

Slipping Over the Border

A first-person narrative of moving to Oregon

by David Cantrell

You all think it was so easy. All you native Oregonians—all seven of you—think a person like me, a former Californian, just waltzed in to your beloved state with nary a hitch but the one with which I'd hooked the U-Haul, stuffed with awful New Age knickknacks and trunks of cash obtained from selling my mansion at overinflated prices. Let me tell you a little story.

It was the winter of 1989. My then-girlfriend Elaine and I knew it was time for a change. First there'd been the motorcycle accident, then the settlement and the obligatory year of wild living, followed by the cold realization that our windfall would blow away completely if we weren't careful. We thought we'd better put it in the ground somewhere, buy a house, build some equity; but where? With half-hearted enthusiasm we looked around San Francisco but, really, what was the point? The only place we might have afforded was a hotplate efficiency for \$53,000. Cough. We began considering various elsewheres, as long as they were lively, affordable, and anywhere but the Midwest. We'd never given specific thought to Portland, but then *Newsweek* came out with its by-now-legendary "10 Most Livable Cities" issue. Didn't tell us much but this one beacon fact: median house price, \$59,000. Next thing I knew I was outside in the January chill, outfitting our battered VW bus with cabinets and a futon for an exploratory trip north.

We left at night, the piece of red aluminum pipe I'd hacksawed and put in place of the missing defroster hose actually doing the trick. We smoked cigarettes and chattered in the darkness, the drafts common to those old buses wispig around us. Taxi, our cute little scrap of a dog, sat on Elaine's lap, panting at the oncoming headlights. We were abuzz with the pioneer spirit. So much so, in fact, that the arctic front descending from Alaska,

the one that led off every newscast in the days prior to our departure, was the furthest thing from our minds. Not for long.

After an agreeable late-night camp-over, we resumed our trailblazing, puttering past Yreka in the early afternoon and beginning our assault on the Siskiyou Pass. In our minds, the new frontier lay stretched out before us. In the skies ahead, clouds glared down on us, ominous and smothering. I kept my eyes on the road. On the California side of the summit all was hospitable. Though the clouds ahead had grown into a shade of deadly gray velvet, not a flake could be spotted dotting the ground. Our bus, in its faithful manner, pushed on. As we leveled off at the top, the alarms of impending doom went off with a flurry. I've never seen the edge of a storm front so clearly defined, and I've never had my vision go so immediately to hell. The wind was furious and everything a blurry white. Semis lined the roadside, lacing on their chains, which—surprise, surprise—we were without. Panic was in the air, along with a whole lotta snow.

I-5 is a divided highway. What few ramps exist up there were already buried under a foot of picturebook snow. We'd get stuck for sure. Though snowless San Francisco beckoned, there was no turning back; pulling over and waiting it out would be a certain death sentence. Nope, there was nowhere to go but down off the mountain and into the teeth of the howling beast. Elaine and I traded anxious glances, fixed our hearts with a kind of blind hope, gulped, and plowed ahead. I proceeded carefully, slowly, so very, very slowly. I was clenched with caution. Elaine held Taxi in

her lap like a giant rabbit's foot, stroking his fur, wordless. None of us blinked. It was snowing so hard now that Nanook of the North would have thought about migrating south. And damn it, we almost made it.

Like hell. We didn't even come close. No more than two miles into our descent, I looked out my window and saw our rear-mounted engine sliding by. In a moment of terror that will last forever, we and our bumbling vehicle were lost in a dervish of 360s, coming to a halt with a jolt, our butts backed up against the guardrail. The

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AUDRIA LOYAL

whole world was dizzy and we faced uphill without a prayer.

Things began to happen in a confused, slow-motion hurry. Shivering more with

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fear than cold, I got out and stood there, helpless and immobile, pondering our bus in its funny position. I happened to look a few hundred yards up the grade just in time to see a big rig jackknife violently over the guardrail, its monstrous front tires coming to rest on opposite sides of the railing. One thing that struck me was how quiet this piece of action was. Someone seemed to have turned the sound down. The next thing to strike me was how unfortunate it would be for us to be struck by a jackknifing truck, since we were now, in essence, an extension of the guardrail. I began pushing and grunting like a mad Cossack, hoping to right our wrong-facing vehicle so we might at least, in theory, glide out of target range of the next semi that came crashing through the snow. Not long into my exertions Elaine began gesturing wildly, pointing up the hill behind me, her eyes as wide as highbeams. I turned and saw my nightmare, exactly as I'd imagined it moments before: an enormous black truck skating right toward us.

As I scrambled out of the way, Elaine gathered Taxi tightly to her chest and pressed herself as far into her corner as possible. Just as my butt slammed to the ice-frosted pavement I was thinking that four feet of air and a couple of inches of German metal and upholstery would hardly suffice as cushion against the imminent crash. Our suddenly minuscule Volkswagen was all there was between me and the descending behemoth. "That's it," I thought, "it's going to kill them and roll over me. We're finished." The impact, if anything, was anticlimactic. No snarling of metal, no rending of flesh, just the soft, mushy sound of steel gently wedging itself into the angle between our bus and the guardrail. The driver of the truck got out, spat, and tried to yell at me as if it were somehow my fault, but his heart wasn't in it. We were all innocent, and we stood around in silence looking at the tangled triangle he'd just made complete, staring in awe at our lack of options.

Yet, in short order a rescue was under way. While Elaine and I huddled together inside the bus, smoking like bad mufflers, we felt ourselves being rocked abruptly

side to side. The truck driver had been joined by two cohorts to push us around and rid the road of the nuisance we'd become. I got out to contribute my scrawny brawn to the effort while Taxi barked encouragement and Elaine took the wheel. We heaved, we hoed, and within moments our dear, old, dented survivor of a bus bumped to the safety of an extra-



ANDREW TAYLOR

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wide, snow-softened shoulder. A couple of hours later, on the heels of a sanding truck, we arrived, triumphant and nerve-racked, on the flat and merciful streets of Ashland.

Though it was still insanely cold and the snow had not abated, we felt as if we'd reached the Promised Land. At the risk of appearing to be some kind of demented pseudo-pope—not to mention having my lips stick to the frozen pavement—I literally got down and kissed the ground. A true hallelujah moment. We hooked up with a friend who was dumbstruck when we walked into his store. He invited us to stay an extra day while our nerves reconstituted and the storm thundered south, leaving in its wake a winter wasteland and

a state full of trembling mortals.

There are three minor passes north of Ashland, just little bumps, really, but in these conditions they could give a driver pause. On the backside of one, as I watched out my rearview window over the peaceful, sleeping bodies of girlfriend and dog, I noticed two cars careen out of control and embed themselves with a thump in the banks piled at the side of the road. Both vehicles appeared less traction-challenged than ours so it seemed the occurrences were happening randomly, a game of dice thrown on a treacherous surface. I kept on, quiet and steady, through a battlefield of abandoned cars and tractor-trailers whose contents were being offloaded out of big twisted boxes perched at precipitous angles. When Elaine awoke, we hardly spoke as we passed these violent spectacles, according them the reverent hush they seemed to deserve.

A few days later, having progressed with all the speed of the Donner Party, we finally came muddling into Portland. We stood in the middle of Laurelhurst Park, as Taxi scrabbled and flayed on the solid pond of ice, talking about what we'd seen and all we'd been through, when we decided we'd do it, we'd make the move to Oregon. It wouldn't be easy, but surely the worst was behind us. And—not counting the insane ardor packing the rental truck, the flat tire on the afternoon we pulled out of San Francisco, the flu I got on the way up here, our car being stolen three weeks after we arrived, then again two months later—we were right, the worst was behind us.

Yep, just another carefree moneybags waltzing into your state from the south, whistlin' Dixie, California-style. Well, I must say, if that was a waltz—and it seemed more like a jitterbug mixed with the twist mixed with a bit of breakdancing—you'll kindly excuse me if I sit the next dance out.