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My best story from the road – “the Cat Named Isaiah”

It was a travel day from the Oregon coast en route to Napa Valley, where my cousin, Seth, was working a vineyard seasonally. I woke up and opened my car to ash flooding into my sleeping bag from the nearby fires. The day before in Eugene a noble and dramatic woman behind me had announced, “I haven’t seen ash like this since Mt. St. Helens!” I’m guessing there was some hyperbole, but I hope this puts the environment in perspective.

I set off after a conversation overlooking Arch Rock with a kind Nevadan couple and was on my way, listening to the audiobook of *Where the Crawdads Sing* (wonderful read, if anyone wants to unpack). The beginning of the trip was uneventful – the sky was red-orange without sun and the air filled with colloidal smoke. 2000 year-old Redwoods greeted me to California with darkness from their looming shadow.

As I continued South I eventually reached a town where the 101 was closed because of a fire 15 miles to my Southeast, and I had just circumvented a fire 9 miles to the Northwest. At my mom’s bidding I fueled up and grabbed 4 water bottles in the case of emergency, remarking in passing to the store clerk that “I’m from Georgia I ain’t never seen nuthin like this,” in an effort to be cute and friendly I guess. She replied, “I’ve lived here 40 years and neither have I. I’m terrified.”

This really put these fires into perspective for me. I had been in Chicago during their “great outbreak” of coronavirus, Seattle and Portland during protests and riots. This was to me (from the thick of all of them) the only thing that the media didn’t over-dramatize. Not getting into that, just gonna drop it and move on to the meat of the story.

My new friend advised I take California-1 to continue south, so I did. About 2 miles up the switchback-riddled highway, breaklights announced a standstill ahead. Eventually I crawled to the front in my VW to find a tractor trailer bottomed out in a switchback. Everyone was passing him, flicking him off, cussing him out, calling him an idiot (which he was for pulling this maneuver) and moving on South. I felt compassion for the clearly-rattled man, however, and stopped my car to offer help.

But he spoke no English. “What do you speak.” “Spanish.”

“Pues, gracias a Dios porque hablo un poquito de español,” I responded. Translation. “Lucky you because in a former life I studied in Argentina.” Josuel and I found a phone with signal and began to work on finding a tow truck (which btw, is a different word in Cuba than Argentina) to clear the road so people could continue on their way. Another couple directed traffic. Until some ass in a sprinter van decided to get stuck and call the cops.

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An officer showed up, was really mean (can give the details if you want, they're funny), blocked traffic (WITH FIRES CLOSING IN AROUND US) and wouldn't let us continue south. So I asked, "Then can you tell me how to get south without getting burned alive."

"Use the 101."

"the 101 that's closed?"

"Yes, that one."

He gave more detailed instructions, I spread the word (to English and Spanish-speakers), and next thing I knew I was leading a convoy along a closed 101 straight towards a fire solely based on the word of a douchey cop. "Left on Branscomb" was his advice. But Branscomb didn't have a left, I saw on my Apple Car-play. Thankfully, from Georgia, my mom tracked it to the right where it intersected with CA-1.

The convoy and I weaved from hobbit hole to eroded hillside through overgrown Redwoods blocking our way on a road clearly not meant for large-scale travel. When we emerged from the shadows to the sunset on the pacific coast, the sun was nowhere to be seen. Thick smoke made the ocean 10 feet to our right invisible. Still, my fist lifted out the window in victorious pumping as 20 horns erupted behind me.

I was on my way to In-N-Out and to Napa. I thought. First, further chaos was obligatory. In smoke it's hard to see on 2-lane highways. When a creature ran out in front of me I (and it) had no chance. Boom. I turned my car around to make sure it was a racoon or something of the sort. It wasn't. It was a house cat.

So I pulled into the driveway of the house where it appeared to be running, parked my car, and prepared for a painful interaction. As I opened my car door, an old man stood in his doorway yelling (and I swear I cannot make this up), "Here kitty, kitty."

Heart. Sink. Pit. Commence. Will I die tonight? It's possible!

But I walked up to the door anyways, and a nice man walked out. He was understanding and not angry about the cat. He told me his name had been Isaiah, a sibling of Ezekiel the tabby cat and Jeremiah the mut dog. We discussed the times and faith and politics and his heartburn. Why did we talk for so long? Ah yes,

Because we buried the cat. We left friends and remain in touch.

I made a new friend that night. If I hadn't taken the time to talk to the couple from Nevada, or put aside my fear to help Josuel, or turn around in the face of all logic telling me to keep driving, I wouldn't have.

That is the story of the cat named Isaiah.

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