

Act One: Act One

Ira Glass

The thing about Hawaii is that before you go all anybody will say to you is, it's paradise. This is literally the word that people use. You tell a friend, I'm going to Hawaii, and then it's like you watch the word enter their brain. And the sensible thinking part of them goes away, and their eyes start to glaze. And then, as if in a dream, like a scene from *The Manchurian Candidate*, they say the word. It's paradise.

From WBEZ Chicago, it's *This American Life*. I'm Ira Glass. Each week, of course, we choose a theme and invite a variety of writers and performers to tackle that theme. Today's program, *Nightmare Vacations*, stories by Sandra Tsing Loh and David Sedaris and this question, if an American family can't get along in paradise, what hope is there?

Act Two: Act Two

Ira Glass

So my sisters and nephews fly in from California. My parents fly in from the east coast. I take an early-morning plane from O'Hare. I went mainly because I wanted to spend some time with my parents. My dad was just out of the hospital. He'd had emergency surgery, nearly died. And I wanted to hang out with them, try to get along better, feel closer, which, in my family, as in many, is not so easy.

I brought the pictures of my trip to show you. This one, this is the condo we stayed in. You can see palm trees through the windows. That's my sister Karen on the couch with a Diet Coke. *Good Morning America*, which I view as the clattering, vapid noise of Satan, is on the television. But that's what my parents like, and I wanted to do what they wanted to do. My parents' Hawaii was not a romantic place of ramshackle bungalows and beaches lit by torchlight. In fact, it was a suburban-looking condo with overstuffed pastel furniture and pastel hotel art prints framed on the wall in a timeshare community with tennis courts and easy parking and a mall and a grocery store. In short, this was the least exotic possible setting.

But when we arrived, my mom got out of the car, looked around the parking lot at the neatly trimmed lawns, and she said the word. Paradise.

This picture, this is my dad making cereal in the condo. My parents brought their favorite breakfast cereals with them, 10,000 miles to Hawaii. They like the familiar comforts of home, like many people do. In fact, in all sorts of stressful situations-- I hadn't actually quite put this together. I realized on this trip that in all sorts of stressful situations, what my parents do is that they make themselves comfortable by focusing on creating a comfortable, personal space.

When my sisters and I moved away to college, my parents comforted themselves by building a new house. When my mom got breast cancer five years ago, they decided to start a major rehab on the house. And in Hawaii, with the stress of having to deal with the children and the grandchildren, they spent a lot of time obsessing on the condo and what they saw as its many shortcomings. The sliding glass doors weren't the heavy, nice kind, my mom thought. The bathrooms' tiles and floors didn't have the quality that my mother would prefer. And rather than spend more time with their family, which was the point of the whole vacation, she would vanish for hours at the time. She would vanish for the whole afternoon. It'd be like, mom, where would she be? And she would have been out, checking out other condos and hotel accommodations, comparing.

Let me see what else I got here. This is me snorkeling. At one point I talked everybody into renting snorkeling equipment. And we all went to one of these coves where they say it's really nice snorkeling. And when we got there, I could not get anybody to come in the water with me.

It turned out that none of the things that you would expect that people would actually want to do in Hawaii were things that my parents, especially, were willing to do. They don't snorkel or swim. They don't like the ocean or the sun. They won't go to look at volcanoes. They don't want to see hula dancers. They don't want to drink fruity tropical drinks with umbrellas in them. My sisters and I, we couldn't even talk them into staying up late and playing cards with us.

It begs the question, the central problem, the problem of the family vacation, what can people do that will make them feel closer? The activities offered by Hawaii seem so puny in comparison to the mountain that the average family presents.

About ۲۰ minutes after this picture was taken, I got out of the water, and we all kind of went our separate ways for the day. My mom went off to look at condos again. And I just did not want to go look at condos. Me, I did not believe that finding a place with heavier sliding glass doors and nicer towels in the bathroom was going to bring us any closer as a family. But it's not like I had any better ideas about how to get close.

C.S. Lewis once wrote-- and I don't know if this is original to him, but anyway, it's in one of his books-- that there's no such thing as a heaven or hell. He says what happens after you die is that you simply continue to be the person who you are but for eternity. So you become more and more like yourself forever. And for some people, that's heaven. And for others, it's hell. I bring this up because I think paradise shares this quality with the afterlife. For some people, a vacation in paradise is paradise. But for others of us, it's much more difficult.

[MUSIC - "IT'S NICE TO GO TRAV'LING" BY FRANK SINATRA]

Act Three: Act Three

Ira Glass

Act Two.

Sandra Tsing Loh

My mother was an optimist. No, I mean really an optimist. This was a woman who, in 1969, planned a family summer vacation to Ethiopia.

Ira Glass

Sandra Tsing Loh is a writer, performer, and composer. She's a columnist for Buzz Magazine in Los Angeles. This story is from her one-woman show Aliens in America, which is largely about her mother and her father.

Sandra Tsing Loh

In all fairness, Ethiopia was not her first choice. Given her druthers, she would have hopped on a luxury ocean liner to Hawaii while young men in tight pants served her peach schnapps on a silver tray. "Peach schnapps, it is the most elegant drink," she used to tell us girls. My mother stood 5'11", a fast-talking German brunette given to wearing bright red lipstick, big amber beads, polka dot dresses. My sister, Kaitlin, and I thought she was the most elegant person we'd ever seen. Of course, we were ages nine and six.

"Peach schnapps, we used to drink it all the time in Danzig before the war, when your mother and Tante Thea used to waltz to Strauss's Blue Danube, thank you very much, at the glittering ballroom in Sopot, built right over the sea, Mit Rosen Gardenin. And of course, you know your mother's dance card was saw from empty in those days. There was Hans Heinlich, Karl Obst, Dieter Fischer-Kucher."

My mother was a nonstop talker. She would not stop talking. That's why she was so sure her Hawaii pitch would work. "Palm trees, pineapples. [SINGING] Bali Hai. Bali Hai, Bali Hai, Bali Hai."

But my father never took to the idea of spending money for the sole purpose of fun. Vacations, birthdays, swimming lessons, Christmas-- these were concepts that didn't really work for him. "It is not that I do not like to spend money," he'd say. "Oh, no. Spend, spend, spend. That's just all I do. It is just that I do not like to throw it away on nothing." Hawaii, of course, was nothing, a horror of sunny beaches, fruity drinks, laughing, happy people. "Why would we want to go there? Where is the educational value?"

My father, by contrast, was fascinated with Uruguay. Why? He had a friend there we could stay with for free. But it was more than that. "The people of Uruguay are very, very sensible and hardworking. The

agrarian farm workers face a fascinating challenge with the combines and the technological hurdles that they--" blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

You might wonder how such opposite people as my parents got together in the first place. I blame it on Buick. When my mother first saw my father in the mid '50s, he was sitting behind the wheel of a shiny new '56 Buick. I guess a man looks better than he ought in a Buick, especially when it's surrounded by southern California in the '50s, a palm-fringed, swimming-pool-dotted utopia lit by a sun so bright, you actually start to hallucinate. You believe you are in fact quite similar to a person. After all, one, both of you are new immigrants, recently escaped from bad circumstances in your home countries. My father was orphaned by age 12 in Shanghai, lived in poverty. My mother went through World War II, ran from soldiers, heard bombs drop around her.

Of course, my mother hated stories of such grim, Zolaesque realism. Her favorite after-dinner stories were either goofy or schmaltzy, ending hopefully with a glass of peach schnapps and a singalong of some kind. When American friends at dinner parties asked her about hardship in Danzig, World War II, Polish occupation, she'd cut them off at the path. "But enough of me. We are all of us travelers, nicht wahr? Foreign people in a foreign land. And we all of us miss home. Let us sing. [SINGING] Edelweiss, Edelweiss, you look happy to see me."

Similarity number two between my parents, nothing, except, I guess, that both had come to America, a place where miserable yesterdays could be traded in for joyous visions of tomorrow. And why not? It was the '60s, a great time for America. Jackie O was in the White House. Apollo rockets were in the sky. The future was made flesh at eye-popping World's Fairs featuring whizzing monorails above. Below, pavilions of happy, dancing third-world people joining hands and singing, [SINGING] "It's a small world after all. It's a small world after all."

So what if my parents had nothing in common. Never mind. My mother would make this work. In 1969, after many disagreements, she had learned to be crafty. She dropped the idea of Hawaii or Florida or Disneyland. All she was suggesting was a four-day trip to Massawa, Pearl of the Red Sea, which lay on a little known, remote part of Ethiopia. It was the last adventure my parents would ever agree on.

"Ethiopia?" My father, of course, had been immediately interested. And why not? Ethiopia was notoriously backward, wretched poor. At that time, too, they were recovering from some sort of bloody civil war, leaving its countryside bleak, its peoples desperate. No one in the world would want to go on vacation in Ethiopia, which my father saw could be turned to our advantage. "After all," my father asked, "if no one else is going, think how far the American dollar will go." "He thinks a vacation should cost one American dollar," Kaitlin and I plead with my mom. "He's cheap and mean." We were onto him, even then. "He just doesn't want us to have any fun. Please, Mom. We don't want to go to Ethiopia."

"Ethiopia?" she asked. "Where is that? Oh, you mean E-th-o-p-ia!" She sang it as though it were Rogers and Hammerstein musical, like "Oklahoma." "E-th-o-p-ia! You mean home of the fabulous little town of Massawa, Pearl of the Red Sea, with its beautiful beaches and luxurious resort hotel with its glittering ballroom built right over the sea, Mit Rosen Gardenin, just like in Sopot?" "Really?" we asked. "Naturilich! It's all right here in my kleine deutsche Reisebuch. Father does not know it yet. He'll probably be quite angry. But once we get there, we will run away from your father and swim on the beach."

"Swim on the beach" was the kind of word my mother would use to describe anything that was too wonderful to be possible and therefore would never come to pass. Swim on the beach with the Pearl of the Red Sea. Who knew?

Air Ethiopia was not a good airline. A plunging, four-hour ride on a shuttering gray plane brought us to a town with a suspiciously gay name of Lalibella. "Lalibella!" my mother exclaimed in mock dismay as its airport, a manure field, rose up to meet us. The hotel Lalibella seemed made entirely of peat, and peat which had taken its kicks and beatings from the desert wind for a long time. Thick woven carpets with ominous symbols hung everywhere, exuding a faint hay smell. Kaitlin and I were given sour glasses of lemonade to drink as we perched on the family suitcases, watching scrawny sheep graze outside a big picture window. All at once, the sheep screamed and scattered. A man in a galabia was running after them with an ax.

I turned from this weird spectacle to contemplate yet another. There stood my mother with four German tourists, large and blond and gleaming in their sweat-streaked khaki, expensive cameras and voluptuous leather travel bags draped around them like fresh kill. Apparently there was no place in Africa so miserable some German tourist did not want to see it. [SPEAKING GERMAN] my mother cried out, raising her hands imploringly, a beat. And then all five adult fell into a group hug. There was laughter, sighing, a rapid German exchange. [SPEAKING GERMAN] Danzig?" was the startled query. Emphatic nodding. "Ach ja. Ach ja." So they all originally hailed from my mother's hometown. Photos were coming out of purses and bags now, chocolates, maps of where they had gone, of where they were going. And now here's where the Massawa, Pearl of the Red Sea, magic really clicked in. By incredible coincidence, Ilsa, Franz-Joseph, and the fat couple were headed too to Massawa, Pearl of the Red Sea. It would be a party. Maybe Kaitlin and I would even get to swim on the beach.

With a wave of my mother's hand, the whole group sat down to a surprisingly festive Ethiopian dinner of bread and peas and potatoes and, of course, fresh mutton that Kaitlin and I had watched nibble its last blades of grass just hours earlier. The adult buzz was growing to a roar. "Hoohoo-hoo-hoo!" There was much slapping of thighs and lifting of glasses. Even my father was having fun. Franz-Joseph had just announced that he was picking up the dinner tab. "Du ferrukten Deutschen," my father guffawed in his terrible German, reaching over and goosing Ilsa on the rear. She was big-hearted enough to laugh it off. I think the Germans were amused by my Chinese father, as though he were a small attack dog.

But even as they were drinking, my mother told us later, she knew that something was kaput. Because while the Deutschen were indeed headed to Massawa, they were planning to fly. My father, of course, had just

gotten tickets for the bus. Although, back at the Addis Ababa Airport, there had been some question of safety about the bus, never quite explained. "Please," one travel official in a shabby blue suit had plead with my parents. "You are wealthy Americans. I beg of you. The people of the bus, they are not good." But my father stood firm. Why ride in a plane for an hour when you could sit on a bus for nine and save almost \$30 for four people? "Besides," he insisted, "we are not stupid tourists. We will go the way the natives go. It will be so much more educational."

But, of course, our new German friends would not buy that. My mother was stuck, so she fudged the truth just a little. "But have you heard about the fabulous bus?" she asked the group over that festive Ethiopian dinner. She herself looked fabulous that night, her crisp, dark hair set off by a fire-engine red dress and big, amber beads. "The scenery is absolutely stunning. You will miss it all by plane. Everyone takes the bus. It is what is done. Perhaps a bit rustic, but sehr gemütlich in its own way. It is the one place where adventure und economy meet. Please, my friends, you must take the bus with us. Please. Life is too short, too short. Because we are, all of us, travelers, nicht wahr? Foreign people in a foreign land." There was a hush, then an explosion of hugging and weeping and something being spilled.

So the mood is bright, if somewhat hung over, the next morning when we all reconnoiter at the bus station, yet another manure field. "Guten morgen!" my mother calls out. "Guten morgen!" the Germans cry back. They supervises as a small Ethiopian hefts their fabulous leather luggage on top of the bus, tying it all down with skeins of twine. The many Ethiopian peasants, the women in black muslin and the men in work shirts and wrinkled corduroys, pretty much ignore us, busy lifting their own chicken coops and lentil baskets.

"A small detail," as my mother liked to put it later when she'd retell the story-- "a small detail" is that there's not one but two buses heading out towards Massawa this day. We and the Germans are all assigned to the first bus. Our family is further subdivided into three seats together at the front, ours, and one way, way at the back, among the chicken coops, my father's. Good. But here's the wrinkle. Our seats are right over the wheel. The floor rises in a hump under our feet. We can't stretch our legs out. For nine hours. And, as I've told you, my mother is ๑'')'").

But the bus officials seem oddly opposed to us changing our seats. Why? The first bus is full, and for some odd reason, they do not want to put us on the second. But my mother insists. "But we cannot sit there. We cannot. Mein Gott! It is intolerable. We are not animals." And then, in with the haymaker. "I will go to the American consulate." Bingo. Without a word, three of us are moved to the second bus, far from anyone we know.

The buses navigate their way down treacherous mountains. The mountains are beautiful, if threatening in their jagged blueness. Occasionally a small peasant child in a soiled galabia runs by the side of the road, waving. His small shout fades off in the distance. "Ahhhhh!"

The road zigzags, zigzags. At the end of each hairpin turn is a lone white cross. I drop off to sleep.

Popping, like the sound of a truck backfiring, jolts me awake. All around us, Ethiopian peasants are dropping to the floor. There are shouts. Then, all at once, like a congregation, the Ethiopians rise and file down the aisle, fingers laced on top of their heads. My mother does not say two words to us. She kneels swiftly. Her hands fly over our bags. She stuffs all of our family's passports and traveler's checks under Kaitlin's and my blouses, smoothing our waistbands to hold them in place.

"Are we there yet?" I ask. My mother claps her hand over my mouth and pushes me towards the door. When I get there, I see what the twin forces of adventure and economy have brought us to. Not a pavilion of happy, dancing people, but Eritrean terrorists clad in military fatigues, firing machine guns randomly into the air. Ahead of us, an Ethiopian peasant woman's cheap black purse is cut from her arm.

Obedient as Ethiopian sheep, we file down the stairs and form ourselves into what appears, sickeningly, to be firing squad formation. All around us is the blankness of the Eritrean desert. Ahead of us, the road stretches out towards Massawa, Pearl of the Red Sea, pitted and empty. "Oh, God," I think. "Oh, God."

Now I look up into the wide blue sky. The great blue depth is mesmerizing, oddly peaceful. "So, this is it," I think, "the end of my life, right here." No more sour lemonade. No more hay smell. I will never grow up to be ʘ·." We wait. But the bullets do not come.

It gradually dawns on us that the terrorists' real interest is in the first bus, not the second. ʘ· yards up the road, Ilsa, Franz-Joseph, and the fat couple have become the center of attention. They stand helplessly in their sumptuous safari outfits, hands in the air. The leader shouts at them.

My eye slides down the line of first bus passengers. And there, towards the end, is my father. With a small body, dark coloring, and worn rag sweater, he actually kind of blends in. And I realize in that moment with a kind of savvy world traveler's instinct that my father will not be shot that day. And in some small way, I am glad. Franz-Joseph, Ilsa, and the fat couple, on the other hand, are being marched off towards the low brown hills as hostages.

"Ethiopia!" my mother cries out. It is five years later. She is back in our dining room in southern California, finishing the Pearl of the Red Sea story for yet another group of mesmerized dinner guests. "But how?" someone asked. "But natürlich! The bus company set it all up. It was totally corrupt. They put all the foreigners on the first bus to make it easy. Had it not been for the wheel, the wheel, I and the putzenlinchins would've been marched off as hostages as well. Our Deutschen friends were released two weeks later, but their passports, cameras, traveler's checks, they never got back. At that point, they may have wished they'd flown, but then they would not have saved that \$ʘ·. Who needed to see the Pearl of the Red Sea anyway? Not us. That night we dined on hot dogs and chocolate milk at the American military base in Massawa. We

slept on metal beds. It was so elegant. Morgan fruh, we were chauffeured straight back to Lalibella via military convoy, which was fine with me, I said, as long as I don't have to sit over the wheel."

Everyone applauds and laughs, and so do I, wanting the story to go on and on. But as the years go by, my mother gets more and more tired of telling it because the Ethiopian vacation comes to be the story of her marriage, a compromise between two opposites that can never be made to work. Eventually my parents spend all their time alone screaming and fighting. And then they stop talking at all, live together in silence, two strangers under one roof.

What my mother will do sometimes after a dinner party is slip into the garage. Still in her amber beads and fire-engine red dress, she sits alone in my father's '67 Buick, puts the radio on, smokes a cigarette. Because the true mirage turns out to be not the Pearl of the Red Sea but that Buick. When my mother had first seen it on that magical day in the '60s, it was the car of a true American, a man who had put his sorry past behind. But that Buick would turn out to be an anomaly in my father's life, a youthful extravagance from which he would never quite recover. As the years went by, it would make my father sick for anyone even to drive it, to waste money on gas.

So, while my mother left her World War II behind, he could not forget his Shanghai. He has brought it with him, and this is where they live, not in America but in his Shanghai. So in his home, it is she who remains the perpetual traveller, a foreign person always in a foreign land.

Ira Glass

Sandra Tsing Loh is the author of the book *Depth Takes a Holiday*. Coming up, David Sedaris travels without his family. In a minute, when our program continues.

Act 3

Ira Glass

It's *This American Life*. I'm Ira Glass. Each week on our program we choose a topic, bring you stories from a variety of writers and performers. Today's show, *Vacations*. We've arrived at Act Three. While Sandra Tsing Loh's story represents a kind of a limit case, the ultimate scenario of a nightmare family vacation, traveling without your family has its own little problems. David Sedaris has this story about awakening to all the possibilities of just hitting the road alone. David is the author of the book *Barrel Fever*, a sometimes commentator on NPR'S Morning Edition, and a frequent contributor to *This American Life*.

David Sedaris

It started innocently enough the year I began the ninth grade and attended an all-day Planet of the Apes marathon at a budget theater a mile or so from my parents' house. I had seen the original movie nine times, waiting always for Vera to ask, "What will he find out there in the forbidden zone, Dr. Zaius?" followed by

Charlton Heston's heartfelt, "Damn you! Damn you all to hell!" when he discovers he's been on his home planet throughout the course of the entire movie.

I had entered the theater on a bright, humid morning, but when I came out, dazed and candy-bloated, it was dark and raining. I thought of calling for a ride, but my mother was off enduring my older sister's flute recital. That left my father, and he was out of the question. "I'll be there in 10 minutes," he'd say. In the background, I would hear nothing, which meant he was holed up in his bedroom watching a golf tournament on TV.

Golf involved hours of dead time interrupted every so often by the announcer, who would whisper, "Butler is obviously thinking about last week's disastrous seventh hole at Glistening Sands." I'd call back an hour later, and my father would answer, saying, "I'm on my way out the door right this minute. Jesus, give me a second, will you?" On the television, one of the pros would pace the fairway, hitching up his lime-green slacks. "It's bogey or nothing if Snead wants to come in at par 44." You could outgrow your clothing waiting for my father to pick you up.

I left the theater and held out my thumb. It was just that easy. My father was in the habit of picking up hitchhikers. We would be packed into the station wagon on our way to the pool or the grocery store, and he would pull over, instructing us to make room for company. It was exciting to have a stranger in the car. My father, his cocktail tinkling between his thighs, was always gracious but at the same time suspicious, behaving as though he were in on some big secret and could pinpoint the lies these people told. "OK, Rudy, I'll be happy to take you to your grandmother's house so you can pick up your laundry." [LAUGHS] He would shake his head and chuckle to himself, but the hitchhikers didn't seem to mind.

I noticed, though, that he only stopped for young people. We would spot some stooped and weathered man standing beside a beat-up suitcase and call out for my father to stop. "Dad, look," but he drove right on by as if they were painted cutouts advertising a restaurant named Tramp's or Hobo's.

I held out my thumb, figuring that someone like my father would pick me up, but instead it was an old woman, her helmet of hair protected by a plastic rain cap. She rolled down her window and shouted, "Damn you. Get your sorrowful butt into this car." She wore a pale blue uniform, the outfit issued to the cashiers at the local supermarket chain. "I got a grandson out there about your age, and if I ever caught him hitching a ride, I'd stick my foot so far up his butt, I'd lose my shoe. What do you think you're doing out there? Where are your people?"

I told her that my father was a POW in Vietnam, and my mother, she's a long-haul truck driver on a run to Kansas City. "Right," the woman said, stubbing out her cigarette, "and I breast-feed baby camels in my backyard just for the freaking fun of it." She pulled up in front of my parents' house. "Truck driver my pretty pink keister. Now you get in that house, and you stay there before someone carves you up. You were lucky this time, but if I ever catch you out here again, I'll run you down just to spare you the misery."

I started hitchhiking on a regular basis. Aside from the convenience, I liked the fact that these people didn't know anything about me. I could reinvent myself every time I opened a car door, trying on whichever personality happened to suit my mood. Some people pulled up as if they were expecting me hours ago, while others slowed down to study me before coming to a complete stop. There were black ministers and retired locksmiths, lifeguards, college students, and floor sanders, and they were usually alone. Raleigh wasn't that big of a town, and most people didn't mind going a mile or two out of their way.

I never hitchhiked beyond the city limits until I was sent off to college and met a girl named Ronnie. Her mother had died in the living room while confined to an iron lung, and her father had remarried twice within the last four years, dragging her through two sets of stepfamilies. Ronnie was tough and independent in a way I'd never known. She'd had a secret sleepover boyfriend at the age of 16 and was well-instructed in the arts of cigarette rolling, camping, breaking and entering, and hair care.

Our campus was isolated in the mountains of western North Carolina, far from anything one might label a point of interest, but Ronnie took charge, initiating hitchhiking trips to Asheville and Gatlinburg, to Nashville and Raleigh and Washington. At the end of the school year, I transferred to Kent State, and Ronnie packed off to San Francisco, where her brother arranged a job for her at a movie theater. I lasted a year in Ohio before deciding to join her.

I'd never hitchhiked that far, much less alone. Allowing fear to get the best of me, I made the mistake of teaming up with Dale Knowles, a freshman I'd met at a dorm party. Dale was creating his own major in beat literature. That was the first warning sign. When shaking hands, he tended to position his palm as if he were returning a volleyball. His prominent gums accommodated teeth the size of Chiclets, and he wore a safari hat decorated with buttons and pins promoting everything from the concept of world peace to the legalization of polygamy.

What I disliked more than anything else was his laugh, which was prolonged and phlegmy, like a cat tossing up a hairball. And he carried a guitar. We hadn't even gotten our first ride before he pulled it out and began composing one of his appalling ballads. [SINGING] Standing on the highway, thumb up in the air. People passing by, pretending not to care.

I'd sooner pick up someone waving a pistol than holding a guitar. He'd lie barefoot on the side of the road with this head propped up on his knapsack, exercising his toes and wondering why we weren't getting any rides. The guy just didn't get it.

We were outside of Indianapolis when we were picked up by two young men in a Jeep who introduced themselves as Starsky and Hutch, names borrowed from the brazen, cultish heroes of a popular television show. They were wired and loopy, washing down over-the-counter amphetamines with quarts of malt liquor

that rolled back and forth the floorboards beneath the front seat. When asked where they were from, Starsky made a gagging gesture. "That's code for Delaware," Hutch said. Starsky gave the finger to the driver of a boot-shaped Gremlin. "State bird," Hutch said. He took a swallow of his warm malt liquor and belched. "State motto," Starsky said.

Noticing the tank was low, they pulled into a service station, where I offered them some gas money, hoping that, like most people, they might view my generosity as payment enough. Starsky said he had it covered, adding that he could sure use some fudge. "Do you have a taste for it? Well, I do. Run on into the store there and see if they have some." It always made sense for one person to stay with the car in case your driver decided to take off with your pack, so Dale stayed behind, which worked out well for him, seeing as he would rather swallow flashlight batteries than shell out a few dollars for some idiot's fudge.

He sat in the backseat while I went into the store and bought a block of something fudge-like and a small bag of potato chips which I might offer as a snack to our next driver. When I got back to the car, Starsky replaced the gas cap and pushed me into the backseat. The attendant headed our way, a roll of bills in his hand, ready to accept payment, and he reached the bumper just as Starsky peeled out of the station, driving over the concrete embankment and onto the interstate.

"I'm not sure how cool this is," Dale said. "What about the police?" "Police?" Starsky said. "Police? Hey, ho, buddy, we can outrun the damn police, no problem." He stood upon the gas pedal, and the Jeep advanced, much like a plane moments before taking to the air. Starsky had upon his face the expression of a comic book bombardier preparing to destroy a village of unsuspecting peasants. He yelled out for Hutch to hold the wheel he opened the package of fudge, and the Jeep swerved into the other lane, barely missing an oncoming refrigerated truck. Horns blared, and brakes squealed. And for the first time in my life, I thought, this is how people die. This is exactly how it happens.

Dale's hat blew out the window, which meant that at least one of us would go with a smile on his face. Had the wind taken his guitar, I might have embraced death with open arms, shouting the word hallelujah and beating a tambourine.

Starsky and Hutch seemed to enjoy our pathetic displays of fear, jiggling the steering wheel and cutting off other drivers just so they could watch us cower and pray. We covered an enormous amount of ground in an hour before Starsky pulled over to relieve himself behind a billboard, and Dale and I jumped out, hugging our packs. "This is is great," I said. "Really, this is exactly where we wanted to go. Terrific."

Dale used the downtime as an opportunity to compose a few new songs.

[SINGING] I'm well aware they were from Delaware.

Days later he was asking for a word that might rhyme with Utah. That'll keep you up all night. I know from experience.

We reach San Francisco where Ronnie had gotten me a room at a residence hotel on Market Street. Dale stayed for a week, leaving by bus the day after I walked in on him standing naked before a full length mirror singing [SINGING] "San Francisco, you stole my heart. Now that I found you, I'll never part. California's stirring in my blood."

His privates were covered by the guitar, but his pale, spotted rear end was more than I could bear. Ronnie and I stayed on for three months before taking off to pick pears in Oregon. She was the perfect traveling companion, as a boy and girl together have much better luck than two guys. We got rides with single women and truck drivers who claimed they needed company and then never said a word. We slept in abandoned houses and open fields, under bridges and behind barbed-wire fences.

After the pears were finished, we picked apples and then headed up to Canada, back to California, and across the country, arriving in western North Carolina in mid-November. Ronnie thought she might stay awhile, and I decided to visit a former college roommate in Ohio, the longest trip I'd ever taken alone.

I got an interminable ride with a pantyhose salesman who spent six hours saying, "You just take and take, don't you? Don't you? Out there with your thumb in the air, not a care in the world, grabbing whatever you can get. Yes, sir, you take and you take until you're ready to burst. But what about giving? Did you ever think about that? Of course not. You're too busy taking. Me, I'm what you call a taxpayer. Tax, it's a tariff that working people have to pay so that someone like you can enjoy a life of leisure. I give, and I give until I've got nothing left. Then I turn right around, and I give some more. I give and give to all of Uncle Sam's little takers. And I've been thinking that maybe it's about time I get a little something in return. Yes, indeed, maybe it's time we try that shoe on the other foot for a change. You, my young friend, are going to wash my car inside and out, and you're going to pay for it."

He exited the interstate and headed for a car wash, the roof of which supported three cheerful seals buffing a limousine with their motorized fins. The man stood beside the bumper, supervising me as I shampooed and waxed his car. "That's right, put a little muscle into it. Next I want you to empty those ashtrays and vacuum the interior top to bottom. Come on, speedy. Let's get cracking."

I had no problem with the work, but he was driving me out of my mind. "How does it feel to be giving for a change? Not much fun, is it? Hurry up now and buff those hubcaps. Let me see you buff." He had me polish everything from the antenna to the license plate before handing me my pack and driving away.

I got a ride back to the interstate and another that landed me ٧٠ miles beyond Charleston, West Virginia. It was around ٤ o'clock, and I hoped I might catch a long ride that would take me through to Ohio. It was cold, and my hands were chapped from watching that lunatic's car. My fingernails shone from the wax.

I waited ١٠ minutes before someone slowed down and stopped ٧٠ yards up the road. It was a pickup truck advertising an air conditioning and refrigeration company. The man's shirt introduced him as T.W. His fingers were soiled with grease, and the cab of his truck was littered with candy wrappers and soda cans. I asked him what T.W. stood for, and he told me it stood for T.W. and that his last name started with an A, so if you put it all together, it had a nice ring to it. He had an open, sincere face, the features set into a gesture of wonder as if he had spent the last ١٠ years in a coma, and everything was new and sensational to him.

When I told him I was headed to Ohio to study medicine, he said, "Really? Be a doctor and operate? On people? You must be some kind of smart to be a doctor. Operate on brains, you say?" I told him I'd already done it a few times, and it wasn't as hard as it looks. I was hitchhiking because I'd made a bet with a friend that I could get from Duke to Kent State in ١٨ hours. I didn't need the money. It was just something medical students to blow off steam. "Well, I'll see that you win that bet," T.W. said. He explained that he had cut out of work early and would be happy to take me all the way to Ohio, seeing as he was a night owl. And he hadn't spoken to a doctor since his foot had been crushed by an air conditioner a few years back. "Look at me," he said, brushing the candy wrappers onto the floor, "riding with a brain doctor."

We could get started as soon as he dropped some papers off to a friend. That's what he told me. He drove off the interstate and onto a series of highways and country roads before stopping at a tavern. It was a cinder block building lit with signs advertising brands of beer and the existence of a pool table. He asks would I like to come in, but I was under age and had not yet developed a thirst for alcohol.

It was dusk by this time, the sun fading behind the surrounding mountains. I waited an hour, two hours, three. It had gotten too dark to leave, as I had no idea where I was, and hardly any cars passed along the road. There were no streetlights, and I could hear threatening dogs barking off in the distance. When it began to rain, I took my pack from the bed of the truck and carried it up front, rooting around for an extra sweater and a pair of socks I could wear on my hands.

I stared at the lights of the bar, wondering who might choose to live in such a town. It was pretty enough. You might pass through and admire the mountains, but wouldn't a person then move on to somewhere more important? Travel is supposed to broaden your mind, but it had a way of depressing me. The more places I went, the more people I saw, the more I realized I didn't matter to anyone except the family I'd left behind. And who knew them outside from their friends and neighbors in a town just as pointless as this one? It brought me down to think about it, so I turned on my transistor radio and listened to a local call-in show.

T.W. staggered out of the bar at around 11 o'clock. He had his arms around a skinny, long-faced man and obese woman who held her pocketbook over her head in protection against the rain. She said something, and the men doubled over laughing. I was in a pretty bad mood, but when you're hitchhiking, it's best to keep it to yourself, as you don't really have a right to complain.

Even before he got into the truck, I understood that T.W. was drunk. He waved goodbye to the man and woman and proceeded to start the engine, jabbing the key here and there as though the ignition might have moved during his absence and could be anywhere by now. "Those are my friends," he said. "I've been knowing them all my life, and they're fun people. You got that?" His face had lost that innocent quality and become stern and dogmatic. "Friends," he shouted. "Personal, private friends." He repeated the word several times, pounding his chest with his fist as if he were training an ape to speak. "My friends." Something told me we wouldn't be driving to Ohio anytime soon.

We reached the interstate, and I offered to get out, but he wouldn't hear of it. "You're coming with me," he said. "Home to my house with me. I've got a place fixed up nice with rugs and toasters and a lot of things like that. My house. Mine. No way are you going out on a night like this. Forget all that other crap with school and college. It doesn't matter for stinking squat."

I pictured his house as resembling the tavern and hoped it was located on a brightly lit street with a decent amount of traffic. Once there, I could probably make a run for it. "Big brain doctor, are you? Like to stick your fat little fingers in other people's skulls and tinker around? Is that what you like to do? I'll give you plenty to tinker with, hot shot."

I was looking out at the wet road and didn't see it coming. He grabbed me by the hair and yanked my head down onto the seat, holding me there with one hand while he reached into his jacket pocket with the other. The truck skidded and swerved onto the gravel shoulder before he grabbed the wheel and righted it. The gun felt just the way I always knew it would. He held it against the side of my face, the barrel butting against my jaw.

I now imagined his home stacked with bodies, as this seemed to be the exact place where something like this might happen. Maybe he'd used his job skills and built a refrigeration chamber to prevent decay. Or maybe he'd bury me beneath some tool shed, and they'd have to identify me through dental records. When had I last been to the dentist? Why wasn't I there now, my mother smoking in the waiting room and copying recipes from the magazines? My dentist would probably say I was asking for it. His dentist would show up on TV, blinking into the camera to testify. "He was such a nice man. We had no idea."

I felt the car slow down and take a turn. We were off the interstate now, probably on an exit ramp. He raised the gun to steady the wheel, and I opened the door and jumped, thinking all the while of the many television detectives who seemed to do this on a weekly basis. "Jump and roll," I told myself. "Jump and roll like Mannix, like Barnaby Jones."

I hit the gravel shoulder and tumbled into a muddy ditch filled with trash and brambles. My pack had fallen out with me, so I snatched it up and ran. Behind me, I heard the truck pull off the road, the door slam, someone coming through the thicket. I thought I should climb a tree, but that's what you do for bears. No, bears will climb after you, small bears, won't they? But he's not a bear. But still, I can't climb with socks on my hands. He'll only shoot me down or shoot me now in the back maybe, in the head, in the arm, blow my arm off at the shoulder. What I needed was a gun or a knife. The Indians made knives and spears. Even now you'd see them in the souvenir shops. But how did they do it? It took days probably, maybe even weeks. I turned my head to look behind me and fell into a knot of thorny bushes.

I thought to get up and run, but he was too close now. I could see him through the trees, his truck lights shining in the distance. "Idiot," he called. "Hey, you, get back in this truck." He looked off to my right, and I understood that he couldn't see me. "I'm not going to hurt you. Get back here. I was only joking. Hey, you-- hey, it's not even loaded. Look." He pulled the trigger, and the gun made a puny clicking noise. "Come on out. Hey, kid, I swear, I was only joking."

I watched as he returned to his truck. "Get your ass back here. Hey, dopey, I'm talking to you." He lit a cigarette and tapped on the horn, behaving as though I wanted to come back but had lost the way. He rolled down the window and drove off slowly, the door ajar and the cab lights on, whistling as if for a lost dog.

I waited until I could no longer see the taillights, and then I ran down the exit ramp and into the middle of the interstate, waving my arms and begging someone to stop. The first two cars just missed hitting me, but the third pulled over. Three students headed to Cleveland for an upcoming concert. I told them what had happened, my voice high-pitched and breathy, and the driver turned to me, saying, "Sounds like you're a faggot yourself." This was not the sympathetic reaction I was hoping for.

They had picked me up hoping I had some dope, and they were right. We smoked it, and they popped in an ^-track of the Ozark Mountain Daredevils. That was my punishment. My reward was that they never said another word until dropping me off somewhere outside of Akron.

I continued to hitchhike for the next few years, but after the incident with T.W., something seemed to have changed. It felt as though I had been marked somehow. I had always counted upon people to trust me, but now I no longer quite trusted them. By this time I was certainly old enough to own my own car but still not weathered enough to appear dangerous. People began picking me up with the idea I had more to offer than my gratitude. Drugs were the easy part. I carried them as a courtesy and offered them whenever asked.

It was the sexual advances that got to me. I had never been much to look at, but that never seemed to matter, as neither were they. When I thought of sex, I pictured someone standing before me crying, "I love you so much that I don't even know who I am anymore." He was no particular age or race. All that mattered is that

he was crazy about me. This thing with drivers wasn't what I had in mind at all. I got the idea they were married with children. "You fool around much when hitchhike?" they'd ask, the question always fast like that and always phrasing it in such a way that they could follow it up with, "I'm only kidding. Jeez. What's your problem?"

I studied myself in the mirror, trying to figure out what had changed, but all I saw was the same old me, wanting to be someone else. I had an unpleasant experience with a married couple outside of Atlanta, a middle-aged man and woman driving a Cadillac nude at 7:00 AM. A few days later in Fayetteville, I was led down a dark dirt road by a man who promised to crush my skull like a peanut. The second time you find yourself cowering in the bushes, you know it's time to ask yourself some tough questions. I got on a bus and never hitchhiked again. To this day, I still haven't learned to drive a car. It seems much too dangerous, and besides that, I'm just not the type to fill out insurance forms. I moved to cities with decent public transportation systems, Chicago and then New York, which is even better. You hold out your hand for a ride but fold the thumb and pinky against your palm. The drivers don't speak English, which comes as a relief. You have to pay, but then again, you always do.

Every so often, I'll find myself in a car driven by a friend, and we'll pass someone by the side of the road. He's young, and the force of traffic has disheveled his hair. He looks into your eyes, pretending to expect nothing, and his lips are moving, practicing the story he plans to tell. "Pull over," I say. "I think I know that person."

Ira Glass

David Sedaris is the author of *Barrel Fever* and the forthcoming book *Naked*. And I know what you're thinking. Every time you turn on the public radio, it's the Ozark Mountain Daredevils.

[MUSIC - "IF YOU WANNA GET TO HEAVEN" BY OZARK MOUNTAIN DAREDEVILS]

Yeah, whatever that means.

Credits

Ira Glass

Our program was produced today by Peter Clowney, Alix Spiegel, Nancy Updike, and myself. Contributing editors Paul Tough, Jack Hitt, and Margy Rochlin. Some songs today were provided by Steve Cushing and the Blues Before Sunrise radio network. But not this one.

If you would like a copy of this radio program, it's only \$10. You can call us at WBEZ in Chicago to get it. 312-832-3380 is the number. 312-832-3380. Our email address, radio@well.com.

[FUNDING CREDITS]

WBEZ management oversight by Torey Malatia. I'm Ira Glass.

David Sedaris

What will he find out there in the forbidden zone, Dr. Zaius? Damn you! Damn you all to hell!

Ira Glass

Back next week with more stories of This American Life.