

stan finds himself



on the other side of the
world

LAURA ORSINI

Stan Finds Himself on the Other Side of the World

A novel by Laura Orsini

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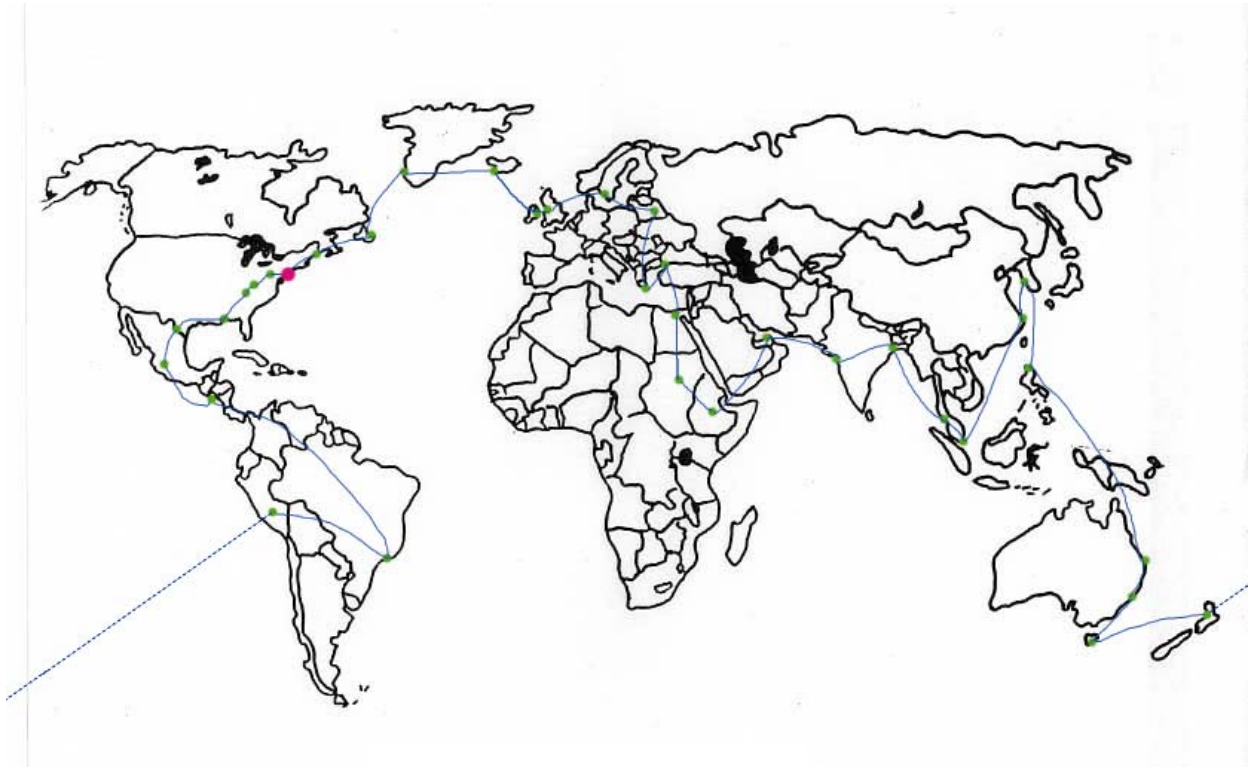
Dedicated to TG — I am eternally grateful
for your never-ending support, inspiration,
and thought-provoking challenges.

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of the *Lonely Planet* travel guides, TripAdvisor.com
— and other Internet resources too numerous to mention.

*There is a stone that whoever kisses,
Oh! he never misses to grow eloquent
'Tis he may clamber to a lady's chamber,
Or become a member of parliament.*

— Francis Sylvester Mahony

Stan's Path Around the World



Chapter 1 DEPARTURE

The sun streams through the window as Stan wakes, a keen nervousness in his belly. He sits up, stiff from sleeping on the floor — his bed packed along with the rest of his furniture into a Secaucus storage unit a couple days earlier. He stretches, then rolls out of his sleeping bag to do his daily crunches and pushups — only 100 each today, as he’s anxious to get going.

Looking out the window as he rolls his backpack into a neat bundle, he calls, “Good morning, Gilbert,” to the gull who visits his backyard daily. Gilbert gives a long, lonesome caw, almost as if offering a sad farewell.

Stan heads for the shower, then changes his mind. *Last thing I need is a wet towel to stink up the car*, he thinks, refolding the towel he’s just pulled from his duffel bag. He hastily throws on a black t-shirt and faded jeans. Sitting on the edge of the tub, he grabs a pair of socks from a new package, puts them on, then shoves his feet into his favorite old basketball shoes. He stares at himself in the mirror as he brushes his teeth. *This is it*, he thinks.

Quickly finishing his grooming, Stan packs his shaving kit and adds it to the duffel bag. He pulls on his Fuqua ball cap as he enters the kitchen. Grabbing a lone banana from the counter, he peels it and eats it in three bites. He glances around at the faded wallpaper as he folds the peel and sets it on the counter. Opening the aging but spotless fridge, he empties it of its only item — a gallon jug of water — and unplugs it from the wall socket.

Stan’s footsteps echo as he walks through his apartment in the four-family walk-up, checking once more to be certain he hasn’t left anything behind — unlikely, as he’d already double- and triple-checked before the movers carted his boxes off to storage.



“Well, sir, for an apartment that size, we usually just send a team of three movers,” the lady from Courtesy Movers sounded tinny on the other end of the phone line.

“And I’m telling you I’d like two teams — six movers. I’m willing to pay whatever it costs, so I don’t understand the problem,” Stan impatiently insisted. “Can you have them here at 9 a.m. a week from Wednesday?”

On the phone with the gas company, Stan glanced at his watch as the moving truck pulled up, followed by a Ford F250 Crew Cab. Six muscly men piled out of the two trucks. Time: 9:53 a.m.

Stan flinched but held his tongue as a guy with “JOE” on his pocket casually piled the cords from his surround-sound system into a box, rather than properly winding them. Convinced that six movers would do a better job than three, he walked to the front stoop where he craned his head as two more guys wrapped his 72-inch TV with two moving blankets and then loaded it into the moving truck. *Relax, they're professionals. Professionals who do this all the time*, he reminded himself as he watched all his earthly belongings make their way out of the house into the back of the moving truck.



Stan pokes his head out the back door and whistles for Isis. He checks the duffel for her leash, patting the freezer bag full of dry kibble. He takes one last glance around the four rooms that have been his home since he moved to Jersey City from Durham. *Weird how much larger it feels when it's empty*, he thinks as he slings the duffel bag over his shoulder, grabs the banana peel, and closes the door behind him. Deciding not to lock it — *why bother?* — he drops his key through the mail slot. Walking down the steps, he lobs the banana peel into a beat-up trash can at the side of the house. *He shoots; he scores.*

He opens the driver door of his reliable old Volvo wagon and whistles again for Isis. Tick-tick-tick comes the sound of her claws on the cement as she rounds the side of the house. The three-year-old Jack Russell terrier jumps onto the front seat, settling into her familiar curled-up position.

“Ya movin’?” Stan shuts the passenger door behind Isis and looks up to see his neighbor to the west, name still unknown after nearly five years.

“So to speak, I guess,” Stan calls over the fence separating their yards.

“Yeah? Where ya headed?” the neighbor asks — making this exchange the most words the two have ever spoken in a single conversation.

“Headed? Well, I’m headed around the world,” Stan admits, a grin quickly spreading across his all-American features. “All the way around the world.”

“Wow — that sounds like some trip.”

“I don’t know yet, but I’m guessing ...” Stan replies, as he waves and slams the door closed. He snaps his seatbelt into place, puts on his blinker, and eases the car away from the curb. In an instant, for there is no traffic at 7 a.m. on a Saturday, he is on Kennedy Boulevard heading toward the Lincoln Tunnel.

“Well, girl, there’s no turning back now,” he says to Isis, who rolls over with a sigh. She seems to know there will be plenty of time later for hanging her head out the window as they hurtle north on I-95.



Irritably, Stan turns the knob, scanning the FM dial for a second time. “My God, you’d think no one in the entire Tri-State Area gets up before noon on the weekend,” he mutters. “They haven’t played anything decent since we left Manhattan, but we’re still picking up New York radio.” He turns off at the next exit, pulling into the McDonald’s/Exxon parking lot and marveling, as he does every time he drives this stretch of the interstate, at the coup those two corporate Goliaths pulled off by being the only food and fuel vendors along this stretch of highway. The parking lot is empty, save a beat-up old Chevy. *Probably the clerk’s*, he thinks as he opens the door to let Isis out to stretch her legs and pee. She runs in giddy circles, delighted by the snow that has just begun to fall.

Shutting his faithful little dog back inside the car, Stan makes his way into the restaurant and scans the menu overhead. Clearly dissatisfied with his breakfast choices, he orders a large orange juice, deciding he’ll wait till later to eat. He harrumphs out the door and stomps back to the Volvo. As she spies Stan, Isis wags not just her tail, but her whole little body with excitement. She watches, front paws on the passenger headrest, as he pops the hatch and roots around in a box for a minute or two before locating his iPod. Plugging the adapter into his car stereo, he is immediately soothed by the smoky resonance of Diana Krall’s voice. “You like her, too, huh girl?” Stan asks knowingly, as Isis curls up beside him with her head on his thigh.

Back on the highway again, Stan muses that he still can’t listen to Diana Krall — or any jazz — without thinking of Paula. Among the many things they’ve done together in the two years he’s known her, she introduced him to the wonderful rhythms and percussions of jazz music. Until then, he’d mostly kept to classic rock and whatever was momentarily trendy. They’d only seen one live show together — catching Esperanza Spalding at a tiny club in the Village a couple of months before she won her Grammy for Best New Artist — but it was an experience he would never forget.

I wonder what Paula is doing right now, Stan muses. *Probably meditating or painting*. Looking at his watch, he laughs. *No — it’s only 11 a.m. Sure as I’m breathing, that woman is still sound asleep*.



“Again? I can’t believe they don’t get rid of you and bring in a temp who can tell time. I’d fire my secretary in a minute if she were late once a week,” Stan said to Paula as they got off the bus that carried them from Hoboken to Kennedy Boulevard in Jersey City. They headed west, toward their respective apartments.

“Your secretary barely knows how to turn *on* her computer, gets lost on her way to word processing, and smells like mothballs.”

“That is beside the point,” Stan said, a bit defensive of Janice, his sixty-something administrative assistant, who it sometimes seemed had been with the Wall Street firm since before the Great Crash of 1929.

“I, on the other hand, am a Word wizard who smells like lilac and lavender. They’ll never fire me. Except for my little issue with oversleeping once in a while, I’m the best temp they’ve ever had,” Paula said, grinning at him. “Besides, they won’t have a chance to fire me — I’ll be gone of my own volition long before that happens.”

“I admit, you do kick ass in the word processing department. But seriously, how many times have you been late this month?” Stan asked.

“I don’t know. Yesterday was the fifth time, I think.”

“And it’s only the twenty-second! You’ve still got six more business days to get through *before* the end of this month. I don’t think you should be so cavalier about your attendance. Especially not with temp jobs so scarce these days.”

“You worry too much,” Paula chided. “And even if they did fire me — which they are *not* going to do — I’d get another job.”

“Just like that, you’d land another temp gig that gives you the kind of flexibility you’ve become accustomed to?”

“Absolutely.”

“I think maybe you’ve been getting too close to the paint fumes again,” Stan elbowed her.

“I appreciate your concern, Mr. Crowley, but it’s completely unnecessary.”

“OK. But don’t come crawling to me if you find yourself unemployed and homeless. I don’t think Gretchen would take too kindly to me letting you crash at my place.”

“Right. I’m sure she wouldn’t. Good thing you’re not my only friend,” Paula smiled and nudged him back.

“Wait — you have other friends? What, I’m just your convenient commuting buddy?”

“Truth hurts, doesn’t it?”

Stan made a small pout.

They reached the corner where Stan turned off, and he said as he did every day, “Well, this is me.”

“Yup.”

“See you in the morning, if you make the seven-thirty bus?”

“I’ll make it.”

“Twenty bucks says you can’t make it through the rest of the month without being late,” he challenged her.

“Make it fifty and you’ve got yourself a wager.”

“Forget it. It’s not worth fifty dollars, even to see you miserable every morning for the next six days.”

Paula looked up thoughtfully at the overcast sky. “OK. How ‘bout this? If I make it on time for the rest of the month, you’ll buy my bus card the next week?”

“Deal.”

“Good. I’ll see you bright and early mañana, then.”

“OK. Have a good night.”

“You, too. Say hi to Gretchen for me.”

“I’m not seeing her tonight.”

Paula’s eyebrows formed a peak, “No?”

“She’s got a work thing.”

“Oh. Well, what are you doing for dinner?”

“One guess.”

“Veggie pizza from Three Brothers.”

“You got it. Wanna join me?”

“Nah. I’ve got some work to do on a painting. Thanks for the invite, though.”

“OK. Call me if you change your mind,” Stan said, waving as he walked away.

Chapter 2 BANGOR, MAINE

Look at that, April 15 today, Stan thinks nonchalantly as he signs the guest registry at the Riverside Inn in Bangor, Maine. Tax Day has never been the burden for him that it is for many people. He'd filed his taxes by January 26, a few days later than usual this year, but his small return had been safely deposited into his mutual fund by March 1.

Settling onto the double bed in the tiny but charming room, Stan thinks about calling Paula for what must be the hundredth time since leaving New Jersey.

He goes back and forth with himself:

I should tell her I left.

No, not yet.

But she'll worry.

That's OK. It'd do her good to worry about something other than herself for a change.

That's not fair.

She'll never believe you really left.

She will when she tries to call and my phone's been disconnected.

I will call her — tomorrow.

As he gets ready for bed, Stan sets his watch on the dresser. He picks it up again, looking at the inscription on the back:

*YOU ARE MY ROCK,
STEADY AND EVER-FAITHFUL.
ALL MY LOVE. G*

I must remember to get a new watch, he thinks as he sets down the three-hundred dollar Hugo Boss timepiece.



The Volvo loaded and Isis waiting expectantly beside him in the front seat, Stan glances again at the world map he downloaded from *virtualtourist.com*. *Damn, it's already 8 a.m. I thought we'd make Newfoundland by tonight. We're already behind schedule*, he thinks. Then he laughs out loud. "Listen to me. Behind schedule. What am I talking about? There is no *schedule!*"

Once he'd finishes chuckling at his own foolishness, his heart begins to race. *Oh, my God — we're really doing this.*

No one is going to believe it, he thinks. Especially not Paula. Well, after enough time passes, she'll call Jack — and he'll cave in and tell her.



Jack is the closest thing Stan has to a best friend, other than Paula. They met as undergrads at Northwestern, roomed together at Fuqua, and still stay in pretty regular contact. While Stan moved into investment banking with a major Wall Street company, Jack had gone on to become a trader on the floor of the Chicago Stock Exchange.

At Stan's request, Jack has agreed to open a P.O. Box in Oak Lawn, where he lives, so Stan can have his mail forwarded there. "There really shouldn't be too much mail," he tells Jack. "I've cancelled all my subscriptions, and all my bills are paid electronically from my checking account. Just keep a lookout for anything from my mom or my sister."

"You sure you don't want to tell them you're leaving?" Jack asks for the third time since agreeing to play mailman for Stan.

"I'm sure," Stan says firmly.

"What about Paula? What did you tell her?"

"Paula and I haven't spoken in six weeks."

"What? You're kidding! You two talk every day. You commute together to and from the City, for Christ's sake."

"Not for a while, now. She quit her temp job before I resigned."

"Why?" Jack asks. "I thought you said they gave her all the time off she needed, and kept her on even though she was kind of unreliable."

"She isn't unreliable — just chronically late," Stan says, seemingly unaware of the edge in his own voice. "Anyway, she landed a big show in a Soho gallery. Some wealthy Europeans decided to invest in her work, so ..."

"Wow! Good for her. That's great. But wait — when was that?"

"I don't know. Late January, early February."

"And when was the last time you talked to her?"

“About a week after her opening.”

“That’s a while ago, dude. What happened?”

“We argued, big time. Both said some pretty ugly things — stuff that’s almost impossible to come back from.”

“I don’t believe it. You two fight like caged lions sometimes, but you’re closer than anyone I’ve ever known. Call her up and apologize. Let her know you’re leaving.”

“No, Jack. Not right now. I will get in touch with her when I’m ready, but not now.”

“OK, man.”

“So promise me, you will NOT say anything to her if she calls you.”

“Dude, that’s not fair. You can’t put me in a position like that.”

“Jack, I hate to bring it up ... but that S.E.C. investigator would still love to nail you. I could have gotten you in a lot of hot water when she started asking around about the unsafe working conditions in that factory in Sri Lanka, but I kept my mouth shut. She called again a few months ago, as a matter of fact. The least you can do is support me on this one.”

“You’re such a bastard, Stan. Are you ever gonna let that thing die?” Jack’s voice rises in obvious frustration. Still, he has to admit his friend does have him on that loyalty marker.

“I kept *your* secret then. I just need you to keep *mine*, now.”

“Fine. I won’t tell her *when* she calls. You know it’s only a matter of time until then, don’t you? Not if ... *when*.”

“Maybe.”

“So what *should* I say?”

“I don’t know. Make something up. Tell her anything. Just don’t tell her I’ve gone — and don’t give her my new email address or cell number.”

“OK, OK. I’ll be the soul of discretion.”

“Thanks, guy. I really, really appreciate this.”

“No problem. So when are you leaving?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“Have a good trip, Stan. Send me a postcard or two.”

“Will do. Thanks.”

“OK. Well, I guess I’ll see ya when I see ya.”

Stan laughed. “Yes, you will. Take care.”

“Oh, Stan?”

“Yeah?”

“What should I do if Gretchen calls?”

“I wouldn’t waste any time worrying about that — Gretchen won’t be calling.”

Chapter 3 NEWFOUNDLAND

Sitting in a northbound lane at the Canadian border, Stan taps the steering wheel with his right hand, his passport, driver’s license, itinerary, and Isis’ vaccination papers clenched tightly in his left hand.

“Hello, sir,” the Border Patrol agent greets him with a smile. “What is the purpose of your trip?”

“I, er ... I’m ... um ... I ... I guess it’s a vacation.”

“You don’t sound so sure about that.”

“No, I ... it’s just ... well, actually, I’m headed around the world.”

“Ya don’t say?”

“Yeah. So this is my first international stop.”

“Well, you’re not carrying any fruits, vegetables, or other flora of any kind, are you?”

“No, sir.”

“Would you mind popping open the back of your wagon for me for a second?”

“Certainly,” Stan says, more confidently than he feels.

The agent scans the cargo bay, noticing the neatly folded clothes in stacking crates. “You taking *all* this stuff with you around the world, eh, young man?”

“I ... I ... I don’t know. I guess. This is the first time I’ve ever done anything like this. I wasn’t sure what to bring, so I brought a little of everything.”

“Well, you’ll figure it out, I’m sure,” the agent winks at him. “Have a grand adventure.”

“Thank you, sir,” Stan says, climbing back into the Volvo. As he drives toward Quebec City, he puts the documents back in their plastic pouch and returns them to the glove box.

“Our first new country, girl!” he says to Isis. She wakes from her latest nap, wags her tail, and yips, as if in agreement.

* * *

Cheap bastards. How much would it cost, really, to spring for actual coffee, instead of this brown water trying to masquerade as java? Stan tapped his hand on the counter as he waited in the sixteenth floor break room for the first pot of shoddy coffee to finish brewing. It was a Tuesday morning in mid-April of 2008.

Normally, Stan went back to his office, rather than pacing the small, stale-smelling room — but this particular day, he chose instead to hang out and read the various notes on the bulletin board.

“DiE, LUNCH ThieF!!!!” was scrawled in Sharpie on the back of a Chinese take-out menu.

Another note read, “Sumer-share. 3br, 2 bath. \$5k/moth. Norht shore Hamtons.” *Nice spelling*, Stan noted.

In the upper left-hand corner, though, was a clean, neatly typed note on a lined three-by-five index card:

Free to good home: Small white female dog. About 4 mos. Believe to be Jack Russell terrier. Location: Queens. Call Suzanne for info. 516-200-3533.

The only Suzanne that Stan knew of was the receptionist on the floor above his. In her mid-forties and the epitome of courtesy and professionalism, Suzanne always seemed to Stan a bit quiet and closed off, nothing like the gossip-fiends who populated some of the other Investment Banking floors. Normally in a hurry to or from his managing director’s office on the seventeenth floor, Stan passed Suzanne’s desk with some regularity. On the occasions he wasn’t rushing, he would notice her absorbed in all manner of intellectual reading during her downtime, and almost always he found himself wanting to start a conversation with her. Never quite able to find a comfortable opening, so far Stan’s conversations with Suzanne

had pretty much been limited to the weather — and whatever news CNN might be flashing across the TV monitor located near the reception desk.

Stan took the index card to the supply room and made a photocopy of it. Back at his desk, he trimmed the copy to size and propped the note against his computer screen. Throughout the day, he picked it up, flicking his thumb against the corner, turning it over and over. He hadn't had a dog since Lucky, the Australian shepherd his family had owned before he'd left for boarding school — and he wasn't sure he was ready to make the enormous commitment he knew it would take to become a pet owner.

* * *

Once, back in Durham, Stan had asked Jack about getting a dog. “Are you crazy?” Jack had demanded. “We're in our mid-twenties, in grad school, for Christ's sake — not a couple of middle-aged farts who don't have anything better to do than sit around cleaning up after a little doggy-woggy.”

“Yeah, but wouldn't it be great to have a dog to take to the park? To play fetch with, and Frisbee?” Stan had countered, hopefully.

“When did you get to be such an idealistic son-of-a-bitch?” Jack almost sneered at his friend. “I mean, it's not like we ever go to the park anyway.”

“Speak for yourself, you lazy couch potato! I jog almost every morning. And regardless of your opinion, you sarcastic asshole, I think it would be nice to have a dog to take running with me.”

Jack laughed, and as he relaxed, the tension that had been building between them eased a bit. But in the end, he talked Stan out of the dog idea. Instead, they got a few goldfish, which lived for about six weeks until their tank turned gray and they died in the murky water.

Feeling sad for the little fish as he dumped them down the toilet, Stan thought, *You poor guys never had a chance with us. Jack promised he'd change the water once in a while if I remembered to feed you every day. Right. Guess we'd better not run out and buy houseplants any time soon.* Still, Stan tried to convince himself, he would have done a better job with a furry, four-legged pet who could whine and yelp if you ignored its needs.

* * *

That night, Stan went home and googled Jack Russell terriers. Every article he read described Jack Russells as a lively breed that needed lots of exercise to work off their naturally excessive adrenaline. Undeterred by the thought of an active dog that would, no doubt, make huge demands on his time and attention, Stan decided to speak with Suzanne the next day.

Again the first to arrive on his floor Wednesday morning, Stan walked into the coffee room and immediately saw an empty space on the bulletin board where the index card had been

the previous day. A bit shocked by the disappointment that washed over him, Stan headed for the stairwell and took two stairs at a time up to the next floor. He emerged from the stairwell to see Suzanne, who had just arrived, hanging her coat in the hall closet.

“Suzanne?” Stan asked, as he stepped toward her, a bit hesitant.

Turning to see who’d called her name, she broke into a smile when she saw him. “Good morning, Stan. How are you today?”

“Good. I’m good. Yourself?”

“Fine, thank you. What can I do for you?”

Stan shifted his weight a couple times. “I was wondering about the note in the coffee room. Did you ... were ... were you the one who posted the note about the dog who needs a home?”

Suzanne nodded. “Yes, I put that note on the bulletin board.”

“Did you ... is it ... the note. It was there yesterday, but I just noticed that it’s gone now. Did you ... find a home for the dog?” Stan asked quietly.

“No. No, I didn’t,” Suzanne said, shaking her head. “I went back and forth about posting it at all — and last night before I went home, I decided to remove the note.”

“Oh, I see,” Stan said quietly.

Suzanne looked at Stan, sensing the disappointment he was trying to conceal. “It was just ... when I got to thinking about the folks in this department — I mean, most of them are nice enough, in their own ways — but no one seems like they really have room in their life for a little dog who needs a lot of attention.” She leaned against the desk and crossed her arms in front of her comfortably.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Stan nodded. “But why were you trying to find a home for her in the first place?”

“It seems someone abandoned the poor little thing. Considering the timing, my guess is she was a Christmas present, gifted without enough forethought about exactly how much work she’d really be for the new owners. I figured I might be better off just keeping her myself — although, she would make the third dog — on top of the rabbits, ducks, and new litter of kittens.”

Stan’s eyes widened in amazement and incredulity. “Really?? What does Mr. Brennan think about all the livestock?”

“Think of them?” Suzanne shook her head with a reproachful look. “How do you think we amassed such a menagerie?” she asked, her joyful eyes belying feigned irritation. “Why are you asking about the dog anyway?”

“Well, I was thinking,” Stan said, kicking at the floor with the toe of his immaculate Florsheim loafer, “I might just have room in my life for a little dog. Especially one that needs a lot of attention,” he finished, smiling to himself at the memory of the long-ago goldfish fiasco.

“I see,” said Suzanne, a slow but radiant smile spreading across her face. She reached into her top desk drawer and pulled out another small, lined index card. “Let me give you directions to my house. Where do you live, Stan?”

“Jersey City.”

“OK. Have you ever driven to Queens?”

* * *

Stan wakes early, as usual. He shivers under the three wool blankets that had barely kept him warm enough to sleep in the twenty-eight-degree weather. *God, and I thought New Jersey was cold in April. Hasn't the concept of radiators made its way this far north yet?*

He crawls out from under the covers in his sweats and peaks out the curtain at the breaking Canadian dawn. Isis nips at his ankles. “No, girl. You don't want to go out yet. It's too cold. Your pee will freeze as it streams out of your body.” The little white dog ignores him, beginning now to yelp. Stan throws on his hiking boots and parka and opens the bungalow door to let his dog outside.

Isis races around, clearly thrilled to be outside in the clean air. Usually impervious to weather of any kind, even she soon notices the low temperature and quickly runs back inside.

“Ya hungry, girl?”

Isis wags her tail, happily.

Stan grabs her plastic dish from his duffel bag. The monogrammed bowl was a gift from Paula for Isis' second birthday.

* * *

“What are you doing with a dog named Isis, anyway?” Paula challenged him.

“What do you mean? What's wrong with the name?”

“Nothing's wrong with it. I'm simply wondering why you chose that name for your dog.”

“I just liked the sound of it,” Stan shrugged.

“Do you even know who Isis is?” Paula prodded.

“Of course — a Greek goddess or something.”

“*Egyptian* goddess!” Paula corrected him.

“Sorry. At least I knew she *was* a goddess.”

Paula rolled her eyes. “Isis was the most important goddess in all of Egypt. She was the goddess of fertility and motherhood and magic. The Egyptians believed that Isis herself walked among her people, teaching the women how to grind corn to make bread and spin flax for weaving. She also showed them how to tame men enough to live with them,” Paula said, looking pointedly at Stan. She ignored his exaggerated sigh and continued, “Isis taught her people how to read and farm, and they worshipped her as the goddess of medicine and wisdom.”

“OK. I’m impressed. How do you know all that stuff?” Stan asked, crumpling the wrapping paper that had contained the new dog bowl.

“Same way you know what to do with a ledger sheet, or why a red herring has such a stupid name.”

“You went to business school?”

“Shut up,” she said, grabbing the wadded up wrapping paper from the floor at his feet and throwing it at him. “It was important to me, so I learned about it.”

“Oh. So why is it so surprising that I’d have a dog named Isis?”

“I don’t know. Just your whole agnostic, prove-it-to-me-that-God-really-exists thing.”

“I never asked you to prove to me that God exists,” Stan argued.

“Not in so many words. But you have to admit, it would be a lot easier to believe in God if I could prove there was one, wouldn’t it?”

“Of course it would.”

“See?”

“But it’s not really about proof. I’m talking about experiential knowledge. I keep telling you — I *want* to believe there is a God. It makes sense to me that there is. But I’ve just never experienced what other people take for granted as the presence of a supreme being.”

“Come on, Stan. Look at the moon, the oceans, the flowers in my garden. How can you see all those things and not *know*?”

Just then Stan’s phone rang. He quickly fumbled it out of his pocket with a hurried “Hello?”

Paula got up and grabbed her backpack. The only person who called Stan at night was Gretchen. And once she called, Paula exited. It was just an understanding they had.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she mouthed as she made her way to the door.

Stan waved, a resigned look on his face as he said, “Where’s your super?” He listened intently to Gretchen’s response. “Again? You should really report the guy,” Stan paused, trying to keep the exasperation out of his voice. “Yes, of course, sweetie. I’ll come over and look at your water heater.”

Paula rolled her eyes to herself as she quietly closed the door behind her.

* * *

Stan showers and thinks about shaving, but quickly decides he can skip a day. He dresses in warm clothes, as he inhales a Power Bar for breakfast. There isn’t much to pack, since he’d only brought the essentials in from the car. *No sense in unloading it all just to load it back again in the morning*, he had reasoned.

He pats the bed for Isis to come to him. She runs over, and he gathers her into his arms. She wriggles a little as Stan deposits her into his shoulder bag, a beat-up old U.S. Postal Service bag.

He’d found it once while rummaging around in the basement of his apartment house. Noticing the thick layer of dust, Stan could see the bag clearly had lain untouched for many years. Before he usurped it, he left a note in its place, indicating his name, apartment number, and the date, in case anyone should want to claim it. When, after six weeks, no one showed up to demand the bag, he had enjoyed the project of removing the insignia and shortening the strap so that the bag now fit snugly under his arm.

“Look, you’re gonna have to get used to this or we’re gonna have to cut the trip short. I have no idea how these people feel about dogs — and besides, I don’t want you to get lost.”

Seeming to sense that he means it, Isis stops wiggling and settles comfortably into the bag, her nose and ears sticking up through the open zipper. He grabs her leash and a discarded plastic sack and shoves them into the bag with her.

Together, they head out to explore the tiny community of Portugal Cove South. Stan was drawn to this stop on Newfoundland’s Irish Loop because, well, it was called the *Irish* Loop. But also, the travel guide had described a fossil museum that sounded intriguing.

The first thing he wants to do is take a boat tour around the little cove. He walks down the weather-worn path toward the dock, Isis stowed comfortably under his left arm.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, an old man appears on the path with him. “Whacha got in the bag, sonny?” the old man asks, the creases in his skin casting a spider-web across his face.

“This?” Stan asks, pointing to the bag that holds Isis.

“That,” the gnarled old man answers.

“This is Isis.”

“Don’t look like any Egyptian goddess to me,” the old man spits. “Looks more like a runty little dog.”

Isis yaps.

“Sounds like a runty little dog, too.”

Isis starts barking.

“Isis, shush,” Stan tries to quiet her.

“Don’t shush her. She’s just doing her job, trying to protect you,” the old man changes his tone. “You watch her good, though. If you put ‘er down, make sure you got ‘er tied to ye, else you’re like to lose ‘er to the wolves.”

“Th ... th ... thanks,” Stan stammers. They come to a fork and the man wanders down the adjoining path. As he walks away, Stan can swear he hears the old man say, “Call your girl.”

* * *

Jack rolls over and looks at the clock. The big red numbers announce: 2:27. *I must be dreaming*, he thinks, pulling the blankets closer around him. *No one calls anybody at two thirty in the morning on a weeknight*. Then he hears it again — his cell phone bleating from the other room. He shuffles into the kitchen to pick up the phone where it’s charging on the counter.

“Hullo?” he says dully.

“Jack, where is he??”

“Where’s who? Who is this?”

“Paula, Jack. It’s Paula. Now where’s Stan?”

“Paula, do you realize it’s two thirty in the morning?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry for waking you. But I just went by Stan’s apartment, and he’s not there. His phone’s disconnected. I called him at work today, and the secretary said he quit three weeks ago. What happened? Where is he?”

“Oh, shit. I told him he shoulda told you.”

“Should have told me what? What happened? Where’d he go?”

“Paula, I’m really sorry. I promised him I wouldn’t say anything. All I can tell you is that he’s all right. And he said he’d be in touch, when he’s ready.”

“When he’s ready? Jack! What are you talking about?”

Slowly exhaling, Jack says, “I can’t tell you, Paula.”

Her voice raising several octaves, Paula tries to keep herself under control, “Jack, this is me. You *have* to tell me where he is.”

“I can’t, Paula. I’m sorry. I promised.”

“Well, he must have a cell phone, wherever he is. Just give me the number.”

“Paula, don’t do this. I can’t.”

“You can, you just won’t!”

“Same thing,” he says gently. His heart hurts not to be able to tell her because he knew she deserves to know. *Stan, you’re such a schmuck for doing this to her*, he seethes. “Look, I know you two had some sort of falling out the last time you saw each other. I wanted him to call you to sort it all out, but he said he couldn’t. Not yet.”

Paula tries to stifle a sob. “OK, Jack. I know you’re just doing what he asked you to do. But if you hear from him, will you tell him I’m worried about him? And that I’m sorry.”

“Of course I will. Hang in there, Paula. I don’t know when, but I do know he will be in touch.”

“OK. Thanks, Jack. I guess I’ll let you go back to bed.”

“All right. I really am sorry.”

“I know. Thanks.”

“Take care of yourself. And, hey, Paula?”

“Yeah?”

“Congrats on the show and the investors.”

“Thanks, Jack. You’re sweet.”

“And tired. I’ll talk to you later.”

“OK, later.”

* * *

Stan notices the old typewriter on a little desk at the front of the fossil museum. “Excuse me, miss,” he says to the bored-looking gal who is paging through an October copy of *People*.

She looks up at him, without speaking.

“Do you think ... would it be all right ... I’m wondering if I might be able to use your typewriter there for a moment?”

“Suit yourself.”

Stan sits down at the empty desk. There is no paper to be seen anywhere. Though he tries to slide the desk drawer open unobtrusively, it lets out a loud groan. He looks over at the bored girl, but she doesn’t even glance up. In the back corner of the drawer, he finds a yellowed index card.

Perfect, he thinks.

He inserts the card into the ancient Smith-Corona. On it, he proceeds to type:

**Ms. Paula Girardi
219 Liberty Avenue, No. 4
Jersey City, NJ 07306
U.S.A.**

He stands up and slides the card into his billfold. Returning the splintery wooden chair to its position under the desk, he makes his way to the rack of postcards that look older than the typewriter. He selects one with a particularly interesting fossil image and drags the girl away from her magazine long enough to collect the fifty cents he feels certain is way overpriced for the dog-eared card.

She shuffles back to her magazine, and has just resumed her leaning position on the counter, when Stan walks over to her, again extracting his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans.

“Um, excuse me?”

“Huh?” the bored girl grunts.

“I wonder if you might do me a favor?” Stan asks tentatively, twirling his favorite fountain pen in his hand.

* * *

“If I write a book, will you illustrate it for me?” Stan and Paula were having a rare weekday lunch in one of the outdoor cafés in Battery Park, in the shadows of the World Financial Center where Paula worked.

“I dunno. Sure. I guess so. What kind of a book is it?” Paula munched her french fries and regarded Stan with amused eyes that said she didn’t believe he could or would ever write a book.

“Never mind,” Stan said, looking out at the yachts in the harbor.

“No ... tell me. I want to know.”

“Not if you’re going to make fun of me. Just forget it.”

“I’m not making fun. I just ... it’s just ... well, you’ve never said anything before about wanting to write a book. I’m just a little surprised, that’s all. But please, tell me about it.”

Stan was suddenly shy. *Why did you have to go and bring it up. Now you have to tell her, and she’s going to laugh.* “Do you promise you won’t laugh?”

“I promise I won’t ... well, I promise to *try* not to laugh.”

“Forget it!” he said, his irritation obvious.

“Come on, Stan. It’s me. Of course I’m going to laugh if it’s funny. But I get the feeling you’re really serious about this. Have you told anyone else about it?”

Stan shook his head and looked around at the other tables on the patio. “Who would I tell?”

“I don’t know — Gretchen, maybe?”

Stan made a face at her and shook his head. Paula shrugged. “OK. Well, you brought it up. If you want to tell me, I’m always here.”

Quietly tapping the fingers of his right hand on the table for more than a minute, Stan finally looked up at Paula’s neutral expression. “I’m thinking of calling it *A Cohesive Collection of Random Ruminations.*”

“Random ruminations. I like that. And cohesive collection, too. Nice alliteration.”

“Thanks.”

“Ruminations about what?”

Stan’s eyebrows raised into a peak. “I’m not entirely sure. Just the stuff I always think about. Global warming. Whether Syd, the street philosopher out by the ferry, is really homeless. The fact that I don’t think Gilligan ever wanted to get off the island. You know ... random important stuff.”

“I think you mean the stuff you always complain about,” Paula said matter-of-factly, as she slurped the end of her Dr Pepper.

“I don’t always complain,” Stan said defensively, until he looked up to see her smiling at him.

“It’s a great idea. You should do it. Of course I’d be happy to illustrate it for you. What kind of an advance are you offering?”

He wadded up his napkin and threw it at her.

* * *

A few days later, Stan was on his way out for an early Saturday morning run when he almost tripped over a package lying in front of his door. Curious, he picked up the neatly wrapped brown parcel and sat down on the front stoop. He smiled as he carefully lifted from the wrapping a gorgeous green leather journal with hand-tooled gold lettering:

A Cohesive Collection of Random Ruminations by Stanford Crowley

Crumpling the brown paper as he stood, Stan realized there was something else in the package. Stunned, he choked back a gasp as he extracted the most marvelous fountain pen he’d ever seen. A couple months later, he’d just finished signing a client letter when he picked up the phone. “Paula, I just wanted to tell you how much I love my pen. It’s the coolest gift anyone’s ever given me. I’m keeping this pen with me no matter where I go or what I do.”

Smiling into the phone, Paula replied, “I had a feeling you’d like it. It sort of had your name on it. Just make sure you put that journal to use, too!”

Chapter 4 NUUK, GREENLAND

Stan sits up in bed the morning of May 10, suddenly alert and wide awake. He and Isis had arrived in Nuuk the previous day. The sun was shining brightly when he went to bed, and it is up now as he awakes. *This must be the reverse of what Alaskans experience*, he thinks to himself.

He slugs down some strong coffee from the innkeeper's front room and is halfway through Greenland's version of instant hot cereal when he remembers it's his birthday. *Way to go, laddie, forgettin' your own birthday. Happy 30th, big guy. Good thing you remembered, 'cause who else is gonna?* "It's not like Isis can run out and get me a card, can you, girl?" Hearing her name, the little dog runs over to the bed, where she jumps up and licks his ear.

Finishing the poor excuse for a breakfast, Stan does his crunches and pushups, two hundred each. Then he showers quickly in the frigid water. He's getting used to three-minute showers, quite a change from his usual efficient but leisurely pace in the mornings. *I wonder if I should shave?* he thinks, looking at his scruffy face in the mirror as he runs the hard towel through his longish hair. Ever since that first morning in Newfoundland when he decided to give his razor a rest, it has remained inactive. That makes today's decision easy: *No shaving.*

He sits down on the bed that is really no more than a cot and pulls out his travel diary. He quickly calculates the distance, nearly 1,200 miles in the last four days. *Too bad we didn't get here a month earlier. Would have been cool to catch the Northern Lights.*

* * *

Paula stomps up the stairs to her second-floor apartment, shaking the mud from her bulky black boots as she goes. She unlocks her door and it squeaks as she pushed it in. "Shit. I forgot the mail."

Making a space on the ironing board that is serving as a makeshift kitchen table, she sets down her satchel. "God, it's a good thing Stan isn't here to see this mess," she mutters to herself. "Then again, if Stan were here, you'd never have let it look like this, now would you?"

She quickly runs down the stairs to the mailbox and flounces back up, flipping through the usual pile of garbage. It seems like every time she opens her box, it's jammed with enough useless paper to line ten birdcages. "How many trees died for this crap?" she wonders aloud for the thousandth time. Just as she is about to toss the whole pile into her recycle bin, an odd-looking card pokes out from the corner of the stack. "What the hell?"

It resembles a postcard — but it is dirty and beaten up, like it's been sitting under a pile of books for years. The picture is faded, but it looks like a fossil of some sort. She flips the card over. The only printing on the back says:

She examines the postmark. April 20th — almost three weeks ago. She tries to make out the city, but it's too blurred to read. She studies the handwritten address:

ms. Paula Girardi
219 Liberty Ave., #4
Jersey City, NJ 07306
USA

No one she recognizes. *How weird*, Paula thinks. She shrugs, about to drop the card into the recycle bin with the rest of the day's mail, but then thinks better of it. She props the ratty postcard against the dusty cookie jar on top of her fridge.

Suddenly, she remembers today's date. May 10. Stan's thirtieth birthday. "Where the in the world is he??" she whines, frustration, anger, and sadness flooding her mind, again. "Well, it's not like we'd have spent it together anyway," she consoles herself. "I'm sure wherever he is, he's spending his big day with Gretchen."

Grabbing a soda from the fridge and a leftover bag of microwave popcorn from the overflowing counter, she plops down in front of the TV, deciding not to let her thoughts about Stan consume her anymore ... for the moment.

* * *

Having heard Greenland is well-known for its music recording industry, Stan decides to visit Sermit Records, one of the country's better known labels. In spite of the drizzly day, Stan opts to walk, rather than drive. As always, Isis is thrilled for the chance to explore new terrain and sniff the delicious new scents.

Known as the world's smallest capital city, Nuuk is spread across many acres, but for many years it had only two large grocery stores to accommodate its nearly 16,000 residents. Stan stops an elderly lady to ask about a huge construction project a short distance up the road. "That will be Nuuk Center, our first shopping center," the woman says proudly. "I am told we will have first underground parking in country!"

"Good to know," Stan says to the woman. "I'm sure that will come in very handy."

"Ya, ya. Is goot," the old lady agrees as she waves and continues on her way.

Stan smiles to himself as they near Santa's Post Office and mailbox, otherwise known as the National Tourist Board of Greenland. Built as a tourist attraction, Stan soon finds it contains little actual Greenland tourism information, and he is disappointed to learn they are a month too early for whale-watching season. *A month too early. A month too late. I'm really ready to be right on time*, Stan thinks. As they continue their walk, Isis seems to intuitively hug Stan's legs as they pass a sign announcing: Kittat — The Skin & Fur Workshop.

After walking for nearly an hour, Stan and Isis arrive at Sermit Records. They enter the store adjacent to the recording studio, Isis in her usual spot under his arm inside the mailbag. The blond gentleman at the front counter nods as they enter.

“Aluu, can I help you, then?”

“I don’t know,” Stan shrugs. “I guess I just want to look around.”

“Suit yourself,” the man says, turning back to the book he was reading before Stan jangled the bell on the door.

“Well, actually ...” Stan says.

“Yes, sir?” the man looks up again.

“Do you have any jazz?”

“Aye. We’ve a big collection of jazz tunes over here,” the man says, pointing to the far corner of the store.

Impeccably groomed, perhaps in his early to mid-fifties with salt-and-pepper hair and a short, neatly trimmed beard, the man appears to be in excellent physical condition, with one obvious exception. As the proprietor slowly makes his way out from behind the counter, the man’s labored gait draws Stan’s attention to his feet. Fighting to control a gasp, Stan sees battered beach sandals that can’t conceal feet resembling a war zone — cracked, blistered, dirty, scabbed over. Stan winces sympathetically at the obviously painful condition. *Geez, what could cause that poor guy’s condition? Stan wonders. And why wouldn’t a man with an otherwise perfect appearance DO something about it?*

Oblivious to Stan’s reaction, the proprietor shuffles slowly down a clean, spacious aisle, asking companionably, “You looking for music for yourself?”

“No, um, actually — it’s for a friend.”

“Your *lady* friend?” the man inquires with a small smile.

“Well, she is a lady — but she’s just a friend.”

“Sure she is,” the man says, mostly to himself.

“Excuse me?” Stan prods.

“Oh, nothing. Here we are. Every kind of jazz ensemble you could ask for. I’m sure you’ll find something here to the lady’s liking.”

“Thanks,” Stan says, as the man ambles slowly past him, back toward the front of the store.

As he leaves the shop with six slightly used jazz albums tucked under one arm, Stan heaves a huge sigh, realizing that he and Isis will now have to walk back the same distance they'd come from the B&B. "We should have driven, girl," he tells Isis, who is obviously less energetic now than when they first set out. Stan heads down the road, contemplating hitchhiking or trying to find a rare taxi.

Chapter 5 REYKJAVIK, ICELAND

Looking at the already weathered map on which he'd created his tentative path around the world, Stan realizes he hasn't planned as well as he thought. He's just gotten off the phone with the Icelandic authorities, who shocked him by explaining that the cost to ferry his Volvo on to Ireland would be more than the cost of two first-class airfares. It was only a couple hundred bucks to bring the car from Newfoundland to Greenland, and more or less the same rate from Greenland to Iceland. Although Stan knew the distance was considerably farther, he mistakenly assumed the cost from Iceland to Ireland would be comparable.

In spite of having been passed over for promotion again last fall, Stan earned a substantial amount of money in his nearly five years as an investment banker. The fact that he lived frugally in an older area of Jersey City had allowed him to virtually double the value of his portfolio in little more than two years.

Though money isn't really an issue for him, he's budgeted \$4,000 a month in planning what he assumes will be a yearlong trip. With a cost of almost two thousand bucks to shuttle his car to Ireland, taking the car with him is now out of the question. It isn't about affording it — it is the principle of the thing. Even though he's kept her in fabulous condition, the 2002 Volvo probably isn't worth more than five grand. As much as he loves his car, he's going to have let her go. *There will be other cars*, he muses.

Right now, his first order of business is to find a post office so he can mail the jazz records home to Jack for safekeeping. Next, he needs to get his hands on a large backpack that can accommodate several days' clothes, shoes, toiletries, his laptop, iPod, camera, journal — and Isis' dish and a couple days' food. Sweating nervously as he takes his trusty Volvo out on the icy roads, Stan makes his way to the Reykjavik shopping district.

* * *

"What?!" Stan glanced over at Paula, white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel.

"I didn't say anything," she shrugged, trying in vain to sound nonchalant.

“You’re watching me. Stop watching me.”

“I’m not watching you. I’m just looking around at the other cars out there. Look — there goes another one sliding into the guardrail.”

“Could you stop already with the commentary about cars sliding into the guardrail, Paula?”

“OK, OK. Calm down.”

“Calm down? Do you want to try this?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Who are you kidding? You’d never let me drive your precious Volvo. Especially not in a freak ice storm...”

It had been more than an hour since they’d first begun their assault on the ice-covered Pulaski Skyway on their way back from a student film festival at Rutgers University. The drive that should have taken no more than 45 minutes, door to door, had turned into a nightmare in the last two miles from home. Stan tried not to cower in the driver seat as the semi a few dozen yards in front of them lost the precious inches it had just gained and began backsliding slightly toward them.

“Can’t we just pull over?” she asked hopefully.

“No, we can’t ‘just pull over.’ It’s only 11:30, so it will only get colder and potentially icier before this stuff melts. And in case you hadn’t noticed, we’re on an incline right now. We’ve got to inch our way up till we make it over the hump. Damn — I knew I should have left the snow tires on for another couple weeks.”

Stan was always just a little bit tense, but Paula had never seen him like this. “So I guess you don’t want to hear a joke?”

“Paula, look, I’m sorry to be so abrupt, but maybe we could just not talk until I get us across this damned bridge, OK?”

She slumped back in her seat. “I just wish I could do something to help,” she whispered.

It was nearly 2 a.m. when Stan finally pulled up in front of Paula’s apartment. Both were exhausted, just grateful to make it home without incident. “Wow, Stan, that was incredible.” She unsnapped her seatbelt. “You were ... incredible. Thank you so much ... I mean ... I’m really sorry I dragged you out and we got...”

“Stop. You don’t need to apologize. It wasn’t your fault. Unless you did some sort of ice storm voodoo that caused us to get stuck on that bridge for more than two hours,” he smiled, finally able to relax.

“I would never ... besides, you know you loved the short film about the romance between the stapler and the scissors. Wish we could all have that kind of passion in our relationships.”

Stan smiled again, turning to face her.

Paula leaned in and, just as he was about to kiss her, she shifted her head and kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks, again,” she said, all but bolting out of the front seat of the Volvo. “I’ll see you Monday.”

“Sure. See you Monday,” Stan gave a half-wave as she closed the door. By the time she got to the front stoop and turned around to wave, he was already rounding the corner at the end of the block.

* * *

Intently focused on the road in front of him, Stan can’t help but glance out the side window in awe, noting how unbelievably clean everything seems to be. It feels as though the Iceland capital has been whitewashed — there is no litter, the air is as pure as can be, and the sun shines brightly overhead in spite of the frigid temperatures.

Thankful that he left Isis in his room at the B&B, Stan easily finds a parking spot outside the Kolaportið Flea Market, adjacent to the harbor. He figures he’ll start there, as he’s heard it is an ideal place to watch Icelanders in their natural habitat. If he doesn’t find the rucksack he has in mind, he’ll head over to the Kringlan Shopping Centre once he finishes here.

* * *

As he heads into the huge industrial building that houses the weekend flea market, Stan is transported back to a childhood memory from Maryland. It was a crisp October Saturday in 1993, and Stan typically found himself the only non-Korean in the midst of the boisterous Chung family.

Though he was born in Incheon, South Korea, James Cheung had moved with his family to the U.S. when he was only three years old and his father’s dental practice had taken them all to Baltimore. Seated alphabetically by a less-than-creative kindergarten teacher, Stan and James had become unlikely but instant pals. They did everything together — played Little League, caught snakes, stole cigarettes from the corner store and smoked them in the woods behind Stan’s house.

On this particular day, Stan, James, and James’ three younger sisters had piled into the car with Dr. Chung for an outing to Bargain Bill’s — a mammoth indoor/outdoor flea market in nearby Laurel. While the girls immediately raced off toward the toy and doll booths, Stan hovered at the entrance, primly reading the signboard that announced the giant market’s sections and vendors.

“James, James,” he called excitedly to his friend, who was already following the siren call of fudge and cotton candy. James turned toward Stan and waved him off, aching to exchange the \$5 bill in his pocket for some sugary goodness.

“James!” Stan called again, more insistently now.

Giving up his place in the growing Sugar Shack line, James was irritated by the time he got back to where Stan stood, grinning like an idiot. “What’s so important? I was almost to the front of the line.”

“The Yankees are here!”

“They are not,” James said dismissively. “Why would the Yankees be at Bargain Bill’s on the last Saturday of the World Series?”

“They’re not *in* the World Series, you butthead.”

Yeah — well, they’re not *here*, either.”

“Look at the sign,” Stan demanded, pointing to a red starburst on the sign. “It says the Yankees are at the Front Row Sports Cards booth today from noon to 3 p.m.”

Looking more closely at the sign, James punched Stan in the arm. “It’s the *Albany-Colonie* Yankees, dork — not THE Yankees.”

“The Albany-Colonie Yankees are THE Yankees — they’re New York’s Double A team. That’s just two steps from the majors,” Stan explained, punching James back. “And they’re here, probably signing cards. Let’s go!”

Even James was now enthusiastic at the prospect of meeting Yankee up-and-comers.

* * *

I’ll bet Mom still has those signed Jorje Posada and Andy Pettitte cards somewhere, Stan muses, as he pushes open the door of the Kolaportið Flea Market.

Wandering the aisles of the bazaar, Stan is somewhat surprised by the ordinariness of the offerings. Sunglasses, row after row of clothing stalls, wigs in every color imaginable, knickknacks, oversized gag glasses, and booth after booth full of books and CDs, albeit covered in unrecognizable Icelandic words. The one thing he’s never seen at a flea market before is counter after counter of fresh seafood. The proprietors offer samples of strange Icelandic delicacies like dried fish and fermented shark. *Not that brave*, he thinks as he politely shakes his head.

About ready to give up on his search for a suitable backpack, Stan rounds the corner of the final row to find a booth with old sports and military gear from all over the world. On a

table in the corner, under a pile of some old army jackets, lays precisely the pack Stan envisioned — maybe a few inches longer than he needs, but all things considered, it's perfect.

Stan looks around for the booth manager so he can pay for the pack and be on his way. Suddenly, a youngish looking man with a shock of white-blond hair saunters into the booth with a slice of pizza and glass bottle of Coke. More than any single person Stan has seen so far, this kid seems to epitomize Iceland's Viking heritage. Finding the clerk amiable, Stan goes a bit out of his way to strike up a conversation with him. Gesturing to the men, women, and children strolling up and down the aisles, Stan asks what the people of Reykjavík are like.

The white-haired young man startles Stan with his response. "You probably think all Icelanders are pretty, like snowflake." Stan nods his head in obvious agreement. Handing Stan his change, the clerk continues, "What you don't realize is that on the inside, we are like volcanoes, waiting to erupt!" *I guess you never really know what's under the surface, do you?* Stan muses to himself as he pockets the money, gathers up his army green pack, and gives a quick salute.

* * *

Back at his B&B, Stan unpacks the Volvo completely, for the first time since leaving Jersey City. *Man, what am I going to do with all this stuff?* he wonders. *I doubt there's a homeless shelter here to donate it to.*

Suddenly, the words of the customs agent at the Canadian border come back to him. "You taking all this stuff with you around the world?"

As he fills the giant backpack, he realizes he's going to have to limit his guidebooks to one. He looks at his copy of *Traveller's Handbook*, the least used of all the books scattered across the bed. *I don't feel like an insider*, he thinks, noting the book's subtitle. *Damn. Why couldn't Lonely Planet have a comprehensive world travel guide with just the places I want to go? Guess being an anti-ebook snob's really paying off now, isn't it?*

He sits down and begins to flip through all the books he had meticulously studied when building his itinerary, tearing out the most relevant pages for the places he still hopes to visit. *Mom would die if she could see me destroying these books.* The thought comes — and goes — before he even realizes it.

Once the backpack is as full as he can get it and still comfortably lift it, Stan turns his thoughts to the Volvo. *What are the chances someone in this town of fewer than 200,000 people will want to buy this car?*

* * *

Stan wanders down to the common room where the owner of the B&B sits reading the paper. “Ah, good morning, Mr. Stanley. How are you doing today? Why the long face?” she asks, folding closed the huge pages of the newspaper.

Stan smiles at her mistaken assumption about his first name. “You don’t happen to know anyone who wants to buy a Volvo — or has need for a bunch of well-made American clothes?” he asks, hands in his jeans pockets as he shifts around a bit uncomfortably.

“Why? You are not keeping the car? And you are becoming a nudist?”

Stan laughs. “No, no. Nothing like that — about the nudist part, I mean. Yes about the car. It’s too much money to ferry it to Ireland, and I can’t keep it. My trusty Volvo made it to Sweden all the way from Jersey City, but getting her back to her home continent now just isn’t feasible,” Stan says sadly. “And because I can’t keep the car, I’ve had to pare down my accessories to the bare essentials. So I have a pile of clothes to unload.”

“I see,” says Mrs. Jakobson, a friendly woman with a warm, open smile.

Stan flops down on the low, wide sofa, his long legs kicked out casually in front of him. Isis curls up on the floor at his feet.

“As a matter of fact, I know someone who can be of help to you, Mr. Stanley.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Oh, yah! My neighbor, Mrs. Borga Hansson, is right now collecting clothes to send to the needy in our sister city of Seattle.”

“Seattle, Washington?”

“Yes. Reykjavik is one of Seattle’s sister cities. One thing we do is to collect clothing twice a year to send with the envoy who travels to Seattle.”

“Wow. I never heard of anything like that before. Do all major cities have sister cities in other parts of the world?”

“I do not know. Many, I am sure. But I do not know which ones or who the sisters are.”

“Wow. That’s very cool. Kind of weird to bring them all the way over here and have your neighbor take them back to the States, but it works, so OK. Thanks.” He leans over to rub Isis’ belly. “Well, that takes care of the clothes. But I still have this little issue of what to do with the Volvo.”

“That, I am afraid, I cannot help for you,” Mrs. Jakobson replies.

“It’s all right. I’ll figure something out,” Stan muses, getting up and heading back to his room, Isis at his heels.

Not for the first time today, Stan wishes he could call Paula. She'd come up with some zany plan that would invariably work. Just as he sits down at the small desk, Mrs. Jakobson calls up to him, "Mr. Stanley! Mr. Stanley!"

Stan opens the door to see that Mrs. Jakobson is already halfway up the stairs. Out of breath, she stops on the landing.

"What is it? What's happened?"

"Come down, Mr. Stanley. Mr. Stephensen from next door is here. He wants to talk to you about your car. It is most beautiful Volvo ever he has seen, he says. And he's Swedish — so he knows Volvos."

Chapter 6 DUBLIN

As Stan was thinking about actually quitting his job to travel around the world, he tried to imagine which countries and cities he'd visit. One place he knew he had to see was Ireland. He remembered as a little boy hearing his mom's father tell stories about his life in Cork. Ever since then, Stan had been captivated by the images he conjured of pleasant Irish farmers and picturesque villages.

The thing was, he remembered hearing from international friends back in college that Ireland required a lengthy quarantine for dogs entering the country from the United States. Certain he would not make the trip without Isis, and equally adamant about visiting Ireland, Stan had headed to the Irish Tourist Board in New York City, where he was relieved to learn that the canine quarantine had been lifted in 2002.

* * *

Arriving in Dublin by ferry, Stan quickly locates a charming B&B, where he unloads his heavy pack and deposits Isis. "You be a good girl," he tells the little dog. Isis nudges him and wags her tail happily, before jumping up on the bed to stretch out, perfectly content to be left alone for an afternoon snooze.

Stan heads to the famed National Library of Ireland, home to a vast collection of Jonathan Swift's early works and many Gaelic manuscripts. Aware that the NLI is strictly a research library, Stan thinks he might get some help tracking down a little family history before he heads off to see the country of his ancestors.

*If you have enjoyed the first five chapters of **Stan Finds Himself on the Other Side of the World**, please continue to check back at our blog and website StanTravels.com. The book is due to be released in time for the 2014 holiday season!*

Thank you for reading.