

Chapter 34

W

Marge heard a whizzing, clicking sound, and then the accelerator dropped all the way to the floor with no effect at all. Nothing. He let the momentum carry him off the 210 exit-ramp, and he guided the truck into a dark gas station and repair shop.

"Fuck," Marge grunted. He turned the truck off and back on, but still no accelerator whatsoever.

"Fuck."

He got out and stalked over to the repair shop. Dark inside, of course. It was 8:30 on a Saturday, what did he expect? There was a pay phone on the corner, so he called the house.

Beep.

Answering machine.

"Hey, my truck broke down. I'm in San Dimas. I need a ride."

Damn it. He could hang out an hour and try again, but who knows where anyone was at this time. He wandered back to the truck and lit his last cigarette.

"Fuck."

He looked at his Thomas guide; it was at least 20 miles to get home. A cab would cost a fortune, and he only had a couple of bucks on him anyway. It has been a great night away, but he'd spent too much. He started to rack his brain for someone else to call, when he had a thought.

"Hmm."

He lifted the Thomas guide and paged through it carefully.

"Hmm."

It was basically a straight shot. Follow the 210 to the 134, then follow the 5 until you hit Griffith Park. Pretty easy. Maybe 20 miles, so figure three to four hours. He could be home for after-hours party time. Plus, it was a perfect night outside.

"Hmm."

He locked his truck and started down the sidewalk. Easy peasy. He only went a couple blocks when he found himself looking over a huge cement trench.

"Hmm."

It was as wide as a two-lane road but was below the street level. He'd noticed trenches like this around LA before but never paid them any thought at all. He figured they were for water drainage when it rained, although he'd only ever seen them empty. This trench ran along the 210 for as far as he could see. At least ten blocks, probably more.

"Hmm."

He walked to the edge of the trench. A smooth cement bank led to the bottom. It was too steep to do in the crappy plastic flip-flops he was wearing, so he pulled them off and carefully stutter-stepped down the bank. He stepped over a tiny stream of water and then out onto the wide flat cement. It was vast and clean; it was cool being down there.

"Hmm."

And off he went. Nodding in appreciation, he walked along the trench, smiling as he went. It was easy going, straight and smooth. The cement felt cool under his feet and the noise of the cars in the city above him felt distant. Here he was, just walking beneath LA, easy as that. He went under an occasional bridge and was sure to steer clear of the piles of garbage that had collected in certain spots. It felt weird to be all alone, and he really liked it. There was a smell that would occasionally cross his path. It was familiar—wet pavement after the rain maybe—but he couldn't place it. On and on he went, finally ditching his flip-flops all together. This was going to be a piece of cake. He was almost glad his truck broke down.

But eventually he started to notice that the 210 was getting further and further away. It seemed like the trench wouldn't take him the whole way home. He popped back up onto the street, and keeping the 210 in sight, he made his way as best he could along the sidewalks, following the freeway as a guide. The sidewalk was rougher than the flat cement of the trench, but still not too bad. He passed a few bars, thinking about stopping for a drink, but figured they wouldn't let him in without shoes. He did eventually pass a bank that had a sign displaying the time.

“Fuck.”

It was 11:47. He'd been walking nearly 3 hours.

Marge took a deep breath. He had to stay closer to the highway. Maybe he'd find another trench. He walked straight, scanning all directions as he went. He got all the way to the on-ramp. No trench. But then he noticed something else.

“Hmm.”

Train tracks. And they ran right along the highway.

He turned left where the tracks crossed the city street, and there it was. As easy as that, he was on a clear straight shot right below the 210. It was perfect. It even had cement ties along the track that were smooth and flat. Each tie was the exact distance of Marge's natural gait. Smooth sailing. Off he went into the distance. He fell into a groove and lost all track of time; time didn't matter. It was like a magic pocket dimension completely outside of the craziness of Los Angeles racing all around him. He even caught a whiff of that familiar smell again, something flowery, a plant or tree maybe.

But his feet and calves eventually started to ache. There was an occasional stone on the cement ties that would bite into the bottom of his foot. And keeping the strict stride length took a toll on his leg muscles. Plus, he was hungry as hell. He pulled out his wallet.

“Fuck.”

\$3. Enough for a soda and a candy bar, and he could try calling The Brick again.

He slipped through a hole in the fence and back onto the street. But right away he knew he was in a different kind of neighborhood. It felt deserted, but he could hear loud music from some of the houses, all of which had bars over the windows. He could see a traffic light in the distance, which he hoped meant a busier street and maybe a convenience store. He kept his head down and tried to walk with a purpose, but as he reached the next block, his stomach clenched. There was a car up ahead and several guys clustered around it.

“Fuck.”

Marge was big. Sometimes big worked to his advantage and kept people from trying anything. But sometimes big had the opposite effect. Some people were drawn to it like a challenge. Especially short guys.

Marge drifted by, self-conscious about his feet. It felt like something that would draw their attention, plus if he tried to run away, he'd have no chance. But he went by without any issue.

When he got to the light it wasn't any better. Still pretty empty in a not good way. He saw a small store and ducked inside. Mexican music blasted over the speakers and the counter was surrounded by bulletproof glass. He grabbed a Coke and a Snickers bar, which was about all he could afford. But as he approached the counter, the front door opened and a whole group of scary looking guys rolled in. Marge set the soda and candy aside.

"Marlboro Reds. And a pack of matches."

Then he lit up the second he stepped outside and kept moving.

He spent the next hour drifting along streets that were just empty enough to feel like a threat. He'd pass a person on their porch or standing on the corner and it felt like he was being watched the whole time. He lit up cigarette after cigarette, and he kept a hand in front of his pants to make it look like he had a gun. It was an exhausting, tense hour that had him dizzy from all the smoking.

Finally, he found a payphone at a closed service station and tried to collect call to The Brick again.

"Fuck."

Answering machine. Where were those assholes? Just as he was hanging up, a car pulled up on the road next to him.

"You all right?" The guy called out, pointing to Marge's bare feet. He looked like a normal guy. He was in a normal car.

"I'm OK. Just walking home. My car broke down."

"What happened to your shoes?"

"They hurt my feet."

"Which way you heading?"

"Burbank."

"Burbank! Shit!"

"Yeah."

"I'm heading towards Arcadia; I can take you a ways."

Normal seeming guy. Normal car.

"OK, yeah. Thanks."

And off they went. The car was clean and the guy was dressed like a normal person. He had short hair and a goatee. He and Marge went along easily, making small talk. The guy seemed cool. Marge looked at all that sidewalk they rolled past, thinking about how much longer it would have taken him to walk. What luck it was to get a ride.

"Do you want a hand job?"

It felt like cold water had splashed over Marge.

"Oh. Uh... no thanks." Marge answered.

They kept going from there. A bit more small talk mixed in with patches of quiet. Then the car was swerving over to the side and slowing down.

"I'm heading south from here," the guy said.

"Thanks so much for the ride," Marge said as he stepped out onto the sidewalk. Then he turned around and saw something wonderful.

"Hmmm."

He was looking right at another drainage trench.

The smooth flat concrete surface felt like ice water on his burning feet. Marge let out an easy sigh as he glided down the wide empty trench, hearing the freeway off to his right. He caught a hint of the mysterious smell again, but only for a second. You could also smell a murky hint of garbage, which made sense as he looked ahead of him. The trench bent to the right, and at the bend piles of garbage had collected. A narrow path snaked between the banks of refuse. There were water bottles and fast-food cups and ghostly strings of plastic shopping bags. All of LA's garbage collected in huge shambley piles. He carefully made his way through it.

Then just up ahead, he saw movement. A piece of garbage was moving.

"Fuck!"

Marge jumped back a step. It was as big as a football and coming right down the path at him. It was a fucking rat!

And then...

"FUCK!"

The whole pile to the right was moving. Everything was moving. Rattles and rustles and God-awful squeals and rats were everywhere.

"FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUUUUUUUUCK!"

Marge flapped his arms incoherently and hopped in panic as a nightmarish wave of motion swept over and around him. He was surrounded. He was overwhelmed. He was screaming and flailing.

And then they were gone.

Marge stood frozen, panting and trembling.

"Fuck."

He took another deep breath and kept on going.

The trench never got good again from there. The overpasses got more frequent and longer in length. He started seeing nests of blankets and cardboard that he knew were homeless people, and they multiplied the further he went.

His feet were killing him, even with the smooth concrete it felt like tiny embers were wedged into each heel, smoldering painfully. His calves were in agony, and he limped tenderly as he walked, wincing with every step. He decided to try calling the guys again. He found a ramp that led up and out of the trench. It was lined on both sides with homeless people, some sleeping, some sitting up and watching. At the top of the ramp was a dead-end street with dozens of shopping carts and several homeless people ambling about. Marge limped by, giving an occasional wave or nod.

As he got past the shopping carts, he saw headlights coming down the street right for him. There was a noticeable surge of activity among the homeless people; they were moving. The vehicle slowed and pulled over at the end of the street. It was an aging minivan, and a crowd of homeless people were moving to welcome it. The side door of the minivan rolled open, and two middle-aged white women stepped out. Homeless people shuffled forward; Marge trailed behind wondering what this was all about.

"Let us pray," one of the women called out.

The homeless people bowed their heads as she prayed loudly, asking God for mercy and blessings. She went on for a good long while.

"Amen," she finally concluded.

Then the women handed out sandwiches.

Marge got in line. By the time they handed him the wrapped package, he was literally drooling.

"Thank you," he grunted, and then retreated to stand among the group of homeless people that were milling around, all opening their plastic baggies.

"You get baloney?" The man next to him asked.

"Uh... yeah," Marge answered.

"You want peanut butter and Jelly? I like baloney."

"Yeah, OK," Marge agreed and swapped. Then he pulled out the sandwich and gobbled it down in three gulps. He had no idea how hungry he was until that moment, and it was the single most delicious thing he'd ever tasted. He could feel it rejuvenating his body.

"You got a cigarette?" The homeless guy asked him. Marge dug into his pocket.

"Three left. They're all yours." He gave the man a friendly pat on the shoulder and walked off.

At this point, everything hurt. His feet, calves, thighs, back, heels—all of it stabbed and cramped. He limped and juked and winced with each step. He felt like the scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz shuffling and stumbling along. But he was doing it, he was moving. It was funny to be there, God knows how late, but still making his way. What a night had been. The sidewalks and crosswalks rolled away underneath him. And he could smell that mystery smell full on now. It smelled like the desert. It was a cool smell. But he still couldn't quite place it. He got into a busy area with more shops and restaurants, but they were all closed and dark. It even looked a little familiar; he thought he might be in Pasadena. Then right in the middle of a wide intersection, a police car shot across his path. The lights whooped for a quick second, and it stopped in front of him.

"Excuse me," a stern voice called out. "Everything OK here?"

Marge stopped and looked up at the cops. They were getting out of the car.

"How about you come over here so we can talk," the cop commanded.

"OK," Marge answered and shuffled over to the sidewalk.

"Where are you heading?"

"Burbank," Marge answered.

"Burbank? You're a ways off. What happened to your shoes?"

"They hurt to walk in, so I left them."

"Have you taken any drugs?"

"No, sir."

"Where are you coming from?"

"My car broke down in San Dimas."

"San Dimas! And you walked?"

"Yes, officer."

Another cop car pulled in from the other direction, and two more cops got out.

"Stay right here," the first cop ordered. Then the four cops walked off to the side, all talking and occasionally pointing back over to Marge.

Marge was happy for the break. He stood, patiently waiting. What a night.

"Fuck," he gasped.

It clicked. The smell. He knew the smell. He knew it exactly. It was when he'd driven across the country. His truck was packed and heavy, his cassette collection rattling in the passenger seat. He went across the Midwest, over the mountains, windows down and air blasting. Through Las Vegas, through the dusty white afternoon, and then he was on the longest, most crowded highway he'd ever imagined, and he knew he'd made it to Los Angeles.

And that's when he smelled that smell. That smell was Los Angeles.

"You say your car is in San Dimas."

"Yes, sir."

"And you're walking to Burbank?"

"That's where I live, sir."

"And you haven't taken any drugs?"

"I have in the past, sir. But I haven't taken any tonight."

"OK—stay here another minute." The cops returned to their huddle over by the cars. Marge nodded and waited contentedly. Finally, the first cop came back over.

"We're going to give you a ride home if you're OK with that."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. It's not safe to be out here like this without shoes."

The cop opened the car and guided Marge into the back seat.

As they headed off, the cops lightened up immediately. They couldn't believe Marge had walked all that way and they asked him about the walk. Marge told them about it, and they went crazy when he told them about the rats. The drive took a while -- a lot longer than Marge expected. He still had a long way to go. He probably wouldn't have made it if they hadn't given him a ride. Or at least he wouldn't have gotten home until at least noon. He also noticed that the sky was getting lighter outside the car windows.

"Just here on the right," Marge said. "The brown house."

The cops slid the car right in front of the Brick. Marge thanked them again as they drove off. He limped up the porch steps, opened the front door, and quietly stepped into the living room. It was still inside, but with the dawn coming up he could see pretty well.

"Fuck."

Brett lay asleep on the couch in his usual spot, but his arm was covered in scuff marks, and his lip had a nasty seam of crusted and dried blood. Then Marge looked over to the other couch.

"FUCK!"

Staring happily back at him from a spot on the cushions was about the doofiest, ugliest dog that Marge had ever seen.