

Travels with Macy

Bruce Fogle

CHAPTER ONE

HEADING FOR SAG HARBOR

I lost her. the second i slid the suv's door open at the New Jersey Turnpike rest area she bulleted off like a greyhound out of its trap. Dusk. Dark woods. Chronic turnpike traffic a hundred yards away. And Macy was gone. We'd been in America for less than five hours, five emotionally painful, exasperating, irritating, agonising, I-want-to-kill-someone hours, and I didn't know where Macy was. In fact for most of those first five hours I didn't know where Macy was.

'MACE!' I shouted. 'COME!' From within the woods beside the parking lot I heard thundering dog feet pounding through fallen leaves. Macy emerged, strutting like a lean Lippinzaner horse, ears perked, tail high.

'Did you see that humungous squirrel sitting on the curb when you slid open the door? That was the juiciest, fattest and slowest squirrel I've seen in my entire life!' She looked around at people returning to their cars with their mega-hamburgers, donuts and drinks. 'Hey,' she said, 'People here. They're just like that squirrel. I love America.'

OK, I embellish. I exaggerate. Macy doesn't actually speak. But you get to know what your dog's thinking and I could see in her eyes that she was on a high. Chasing a corpulent squirrel that spends its life pigging out on rest-area fast food cleansed her mind of what she had just endured. I wish it could have been as easy for me. I felt dreadful. I'd just put my innocent dog through hell and wanted to sweet talk, lie or bribe my way back onto a plane, this time with Macy at my feet, and return home to London.

I'd worried a little about the long flight from London to New York, but had concluded that being caged for nine hours shouldn't be any more stressful for Macy than it is for any patient of mine dropped off at the veterinary clinic first thing in the morning and picked up at the end of the day. Sometimes it's necessary to endure a little unpleasantness so that life in future is better. Think positive, I told myself. Macy

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may be discombobulated for a few hours but think of what she gets in return - dog-paddling in the Great Lakes, mountain-climbing in the Rockies, beachcombing on the Gulf of Mexico. The two of us were embarking on the best sabbatical ever.

Everything had gone smoothly at departure. Julia, my wife, couldn't bear to see Macy crated for cargo, so our son Ben took Macy and me to the airport. Ben and I laid her blanket in the transport crate, put Macy in and gave her one of the soft toys she likes to have in her mouth when she falls asleep, a seal Ben had brought back for her from one of his trips to the Falkland Islands. I know it's sad but we buy each other's dogs stuffed toys when we travel abroad. Macy behaved in her typically benign way, with stoic resignation. She sat in the crate simply looking morose and concerned. At funereal speed the forklift driver drove into the small cargo warehouse, while two attendants with hands on the crate on both sides talked to her as they walked her away.

The flight itself was easy, almost no turbulence, but I must have looked troubled because a flight attendant, a warm, pink woman whose short sleeves cut like tourniquets into her fleshy arms, asked if I was OK. 'My dog's down below,' I replied. 'God, I wouldn't do that to my dog,' she responded. Did she know something I didn't?

She returned with a colleague. 'His puppy is in cargo,' she explained.

'Actually, she's a three-year-old golden retriever,' I replied.

'Oh, poor little puppy,' said the sidekick, not listening to what I'd just said. 'I have a cockerpoo. I'd never put her in cargo. Would you like a beverage?'

The well-meaning flight attendants did know something, though they didn't know they knew it. Their airline's airport personnel do not understand international pet transport. There. That's me being very British, very polite. Let me please revert to my origins for a second. They're a pack of rat-tailed ill-informed assholes! That's better. I got through Customs pretty fast, picked up my two very heavy bags and asked airline staff where I should go to get Macy. I won't dwell on this because my blood still boils when I think about it, but put simply, I was sent to four wrong places. Two hours later I decided she must have been taken to Continental's off-airport warehouse and asked airline staff where it was. No one knew this either! A porter eventually gave me instructions; I took the monorail to the car rental location, picked up an SUV which I needed to transport the large crate, then went searching through road construction for the warehouse.

Macy was there but I couldn't see her and she wouldn't be released from her crate until I paid the airline an additional handling fee, and took the receipt elsewhere to US Customs for their stamp. I drove to Customs and, needless to say, it was shut. Do you get why I was feeling the way I was feeling? Then Julia phoned and with concern in her voice asked, 'Why haven't you telephoned? How's Macy? Are you being good to her?' I can't say I was very civil.

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Other folks were hanging around Customs, waiting for their paperwork to be reviewed. The place wasn't supposed to be shut. After twenty minutes a black sedan arrived and two Customs officers nonchalantly returned. The throng let me go first. I'd told them about Mace. And so, over four hours after landing and after more than thirteen hours in her crate, Macy was free to go. The cargo warehouse reminded me of that last scene in Raiders of the Lost Ark - unending corridors of crate-filled shelves. Among all of this Macy was found and forklifted by a Michael Schumacher wannabee to the loading bay where I'd been told to wait. Macy looked up at me from inside her crate. 'Please! Help! Out!' she pleaded with her eyes. I opened her crate and wanted to get her outdoors as quickly as possible. There are, after all, physiological limits to what her magnificent bladder is capable of. Now Macy's not a demonstrative dog. She's very British, like I've become. Like me, she contains her emotions, but all she wanted to do was whimper high-pitched cries, lick any bit of me she could get her tongue on and dance for joy. Activity in the warehouse stopped. Forklift drivers, paper shifters, security, they all turned, looked, watched and smiled as Macy joyously greeted the bastard who'd put her in the crate in the first place. Dogs are forgiving. My guilt endures.

I didn't time Macy's first pee on American soil, but if I had it probably would have entered the Guinness Book of Records. I loaded the crate in the back of the SUV, put Macy on her blanket on the back seat, phoned Julia, apologised for my curtness, let her know that Mace was well, and headed for the New Jersey Turnpike. We were driving south to Charlotte, North Carolina, where a vintage motorhome I'd bought via the Internet was waiting for us.

At the rest area I got out her heavy ceramic water bowl I'd brought with me and filled it with 'microfiltered, UV-treated, naturally sodium-free, true, certified, spring water product'. She lapped while I marvelled at how many adjectives can be used to describe water. We sat on the curb and shared bites from a Roy Rogers quarter-pounder, some chicken nuggets and a couple of glazed Krispy Kreme donuts.

'You never let me eat this stuff,' her body language said.

'Take advantage, sweetheart,' I told her. 'How I feel right now might not last forever.'

So she did. In her deliciously delicate and gentle way, using her lips rather than her teeth, she took each morsel I gave her, chewed carefully and thoroughly. I tossed the remainder of our first American meal into her food bowl and she licked it clean, then licked the ground around the bowl clean. As we walked back to the car Macy's eyes lit upon another squirrel, sitting on the curb between two parked cars, eating a donut. She turned into the food police once more, but this time she responded immediately to my verbal command and returned to the car. We set off down the turnpike. I wanted to put some miles behind me before we stopped for the night.

I enjoy driving and, although it was dark, traffic was dense, and my body clock was five hours ahead of local time, I felt comfortable and we drove south past Trenton, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, then Wilmington, Delaware. Near Baltimore, Maryland, I checked into a sleepy seventies strip motel. 'Ten bucks extra fer yer dawg,' the night attendant droned. I backed up to the door to our room,

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opened the tailgate, unzipped a bag and Macy's bed decompressed out of it, springing back into a large soft rectangle. I left it to air while I gave her another small meal and took her across the parking lot to a grassy area.

'What a perty dawg,' a bottle blonde proclaimed, disengaging herself from the guy she was with and coming over to me. 'Will you breed her?'

Yes, I know, dogs are babe magnets but I was too tired for conversation. I took Macy's bed into the motel room, turned off the lights and both of us hit our respective sacks. Almost immediately there was a knock on the door. Macy went into German shepherd mode. Her woof is basso, profundo and magnifico. I love her territorial guard-bark.

The knocking persisted and I looked through the peephole. It wasn't the bottle blonde. Outside were two twelve-year-old kids sucking on Coke cans. 'Yah?' I uttered, rather eloquently.

'You left all the doors of your car open,' a kid replied.

I had. Driver's door, passenger door, back seat door, tailgate, they were all open. In the car were my suitcases, driver's licence, passport, money, laptop, camera, everything, the whole shebang, at a motel that had three locks on the bedroom door. This isn't how I planned our trip would begin.

* * *

By rights I should have headed north-east from Newark Airport, to Sag Harbor, Long Island, where Steinbeck started his travels with Charley, but my chariot, my vintage, 27-foot motorhome was awaiting me 700 miles south-west, in Cornelius, North Carolina.

Beyond Richmond, Virginia, I joined US 1, the old road my parents travelled on annually each winter, from Toronto, Ontario, to Miami, Florida. It may be that I've inherited my love of travel - my need to travel - from my parents. They've had a compatibly incompatible marriage for over 65 years now, during which they travelled to every continent but always headed to Florida each winter. My father, now in his late nineties - once a tall, muscular, ox of a man - still fiercely distinguished-looking - is a 'doer'. It doesn't enter his mind he can't do anything - repair a watch, plumb a house, raise a wharf. He's a quiet man and I get a kick, even now, when people turn and look when he walks past. Natural dignity. Natural presence. Leaving the cinema one evening after watching the Tom Hanks/Paul Newman film Road to Perdition, I said to my kids, 'Did you see what I saw?' 'It's amazing,' my daughter Tamara replied. 'Paul Newman is Grandpa!'

My mother is as opposite to him as a physique and temperament can be; small, blonde, warm, voluble, effusive, a bit histrionic, touchy-feely, mother-earthy, and although she never recognised it in herself, but every man she ever met did, deeply sexy. For a kid growing up, they made quite decent role-models: a handsome father

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who I knew could kick the shit out of anyone else's father and a mother loved by everyone who met her.

In their prime, my parents had a common love for travel. They drove frequently along this road I was now on, until it was replaced by the faster and more direct I-75. And as they drove they argued. And argued. My father's aim was to get where he was going as fast as possible. My mother preferred to soak in the countryside. She would have been enchanted if she had had with her the American Guide Series (AGS), Guide to U.S. One, as I now had, published the year they married. Like all the AGS books, this guide wanders from subject to subject as US 1 meanders from state to state and town to town. Here in southern Virginia, for example, the guide explains that ham was from peanut-fed porkers, cured by months of exposure to hardwood smoke then covered in a brown sugar and sherry paste. This region I was driving through was also the home of fried apple pie, baked corn pones and fried corn dodgers. While corn pones and corn dodgers are now gastronomically extinct, any visitor to a McDonald's restaurant knows that fried apple pie left the depths of Virginia and went international when it was added to that fast-food chain's range of desserts.

If you drive through Brunswick County, as I now was, the Guide recommends trying Brunswick Stew, giving a recipe that begins, 'First catch yourself a hare ...' Tomatoes, onions, okra, carrots, celery, cabbage, potatoes, butter beans, red peppers, corn, bacon, everything went into Brunswick Stew. I looked for a local diner but lucked out. Macy and I stopped for lunch, sat on a grassy knoll, and in the clear, warm, penetrating sunshine we shared a box of Bojangles chicken and muffins from the adjacent fast-food outlet. 'Still feeling guilty?' she asked.

In North Carolina, US 1 passes through gently rolling farm land, studded with pine and oak woods. From their still-evident grandeur some of the abandoned farm houses once belonged to wealthy landowners. Two storeys high and surrounded by verandahs, some were almost totally hidden by the overgrown dogwood, tulip poplar and sweetgum trees that surrounded them. Behind one of these buildings I saw a line of four ivy-covered humps. Macy disappeared into the overgrowth covering one. I pulled the vegetation aside and found piles of rough-hewn planks and tar paper. The AGS North Carolina Guide says that in 1941 this northern part of Warren County was part of the State's 'black belt', predominantly inhabited by slave descendants. Three local families owned over a thousand slaves each. These tumbled piles of split logs and pine slabs may once have been slave quarters. Think about that. It's still possible today to wander off a highway in the Southern states and chance upon buildings that slaves lived in. Not in a museum. Not in a re-creation. For real. That's truly exciting.

We didn't see a single person, let alone meet anyone on this stretch of US 1, but did when I drove into nearby Kerr Lake Recreation Area. No slave descendants here. The parking area was filled with young white families, unloading everything from picnics to bicycles to fishing boats. While Macy bounded through the surrounding loblolly pines, beachcombed on the coral-coloured muddy shore and cantered up welcomingly to park visitors, I read the posted park regulations. 'People under age 16 must wear a helmet while riding a bicycle. Persons unable to maintain an erect,

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seated position cannot be bicycle passengers. Pets must be kept on a leash no longer than six feet.' Damn. We were both here to explore and investigate. There's no way I was going to restrict my dog's freedom.

At Durham we turned west onto I-40, past Greensboro and Winston-Salem, then onto I-77, south towards Cornelius, just north of Charlotte, where our vintage home awaited. The interstates were tedious and boring. I hadn't even begun to retrace John Steinbeck's route but already I was thinking back to his journey. In Travels with Charley, Steinbeck wrote:

When we get these thruways across the whole country, as we will and must, it will be possible to drive from New York to California without seeing a single thing.

Prescient, that.

Dawn and dusk are my dog's favourite times of day. A dog's dawn world is accentuated by the intoxicating aromas embedded in morning dew. A dog reads these odours like the daily news; who passed by; how long ago. Dusk is almost as exciting. Dogs see well in dim light, far better than we do. It was dark when I took Mace for a walk on the forest-bordered lawn to the north of the motel we were staying in. She darted after a rabbit into a wild raspberry thicket and I heard her thundering through the underbrush. 'Mace,' I shouted in a whisper, remembering I was in America. I didn't want other motel residents to wonder why I was calling for pepper spray. 'Mace!' After a few minutes, during which I always knew where she was because I could hear her rummaging around in the humid, leafy compost, she reappeared, raced past me and leapt in the air. She stopped, trying her hardest to stand her ears up. She concentrated. She looked quizzical.

Mace was stymied and I was enchanted for we were surrounded by hundreds upon hundreds of luminescent fireflies all sending out slow pulsating green flashes. I'd never seen so many. As kids in Ontario we used to capture and bottle fireflies to act as lanterns. They kept flashing in the jam jars because they were so annoyed. What we were seeing were males flashing for females in the grass at our feet. They also use their amazing bioluminescence to illuminate the ground when landing. Here's some biological trivia. Do you know that some females of a related species flash back at guys looking for sex, deceive them into approaching, then eat them? This species's appropriate scientific name ends in femmes fatales. I stood mesmerised, watching the slow single flashes all around me turn on and off. It was gorgeous. The air was filled with green fairy lights and at one point it seemed as if they were synchronising, all going on at the same time, then off for around five seconds, then on again. It was scintillating, the perfect way to begin the trip. Macy didn't know what to think. She stared incredulously. I put her leash on and walked her back to the motel, making sure not to step on any flashes in the grass.

Macy and I both slept soundly, but at 4.30 a.m. we got up and walked up the hill to the all-night gas station-convenience store for some breakfast.

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'Sir. We serve dawgs. Ya cain't come in,' I heard as I pushed the door open. I must have looked puzzled as I stood there, so she continued, 'Can ya leave yoare dawg atside?'

Only after I'd bought us a box of Krispy Kreme donuts did I see the hot dogs rotating on their rollers.

Munching breakfast we walked through the grounds of a pristine, luxury, gated condominium complex to a hill topped by a communications transmission tower. Macy darted through the unkempt overgrowth chasing whatever she was chasing and, following her, I found myself in a grassy field dotted eccentrically with low tombstones. Some stones were pink granite engraved with names like Euphemia and Thelonious. Other graves had only concrete block markers. There was a fresh pine branch stuck in the ground at the top of a new mound of red earth, dug since the last rainfall. Macy has a habit of digging in fresh earth so I made sure she avoided that one. Beyond the field was a road, lined on one side by a row of luxury homes in the final stages of construction and on the other by old, decrepit, low-built wooden shacks, each with piles of clutter on the porches and lawns. Grass grew high around rusting cars.

Early risers, all African-American, were walking towards the main road. 'Mornin.' 'Mornin to ya.' 'That's some perty dawg.' At one unpainted clapboard home with an old wringer washing machine and piles of off-cut wood on the porch, there was a sun-bleached silver 1986 Buick Regal parked in the grass, with a Stars & Stripes sunscreen in the front window that read, 'Proud to be an American'. The juxtaposition of poverty and wealth surprised me, although it shouldn't have. When I grew up in aspirational North America, a big, new home was everyone's seemingly obtainable target. It didn't symbolise 'how that other half lives' but rather 'how I'll live one day'. Remembering that, my surprise turned to satisfaction.

At the Holiday Inn an elderly couple from Massachusetts, both lean and tall and looking as if they'd just stepped out of a Normal Rockwell Saturday Evening Post cover, checked out of the motel. Leaning heavily on his cane as his wife put their bags in their car, the man looked at Macy, then stared ahead avoiding any eye contact with me.

'My Jenny just died.' He paused and his jaws chewed. 'She was a good part of the family.' He paused again and now his jaws clenched. 'She just ran and ran and ran ... ' and his voice trailed off. Then, supporting himself on his cane, he reached down to touch Macy and as he did so she stretched her head towards him and pressed it deep into his hand. They stood there for perhaps a minute, the old man with the palm of his hand on Macy's head, Macy standing statue-still. 'She thought she was human,' he said, still staring into the parking lot.

As I've mentioned, I've lived in Britain for the last 35 years. You don't pry. You don't meddle. You don't get involved. But I asked anyhow, 'How old was she?' And the question seemed to bring him back from his reverie. He explained that Jenny was a standard poodle who lived until she was 17 years old.

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'Have you ever had a chance to read Travels with Charley, John Steinbeck's story of his trip with his standard poodle?' I asked. 'Macy and I are setting off today to retrace his route.' Now, I'm not superstitious; I don't believe in omens. So why was it that this man - the first person I met to whom I'd mentioned what we're doing - pulled a new Penguin paperback copy of Travels with Charley out of his coat pocket and replied, 'Got it right here. It's my reading material'?

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