next period starts."

I nodded, put on my heels, and glanced at the mirror to check my hair. I was still getting used to the shorter version of my dark blonde hair. It had been shoulder-length for many years, but as I neared the age of 45, I decided it was

time to shorten it to a style that seemed more manageable and age-appropriate.

“Do I look okay?” I asked, as I took one last glance at my reflection.

“You look great.”

“Any lipstick on my teeth? Dress wrinkled? Egg on my face?”

Carla smiled. “You’re perfect. Now go.”

The principal’s office was down the hall, so I had a few minutes to rehearse my speech—for the umpteenth time. Caroline, the school secretary, lifted her eyes from the computer as I entered the office.

“Hey, Tasha. Paul is waiting for you,” she said with a smile. “Like your dress. New?”

“Oh, thanks. Sort of. I got it for a cousin’s wedding last month. I’m not really someone who wears much blue—I’m more of a brown or black person—but I liked the style. It’s okay if I go on in?”

“Sure,” Caroline replied, refocusing on her typing again.

I knocked softly before entering, and Paul looked up from the stack of papers strewn on his desk.

“Hi, Tasha. Come on in. I’ve been meaning to talk with you, so I’m glad that you made an appointment to talk with me. What’s up?” Paul said in his usual easy-going style.

Young, tall, and handsome, Paul was the answer to every young lady’s dream. Most of the high school girls in the school went out of their way to talk with Mr. Everett. I actually began to think that some of the girls got into trouble

just to get into his office. Negative attention is better than no attention at all, I guess.

Somehow my mind had gone blank. *How was I going to start this conversation?* I thought.

“Um, well, Paul, I’ve rehearsed this so many times, and now I don’t know how to begin.”

“I think that the best way is to just say what’s on your mind, Tasha. Is everything okay? Problems in class?”

“No, nothing like that,” I replied. “I’d... I’d like to take a leave of absence,” I finally blurted out.

My rehearsed lines were so much better, and I could tell by the look in Paul’s eyes that this was a shocking statement—much too blunt.

“Really? Are you okay, Tasha? Not ill, are you?” Paul responded.

“No, no. Let me try to start over,” I stated, as I attempted a grin. “The last two years since Mark died have been difficult. I went through three years of chemo with him and watching him suffer to the end was hard. The girls are both grown, through college, and on their own, and the house is huge. I seem to stumble around in it as if I’m lost.”

“You want to take time off to find a smaller house?” Paul questioned, confused.

I laughed. “I wish it were that easy. I want to take a leave of absence to try to put my life together again. I’m not just lost in the house—I’m lost in life. My husband and children are gone, and I don’t know who I am. I want to get away. You know, have time to myself to think and figure out where

I'm going from here." I pondered my next statement before saying it. "Does all of this sound stupid—and selfish — to you?"

"Well, no, no, not selfish at all. I guess that I'm more shocked than anything because you have always seemed to have it 'all together,' even after Mark's death. I mean, you have never lost your sense of humor—always coming up with a wise remark. I had no idea that you were struggling. I wish that you had said something to me sooner. Natalie and I would have had you over for dinner or something. I'm really sorry, Natasha."

"I've been to so many people's houses for dinner, and I really appreciate everyone's kindness. This is something that I have to do by myself. No one can help me, truly," I stated. "I figure that I have a year's worth of retirement days already accumulated. Could I use five or six months of them and travel?"

"I'll have to get that approved by the school board, but I'm sure that it'll be doable. Where will you go? Any ideas?" Paul asked.

"We used to live in Holland when Mark and I were first married. His company sent him abroad for five years. In fact, both of the girls were born in Europe."

"Really? I didn't know that. They have dual citizenships?"

"Yep. Anyway, I just want to travel, write, and also gain first-hand information about some of the literature and history that Carla and I teach. I've always said that travel is the best means of education, so I want to prove that," I said with

a smile. “Besides, I’ve always wanted to write a novel, and now could be my chance.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot, huh?” Paul asked, not suppressing his smile.

“Yeah, I have. I don’t want it to seem as if I’m running from my problems. I just need time alone—away from reality and the humdrum of everyday life—to sort through my life and figure out what I want to do with the next forty years or so,” I concluded, grinning.

“The board meets on Monday. It’ll be our first topic of discussion,” responded Paul. “Anything else?”

“No, that’s all.” I paused. “Well, yes, there is. You wanted to talk to me about something?” I asked.

“Oh, I just wanted to see how the three linked classes were going and if you and Carla wanted to continue with three classes next year. But now isn’t a good time to talk about all of that.”

“Oh, about the team-teaching—I haven’t actually talked with Margaret Kramer about this,” I said, hurriedly, “but she has always been envious that I was teaching European literature because it’s a special love of hers. She has said that if I ever get tired of teaching it, I should remember her. I think that she’d step in and cover me next semester.”

“Wow, you have thought about everything. Well, I’m sure we’ll work it all out, Tasha. I’ll let you know what they say at the board meeting Monday night, but I think that you should start packing,” Paul responded, extending his hand.

“Thank you, Paul. Thank you.”

I “floated” down the hall just as the bell rang for the next class. I stuck my head into Carla’s room and gave her a “thumbs up.”

CHAPTER 2 : AM I REALLY GOING?

I COULD THINK OF LITTLE ELSE except my request. Paul called me to his office at lunch time on Tuesday to give me the “okay” to take a leave of absence. My head was spinning when I returned to my room, and it was all that I could do to concentrate on school and students for the remainder of the day.

Carla and I went to Starbucks for coffee after school.

“So you’re going abroad for six months?” Carla asked.

I nodded. “Give or take a month or so.”

“How will you manage? I mean, do you speak all of the languages that you’ll encounter? Where will you stay? How will you get around from city to city? How do you ...”

“Hey, hold on, girl. That’s way too many questions,” I said with grin. “I figure God is in charge, and He has already made this opportunity possible for me, so I’m in good hands, don’t you think? Besides, I’ve lived in Europe, and I’ll be fine. Mark and I traveled the entire continent during the five years that we were there, and we never had any problems.

“So here’s my plan,” I continued with a twinkle in my eye. “I’ll get a large backpack and will hitchhike my way through Europe. You know, like the students used to do in the ’70s. I could work a little in each village for food, and...”

“Come on. Seriously, Tash. What are you going to do? First, how are you going to communicate with the Europeans?”

“Well, I speak Dutch, a little German, and a little French, and everyone in the larger cities speaks English,” I concluded, taking a sip of my double-mocha latte. “Mmm, good stuff. I’m glad that Europe now has Starbucks. I’m not sure that I could survive or even think of going without that franchise in Europe,” I stated, giving Carla a wink. “I’ll bet that I could get a job in a Starbucks over there. I’m sure that I own a portion of the business with all of the coffee that I drink here.”

Carla smiled. “All right, so language may not be a problem, but where are you going to stay? Don’t tell me hostels.”

“Where will I stay? I don’t know for sure, of course, but I still have friends in Holland who will let me room with them for a week, and I’ll probably get a flat in some of the other countries if I’m staying for two or three weeks. However, I will keep the hostel idea in mind if I get in a pinch.”

Ignoring my statement, Carla continued. “You are brave and adventurous, Natasha. I couldn’t do any of that.”

“I’m really not so brave as I’m confused right now,” I said, trying to be serious. “I just need to get away from everything. It’ll be like starting over, and, hopefully, I’ll come

back refreshed and ready to take on life again. Right now, I'm drained and tired."

"When do you plan on leaving?" Carla asked.

"As soon as school is out. I think that we have five weeks left. I'm going to try to rent out my house so that it's not sitting vacant. There are two new teachers coming for the fall semester, so I think that I'll contact them and see if either of them is interested," I responded.

"Good thought, Tasha."

"I'm going to get a ticket to London, and I'll be on my way, suitcase in tow. Well, maybe two suitcases... not sure."

"Have you told your girls yet?" Carla inquired.

"I've mentioned it to them. They both think that I'm crazy, but they also know that these past two years have been difficult and agree that a change in scenery would be good. However, they just wish the scenery were on this side of the pond," I concluded, grinning.

"Understandable," Carla replied. "In my heart, I'm really jealous and envious that you have the courage to do this. Truly, I think that it's wonderful, Natasha."



The next five weeks were a whirlwind. First, I got my plane ticket to London. I could leave on May 30, and I realized that I would celebrate my birthday—July 17—abroad. I left the ticket open-ended because I wasn't sure of my return date. My house rented immediately to one of the new teach-

ers coming during the middle of June, and I started sorting through my clothes and necessities that I'd need for the first few months. I'd have to buy winter clothes as the weather got colder, or else I'd have to spend the cooler months in Italy, Greece, or Spain. I had no timetable and no schedule, so I'd decide when the time came.

My colleagues held a *bon voyage* party two nights before I left, and I was teary-eyed by the end of the evening.

Did I make the right decision? I'll be all alone... can I handle that? What if there is an emergency back home? I reminded myself that my ticket was open-ended, and I could return whenever I wanted. My mind was reeling with thoughts, and I finally forced myself into the shower—my last American shower—and got ready for bed.

Sleep didn't come easily that last night. Again, I rethought everything, trying to decide if I had forgotten anything. Finally at 4:00, I fell into a fitful sleep until around 10:00 in the morning. My flight—leaving at 5:30 p.m.—was direct from O'Hare in Chicago to London Heathrow. Since I was only fifteen minutes away from the airport, I decided that a taxi would be easiest. No more good-byes to my friends—I had said those already, and I wanted my departure to be easy.

With one checked piece of luggage and a carry-on which could be made into a backpack, I arrived at the international terminal in O'Hare at 2:30. The uncertain emotions from the previous night were gone, and I felt excitement that I hadn't experienced in a long time. Most people saw me as

fun-loving and bubbly, but often on the inside, I wasn't that way. I'd cover my emotions with laughter so that I didn't have to deal with reality.

The line was long, curling around like a snake. Most international flights left in the evenings so everyone was checking in now. I was behind a guy who reeked of smoke and looked as if he needed the expertise of a barber last week ... no, last month. *How can he afford a ticket abroad*, I wondered. I'd swear that I had given this guy some coins on the corner of State Street and Lake in downtown Chicago last week. He had crutches beside him, along with a sign that read, "Homeless. Need money to join my family." The sign hadn't said that his family was abroad.

"Do you live in downtown Chicago, sir?"

The old guy first gave me a blank stare and then turned his back on me. It was then that I decided it was definitely him. *You creep*, I thought to myself. Last time that I'd give money to someone on the Chicago streets.

"You should be ashamed," I whispered, just loud enough for him to hear. "You are robbing honest people of their money so that you can go to Europe ... or somewhere overseas. Maybe some warm island where you don't have to worry about winter."

No response. I decided it wasn't worth it to continue this one-way conversation.

The line seemed to crawl. How many people ahead of me? Maybe 100? I saw a lady from the airlines who was checking tickets, but she was miles away yet. The two kids

behind me started to fight, and the little girl gave her older brother a kick in the knee, which sent him into a tizzy. The lady further back had a baby in a carrier, and he/she was screaming. Some lady ahead of me threw me a toothless smile, and I wondered what I had done to deserve that. Crazy-ness abounded at O'Hare.

Within fifteen minutes, though, the airline lady—her name tag read “United Airlines... Marsha”—approached me with the offer to go to the computer to check in. It was a gift from Heaven because by now, the little girl behind me had kicked me in the rear as she lay on the floor in a tantrum. I was close to murder.

Computerized check-in is a god-send, and within minutes, I was through the tedious task of getting my boarding pass and only had to have my luggage weighed and ticketed.



It was 3:30 when the news was posted that our flight would be late. By 5:00, the gate had been changed three times already and the computerized sign still said that flight UA 21 was delayed. Unfortunately, the two brats who had been fighting behind me were on my flight, and the screaming mimi in the baby carrier was also on flight UA 21. *Fantastic*, I thought. With my luck, my seat would be next to one of them, or just as bad, next to the “homeless” guy from the Chicago streets. He, too, was on my flight.

At 5:15, the posting said that the flight had arrived, and by 6:15, we were told that we'd be boarding in 15 minutes. Okay, maybe we'd leave by 7:00. Not good, but not too bad. I tried to get close enough to the brats' mother to see which section they were in, but I couldn't tell. Homeless was shuffling toward the gate with his tattered backpack slung over his shoulder, and I watched as he got a few disgruntled looks from other passengers. *His smell, undoubtedly, I thought. He's a walking cigarette.*

"First-class passengers may board the flight," came the announcement.

First-class people were already at the front of the line in anticipation of boarding, and to my horror, Homeless was with them.

"What? Seriously?" I said aloud.

The lady next to me followed my stare, and I heard "Oh," escape her lips.

"I gave that guy money on the streets of Chicago last week, and today he's flying first-class to London? I can't believe it!" I exclaimed to the lady.

"Outrageous," she declared. "I once gave a crippled guy—well, someone who I *thought* was crippled and in a wheelchair—money in Chicago, and later that day, he was walking around Macy's buying perfume. From then on, I walked right by those homeless people. Never again."

"I'm sure that many of them are homeless, but I never know what they'll spend the money on, so I'm right with you, lady," I stated.

Homeless was out of sight by now, and the business-class passengers were called. Screaming Mimi—definitely a *girl* with pink dress and headband—and her mother got on.

“You know, I must not live right. I want to go first-class or business-class. How does this all work?” I asked, listening to the screaming diminish as the business-class people walked down the ramp.

Okay, now I only have the two brats to worry about being next to me, I thought. I know that I’m on an aisle seat, and there are three of them including their mother, so they can’t be next to me. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Section 4, Section 3, and Section 2 were all called. The Brats were still there, but so was the lady next to me.

“What seat do you have?” I asked, hopefully.

“12A,” she replied.

“Oh, great. I’m in 12B. We’re neighbors,” I stated with a smile.

“Section 1 may now board,” the stewardess said over the loud speaker.

I let Brats and Mother go ahead of me, and Lady—her name was Anne, I had found out by now—and I walked on together.

There was Homeless sitting in first-class, already drinking a martini. *Wow*, I thought. I could hear Screaming Mimi before I saw her, and as we got to the business-class section, I saw her mom attempting—with no success — to feed her a bottle.

As we neared Section 1, my eyes searched the area for Brats, but they were nowhere to be found. *Excellent*, I thought. *They must have been in Section 2 and didn't go when called.* Obviously, they weren't in Section 1.

Anne and I helped each other put our carry-ons in the overheads and settled in our seats. Just then the bathroom door slid open and Brats and Mother emerged. All three of them had been packed (it's still a mystery to me how three fit in there) into that two-foot by two-foot cubicle, and they were heading my way. Frantically, I looked around for empty seats. Oh, no, the three across the aisle ... no, please, God, no.

Oh, yes, that's where they landed. Right across the aisle! If I had been allowed to carry a knife onboard, I would have used it. I'm not sure if it would have been murder or suicide, but there would have been blood on the blade.

"I try to always look at the bright side of things and attempt to figure out what I'm to learn from a negative experience, but this one has me stumped," I said to Anne, as I motioned to the three as they argued about who was sitting where.

Just then I got whacked in the head with Girl Brat's doll—the act was aimed at Boy Brat, but she missed—and I turned on her.

"Listen, you little m... m... miss (I wanted to say monster but thought better of it), *don't do that again*," I said, fire in my eyes.