102: Road Trip!

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Prologue: Prologue

Ira Glass It's hard. After "On the Road Again" and "Six Days On the Road" and "Hit the Road Jack" and "Roadrunner" and "Born to Run" and "Running on Empty" and "Life in the Fast Lane" and "Lost Highway" and "Highway One Revisited." After "Let's Get Away From it All." After Easy Rider and Thelma and Louise and Lost in America and too many road movies to name or even remember. After Jack Kerouac and Route 66. And as long as we're at this, after Huck Finn and The Journals of Lewis and Clark. After all that it is hard for an American to just hit the road without some expectations.

Take Jamie. After his mother died, after three months of visiting her in the hospital and three years in which she'd been sick, he hit the road, in the car that used to be hers.

> **Jamie** I kept trying to be, like, you know, what is the realization I'm going to come to? Or what is the feeling that I'm going to settle on? And that was what I kept feeling was, like, am I feeling something? Am I experiencing something?
>
> **Ira Glass** Really? You felt like, OK, I'm on this big road trip. I'm supposed to have a revelation.
>
> **Jamie** Yeah. That's what I thought. You know, I was hoping that I would, yeah, be somewhere, I'd step out of the car and experience the grandeur of the place and just be like, yeah, this is what life is. And this is, like, my

mom dying. And this is, like, where I am in my life. And, you know. But it didn't happen like that.

Ira Glass Any road trip is going to feel longer than you think it will. And you'll be tired and you won't get a meal exactly when you're hungry. You never find a bed exactly when you want to go to sleep. And you're probably not going to find out what it is that you got on the road to find out in the first place. And you know all that. You know all that going into it.

And you still, we all still bind to the cliche about road trips. That what a road trip stands for is hope. Hope. That somewhere, anywhere, is better than here. That somewhere on the road I will turn into the person that I want to be. I'll turn into the person that I believe I could be, that I am. And, come Memorial Day, we hit the road. You and me and our whole great nation, with high hopes and no expectations for the future.

And, to hasten the journey, we bring you now this hour of radio. Today, from WBEZ Chicago and Public Radio International it's This American Life. I'm Ira Glass. Today's program, Road Trip. Act One, Busman's Holiday. Dishwasher Pete loved riding the bus from city to city until one last seven day trip that took him off the whole deal.

Act Two, Merci. How do you even say that? Mare-see? Merci. Can a road trip in Europe save a marriage? The answer is with one case study.

Act Three, On the Road in a Tuxedo. At the age of 92, comedian George Burns was still traveling all the time. Margy Rochlin briefly traveled with him. What it is like when being on the road has been your job for decades.

Act Four, Paw Paw for Jesus. Cheryl Trykv achieves what everyone wants when they hit the road. She actually finds adventure, and it is not pretty. Stay with us.

Act One: Road Trip in a Tuxedo

Ira Glass Act One, Busman's Holiday. Regular listeners to our program may remember Dishwasher Pete who travels from state to state washing dishes and publishing his zine Dishwasher. Usually he only stays in one place for a few weeks. And then he takes the Greyhound bus to the next town. Lately he's been living in Portland. But he was only too happy to get back on the bus.

Dishwasher Pete I like riding Greyhound. Over the last eight years I figure I've ridden at least 100,000 miles on Greyhound. In total, about four solid months of my life have been spent cooped up in their buses. I would consider it my home away from home, if only I had a home.

What I like most about Greyhound is how long it takes to get anywhere on the bus. Airline passengers love to complain about the five excruciatingly long hours it takes to fly from coast to coast. But on the bus that same distance takes three full days to cover, which is what I think is about the perfect amount of time for such a trip. And unlike airplane flights, no movies are shown on Greyhound, no headsets handed out, no free magazines available. No waitresses force bags of peanuts on you every five minutes. On the bus, passengers are largely left alone with their thoughts.

I have this theory about people who ride Greyhound. About how, as we sit on the bus for hours and days, waiting to reach our destination, we travel in what I call a transitional state, thinking about where we're coming from and where we're going to. I know I do. And from my talking to other people on the bus, I know many others do as well.

For example, this one route I've ridden a lot goes south through Crescent City, California, home of the Pelican Bay maximum security prison. I rode next to this guy who'd been locked away for 14 years and had just gotten out. Across the aisle from me was a teenager with a buzz cut on his way to boot camp. We talked for a while, but mostly we just sat and thought about the different places we were headed.

For a long time I've been wanting to tape record the stories I've heard on the bus, to document this phenomenon that I've been trying to figure out. So I was pretty

excited when This American Life offered to send me on a Greyhound trip with a fancy tape recorder and a seven-day Ameripass. For a week, I could wander any Greyhound route I chose and test my theory about the bus.

So I packed up a loaf of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a bunch of bananas and stepped on a Greyhound.

I spent the first 10 hours traveling down the coast of Oregon. I was so eager to talk with the other passengers I stayed awake all night even though everyone else was sleeping. It wasn't until we stopped for breakfast in Crescent City that I was finally able to strike up a conversation. Steve was about 50 years old, sported a bushy beard and wore an olive green army jacket. A large wooden crucifix dangled from his neck. He said he was an itinerant preacher and that Greyhound was his chapel.

Steve Well, I just preach in my own time. Not any specific times. And usually try to avoid audiences when I do speak because that way I reduce the possibilities of rejection or mockery. [LAUGHS]

Dishwasher Pete You avoid audiences. Then who are you talking to?

Steve Well, see, I believe in the transmission of voice or spirit can transmit 360 degrees into the world times 360 degrees.

Dishwasher Pete And Greyhound's conducive for your traveling ministry?

Steve Well, in the fact that I do not have my own privacy, like in a private vehicle, there becomes an either intermeshing or clashing of spirits like on a crowded-type Greyhound. Sometimes things are more harmonious, and other times people pick and poke and they solicit a reaction.

Dishwasher Pete So normally your preaching on the bus would come with you just talking to the person sitting next to you?

Steve Most of my preaching is done by myself, just speaking into the air, though, without another human being being there. You might be one of the first human beings that's ever really listened to me or acknowledged that in my presence.

Dishwasher Pete Steve's ministry is not limited to the teachings of Christ but also included a healthy dose of praise for natural medicines, like cannabis and opium. I thought I was agreeing with him when I said that it did seem ridiculous that pharmaceutical companies simply sold nature back to us. But Steve took offense and pulled out a bottle of Anbesol, which he described as 60% grain alcohol plus benzocaine.

Steve Which is a chemical, as a chemical similar to the naturally occurring cocaine. And so if a person likes the cocaine--

Dishwasher Pete What's it for?

Steve Well, it's just a little topical anesthetic which is like a local number. And so they talk about toothache and things of that nature. Certainly not a central nervous system relaxant like the opium poppy. Which I consider more of a valuable plant. Because of its pain relief but--

Dishwasher Pete Chug a lug.

Steve Just a little nip. Just a little nip now.

Dishwasher Pete So is that numbing your whole mouth now?

Steve Well, it takes about 10, 15 seconds. Actually, there is an immediate effect, but, yes, it is actually, believe it or not, numbing and very pleasant.

Dishwasher Pete Steve continued talking, but it became increasingly difficult to understand what he was saying as his speech slurred. By the end of our 15 minute talk he told me it was the longest conversation he had in the last three and a half

years. Then Steve got on the northbound bus bound for Portland and I continued on to San Francisco.

From San Francisco I rode 10 hours to Los Angeles, sitting next to an 11-year-old kid that didn't want to talk to me. At the Hollywood bus station I saw a bus headed for San Francisco and figured, what the heck? Maybe I'd get lucky on that bus. So I spent the next 10 hours retracing my route back north, sitting beside a guy who slept the whole way.

I had to wonder, where were all the talkers, all those chatty passengers that usually sit next to me and share their stories about where they're coming from or going to?

In Reno I switched to a bus route I've always been curious about, the one that headed south through old mining towns down to Las Vegas. My attempts to find out who rode that particular bus led nowhere. I approached the other half dozen passengers one by one. But no one would talk to me.

On the bus from Las Vegas to Flagstaff, Arizona, I asked the woman sitting next to me if I could record our conversation for the radio. She acted like I was nuts. "You want to talk to me about Greyhound for the radio? What radio station is that?" "Well," I explained, "it's a show that's on different stations in different cities." "What station is it on in Los Angeles then?" she asked. "Los Angeles, I'm not sure." "You want to record me for the radio, and you don't even know what station it is? Yeah, right," she's scoffed. "Give me a break."

She alerted the other passengers around us that I was trying to pull something over on her. Soon I was verbally assaulted from all sides, the butt of everyone's jokes. I put the tape recorder away and stared out the window. My enthusiasm for this trip was rapidly dwindling.

At a rest stop I slinked away from the pack of passengers who were smoking their cigarettes and ridiculing me and stood off by myself. Maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe there wasn't anything significant on the minds of Greyhound passengers after all. When the smoke break ended, I reluctantly got back on the bus.

On any bus there's usually some sort of outcast, like the drunk guy who smells like urine or the woman babbling to herself. Then it dawned on me. With these dorky headphones on my head, this foot long microphone in hand, trying to get people to let me interview them about where they're going, it was me. I was the weirdo on this bus.

> **Dishwasher Pete** Hello? Well, I guess since nobody else will talk to me on this bus and there are only a couple people on this bus and we've got about nine more hours to go and it doesn't look like anybody else will be getting on the bus because we are in the middle of the desert. So I may as well talk to myself.
>
> We are somewhere in the desert. I can see we're traveling under a clear blue sky. I can see about 30 miles. And a whole lot of dirt, rocks.

I guess I didn't have much more to say than anybody else on the bus.

> **Dishwasher Pete** Um--

Dishwasher Pete All these years I've boasted of being some sort of hardy Greyhound passenger, impervious to all those things that many people complain about. The seemingly never ending rides, the annoying passengers, the claustrophobia. I mean, I sat next to a guy vomiting on himself and it's no big deal. I sat across the aisle from people having noisy sex and it didn't bother me. But now, on this trip, Greyhound was starting to get to me.

On the bus to Phoenix, I found myself wedged between the window and a guy who took up way too much of my seat. I tried to sleep for the first time in days but found that I couldn't. My whole body was sore. I had shooting pains in the back of my thighs. My back ached. I had a headache. The baby in front of me cried the whole way. The toddler behind me got smacked around for not sitting still after having been pumped up on candy. I was becoming increasingly claustrophobic. I was beginning to lose it.

Normally I survive long bus rides by concentrating on my destination, but now I didn't have a destination. I wasn't really going anywhere. How could I expect to find anyone in the transitional state when I wasn't even in transition myself? Maybe this was the problem with the whole mission. I had ceased being a regular Greyhound passenger. I was an outsider.

I stood in line for the bus to Las Cruces, New Mexico, trying to calm down. I thought I was in control until I watched a mother drag her kicking and crying toddler across the bus station by the kid's hair. I snapped. I couldn't take it. I couldn't handle being constantly surrounded by so many people anymore. I sure wasn't feeling at home like I usually do.

I stepped out of line for the Las Cruces bus. I had to get home. Sadly, Portland was still a 36-hour ride away.

At the Arizona-California border, a new passenger sat down across the aisle from me. Not needing any more abuse from strangers, I resisted my initial temptation to talk with her. A couple miles down the road I watched her pull a Polaroid photo from her purse, stare at it for a half minute, and then tuck it back in her purse. A minute later she had the photo out again and this time I snuck a peek and saw that it was a photo of her sitting in the lap of a guy wearing prison garb. Since she had boarded the bus in a prison town, I realized she had probably just visited a jailed boyfriend or husband.

Now she had to sit on the bus for who knows how many hours and dwell upon the person she had just left. At last, I thought, the one person I had been looking for on this whole trip. Someone in transition. Someone who could help me prove my theory about the bus. Her name was Lisa. And she was just as suspicious of me as any other passenger had been. But she did consent to let our conversation be recorded.

Lisa Arizona. Yeah. Nothing great.

Dishwasher Pete [INAUDIBLE]

Lisa No.

Dishwasher Pete The conversation didn't get very far. She gave only one or two word replies to most of my questions. Eventually she ended up asking me the majority of the questions. After a couple of awkward minutes, I put the microphone and tape recorder away. She stared at her photograph some more while I watched the desert in the fading sunlight.

A half hour later, after the bus had darkened and people dozed off, Lisa tapped me on the arm and told me she had inherited powers from her grandmother. Powers with which she could grant me any wish I desired. For this service she would only charge me $5.00. "At my shop," she said, "usually I charge $10, uh, $20 for a wish." She said it just like that. "$10, uh, $20."

Well, $5 for a wish seemed like a bargain so I started counting up the hundreds of nickles I had won in a Las Vegas slot machine. But she said it would only work with a $5 bill. I didn't have any fives, but I did have a 10. "A 10 will work," she said.

I followed her instructions, folding the bill into a little ball and handed it to her. She squeezed it in her fist and said, "Now make a wish. But you can't tell anyone what it is." So I made a wish. Then she told me to tell her my second and third wishes. That these wishes were important, too, but not as important as the super important first wish. Well, in my state I only had one wish that I needed fulfilling, so I just made stuff up for the merely important second and third wishes, wishing for better health and a new romance.

On the dark bus she whispered across the aisle, assuring me that I was now in better health and that I could expect a new love in my life. Then she asked me to tell her my super important wish, my number one wish. "But you told me not to tell me anyone," I said. "You can tell me," she said, "but don't tell anyone else."

So I told her I wished I wasn't riding the bus anymore. "Oh," she said. "You're tired of riding the bus. I can see it in your face that you're very tired. You have a kind face." She whispered about my face and described how tired I looked for

five minutes, mentioning three times that while I might be laughing on the outside I was really crying on the inside. But I wasn't laughing, not even on the outside.

When she was done I watched her slip my 10 in her pocket. Meanwhile, I was still on the bus.

Ira Glass Dishwasher Pete will be putting out a new issue of his zine Dishwasher in a few weeks. Grab a pen. If you send him a dollar, you can get it. At P.O. Box 8213, Portland, Oregon, 97207.

[MUSIC - "GREYHOUND THEME IN E MINOR" BY IAN LYNAM AND PAUL IONNATI]

Act Two: Merci

Ira Glass Act Two, Merci. A road trip can be a profound test of any relationship. After all, expectations are high, everybody's looking for a good time. And at the same time you're in circumstances that can make anybody irritable, probably because you're together all the time. All the time. Because of all this, a road trip can save a marriage or destroy it. We bring you this case example told by Carmen Rivera and Candido Tirado at the Nuyorican Cafe in guess which east coast city.

A couple years ago a friend of Carmen's decided to get married in Italy. The friend was already married, but the friend had not told her parents. So she decided to get married again on her anniversary in Italy with her parents present.

Carmen Rivera So we think it's a good idea, but we're not really sure if we want to go. She invites us to the wedding and we're not really sure because we had gone to Italy the year before and we're kind of not getting along. We're not communicating and we're kind of angry at each other. And it was this atmosphere of a general malaise in the house.

Candido Tirado Malaise? [LAUGHS]

Carmen Rivera That's what it was. What do you want to call it?

Candido Tirado Fighting. Changing the TV channel. I mean, we fought about everything.

Carmen Rivera Yeah, but that was like a malaise.

Candido Tirado OK. Whatever.

Carmen Rivera OK. So we're in this malaise. We haven't decided yet. And we get a phone call from Paris, from a friend of ours, [? Malika ?], who invites us to stay in her house in Paris. And we tell her about the wedding in Italy and she goes, well, why don't you come stay with me and then we'll all go together to Italy? So I think that's a great idea. We can kind of be with friends in Europe--

Candido Tirado I need to interrupt here. When she says Paris, see, you don't get the idea. This is an obsession. Ever since I know her, she says, I want to go to Paris, I want to go Paris.

Carmen Rivera That's not true. Don't exaggerate.

Candido Tirado Every movie that has Paris in the backdrop, we see. Every magazine article, "Look, Candido, Paris." So I decided to quench this thirst.

Carmen Rivera All right, that's kind of true. OK. So I'm really psyched and I'm thinking, OK, maybe if we go to Paris we can work on our, you know--

Candido Tirado Malaise.

Carmen Rivera --malaise. So the next thing we know, we're in Paris. And it's better than I ever thought it could be. The light was amazing, and the architecture's amazing.

Candido Tirado The food.

Carmen Rivera The art, the food. It was wonderful.

Candido Tirado But where's [? Malika ?], the person that was going to give us the apartment to stay in?

Carmen Rivera She's nowhere to be found. And we call her apartment, and they say the number's disconnected. So we get a hotel room on the Left Bank. And I'm just really overly excited. And one day on our way to the Eiffel Tower, we go through the Jardin du Luxembourg, which is a beautiful park. And out of the corner of my eye, I see chess tables. And like we said before, he's a chess master. He's a national master. He's in the top 1% of the United States. So the last thing I want to see is a chess table.

So I tell him, "Look, Candido, look at the puppet show over there. Isn't that really great? All these little kids. Look, tennis courts. Wow, there's so many things to do in the park--"

Candido Tirado Look, chess tables over here. Let's go see.

Carmen Rivera So we're in this great romantic city, city of love, and we're supposed to be, you know, trying to reconnect and cure our malaise and he spent all his time in Paris playing chess and I spent my time--

Candido Tirado Going to museums, stuff like that. Who cares?

Carmen Rivera Then it's time to go to the wedding.

Candido Tirado The week passes and we take a train overnight to Paris.

Carmen Rivera Modena.

Candido Tirado To Modena. Excuse me. But we get to Modena, and her friend, we call her, and she says, yeah, I'll be there in 25 minutes. Comes to pick us up in three hours. And I saw that as a sign that we shouldn't be there. We should be in Paris where I could be playing chess. And Carmen didn't want to go back.

Carmen Rivera Because I knew that as soon as we got back to Paris, he would play chess. I was like, no way. I want a vacation. We're going to be here in Italy. We're going to support my friend. I don't want to hear the word chess.

Candido Tirado So her friend lives like-- we thought she lived in the city but she really lives like in Arkansas. Cow country. So now we get stuck in this house in Arkansas.

Carmen Rivera Formigene.

Candido Tirado Formigene. And she drops us there with her non-English, Spanish speaking parents and she leaves to the country house. And leaves us there.

Carmen Rivera And then she cancels the wedding. And she decides not even to tell her parents that she's married. So we spend that week alone with her parents.

Candido Tirado It wasn't that bad.

Carmen Rivera Because they were pretty nice.

Candido Tirado We got drunk a couple of times.

Carmen Rivera On liquor made out of chestnuts, and they were very nice to us. But he's complaining again, there's no chess. Everything's old, it looks like a tomb. I'm upset, there's no chess players here. I want to leave.

Candido Tirado I get claustrophobic, you know. We start fighting more and more.

Carmen Rivera So we start fighting more and more. My friend asks me if I support her decision about this wedding. I tell her, no. I mean, you know, you're 35 years old, you should tell your parents you're married. And so she's mad at me. So she stops talking to me. Him and I have one of the hugest fights, and we break up. And he says, "You know what?"

Candido Tirado I'm going back to Paris.

Carmen Rivera And I'm like, go. I'm like, go, but I have all the passports. I take care of the tickets. I'm the one that made all the phone calls in French and Italian. So I tell him, OK, if you can figure out on your own how to get back to Paris, you can go. So he couldn't figure out how to get back, so he stayed with me.

Candido Tirado I knew how to go back. I just didn't know how to speak the language to get back, you know.

Carmen Rivera OK. All right. So the next stage of this whole trip is to go to Corsica. And we had made plans, so we all go. So my friend is mad. They're fighting and we're fighting. And we wind up in Corsica.

Candido Tirado Now Corsica, I don't know if you've been there but it's like the ugliest place I've ever been to. It's these ugly rocks coming out from the ground. And so I'm not really happy here. And I'm feeling more and more claustrophobic because now I'm in another country. So we drive down and we turn a mountain and we go to the south of, um--

Carmen Rivera Corsica.

Candido Tirado Corsica which is Bonifacio.

Carmen Rivera Bonifacio, it's the southernmost city.

Candido Tirado And they turned and we come up into this beautiful town. And the other people, they went camping. So we wouldn't go camping with them because I don't camp in New York. You know. I'm not traveling across the world to go camping. So they get very angry at us, of course. You know, that's another thing to be angry about. And we get to Bonifacio and it's, like, one of the most beautiful places I've ever been to.

Carmen Rivera It's built into the rock, but it looks like Monaco. It has those kind of lights. It's very romantic. And our friend drops us off in our hotel and she

goes, "Well, I'll see you next week." And she just drives off.

Candido Tirado Now, we don't have work, we don't have chess, we don't have her friend. All we have left between us is our general malaise.

Carmen Rivera We start-- first, we're not really talking to each other and he's really upset. He's like, you know, this really sucks. I can't believe that you did this to me. I could have been in Paris. But then we start taking walks. I mean, there's really not much else to do and, so--

Candido Tirado One morning.

Carmen Rivera There's a beautiful prehistoric town, and we start kind of connecting and talking about the history. One morning we're eating breakfast in a beautiful restaurant that's built into the rock. And it's a very clear day. And we're on the patio. And you can see Sardinia. And it dawned on me, wow, we're two Puerto Ricans from the Bronx and we're here and we see Sardinia and this beautiful day. And I look over to Candido and I'm like, wow, I'm really glad I'm sharing this with him.

Candido Tirado I was feeling the same way.

Carmen Rivera So Sunday morning was the seventh day. She calls and she says, OK, be downstairs in 20 minutes. We go downstairs, 20 minutes, she comes and we get back in the car. And it took 12 hours to get back to Formigine. Because there's a long ride, there's a ferry, and then there's another long ride in Italy. And in those 12 hours nobody said a word. And she was really upset.

And we're kind of feeling good, but we're just reading the vibe and we're like, OK, we shouldn't say anything.

Candido Tirado The next morning we pack. And we're supposed to be leaving about 4:00 to catch the 5 o'clock train. And somewhere about 12 o'clock she calls Carmen over.

Carmen Rivera She wants to talk to me privately. And she brings me into this office in her-- she has a really big house. And she says, I'm really mad at you because you didn't talk to me on the way back from Corsica. I don't know what's up with you.

Candido Tirado You didn't go camping.

Carmen Rivera You didn't go camping with me. You went to Paris first. And you said you were going to come here earlier. But then you were here too long in my house and you used the washing machine. Like, oh my god, make up your mind. If you're upset at me, just pick something. I was so confused. And then it dawned on me kind of, you know, this is not the friendship I thought it was. And I'm like, well, you know what? I'm not going to deal with this. I'm out of here. She was like, fine, get out of my house right now. So I go get Candido, in the back yard studying chess.

Candido Tirado I carry my chess books with me.

Carmen Rivera He has a chess book.

Candido Tirado My chess board.

Carmen Rivera But, you know, we're happy so I don't feel like a chess widow anymore, so it's OK. So I go tell him we have to leave.

Candido Tirado So we pack. And as we're packing-- and I know something's going to happen because we have to have that blow up, you know? We go outside, and there's a black cloud right on top of the house. And it starts to rain on top of the house. It wasn't raining any other place. There was sun all over the place, except on top of the house. So I said OK, this is the universe playing a trick on us or God laughing at us.

And her mother says, take them to the train station.

Carmen Rivera Her mother doesn't know anything.

Candido Tirado So I know we're not going to make it to the train station because in the car we are going to blows. So she takes the back roads down the tomato fields and she begins to berate us.

Carmen Rivera She starts arguing. She just rehashes the whole argument all over again and how we couldn't make it on our own to the train station.

Candido Tirado You're so smart, why don't you make it on your own?

Carmen Rivera And we had just done it before--

Candido Tirado I'm in Arkansas, that's why.

Carmen Rivera That's true. So she says, if you don't let me speak, I'm going to throw you out of the car.

Candido Tirado So we said, throw us out.

Carmen Rivera Throw us out.

Candido Tirado Which she did.

Carmen Rivera She gets out of the car. She takes all our bags out--

Candido Tirado Throws them in the street.

Carmen Rivera She's like, get out of here, I never want to see you again.

Candido Tirado Stops traffic. I mean, there's like 50 cars now looking at us. People getting out of the cars.

Carmen Rivera And leaves us with our bags, walking down this road.

Candido Tirado But we have a cart. So we put all the bags in the cart. And suddenly, we feel free.

Carmen Rivera We start laughing.

Candido Tirado We start laughing. And we never felt so free in this three weeks. It was like five miles away from the train station. As we walk down this straight, narrow road I started thinking about the soldiers in World War II when the war was over. And they were going home and they had won the war. And Carmen and I are walking--

Carmen Rivera We looked at each other, and we talked about that, this war that we'd just been through. And it just felt so peaceful and--

Candido Tirado So right.

Carmen Rivera I fell in love again. It was really beautiful.

Candido Tirado Thank you.

Carmen Rivera Thank you very much.

Ira Glass Carmen Rivera and Candido Tirado told their story during an evening of traveling stories held by The Moth. They're playwrights. Both of them have plays running at the Spanish Repertory Theater in New York.

Coming up, martinis every day, El Producto cigars, no fresh fruit or vegetables, and four high school cheerleaders. That's what you get when your job is one long road trip and you are the 92-year-old George Burns. We have an eyewitness account. That's in a minute from Public Radio International when our program continues.

Act Three: Busman's Holiday

Ira Glass It's This American Life. I'm Ira Glass. Each week on our program of course we choose a theme, invite a variety of writers and performers to tackle that theme. Today's program, as our nation heads out on the road for the Memorial

Day weekend, Road Trip, the pleasures and disappointments of life on the road. We have arrived at Act Three of our program. Act Three, On the Road in a Tuxedo.

Margy Rochlin There are two ways you feel when you interview a celebrity. There are those that make you feel like a person. Then there are the kind who make you feel like a blip. There's nothing wrong with a blip interview. In fact, it's liberating. You can say whatever you want to them. They will not remember you.

Ira Glass 10 years ago reporter Margy Rochlin was sent to do a magazine story about George Burns. For a 92-year-old, he was spending a lot of time on the road. 25 shows a year at conventions and other one night gigs. Plus weeklong stints in Vegas and Atlantic City.

This is the story of a road trip as business not pleasure. George's entourage in its entirety at that time included Irving Fein, his then 77-year-old manager, and Morty Jacobs, his piano player for, at that time, 23 years.

From the start it was clear to Margy, they were kind men, they were polite men. They called her "kid" the way they called everybody "kid." They reminded her a lot of some of her older Jewish relatives. But this was a blip story.

Margy Rochlin 9 o'clock Friday night, Moscow, Idaho. University Inn. We sit around in the common living room that connects George and Irving's bedrooms. George and Irving always get connected bedrooms, with a living room in between if they can. In the late afternoon when it's quiet, this is where George and Irving like to sit. They watch television. They read the trades.

Right now Morty's here. The sun is set and it's early evening. In general, they have three main topics of conversation, the act, the schedule, and where they want to eat. Here's some typical dialogue. Morty will say, "Where should we eat?" And Irving will say, "The Broiler Room." That's the hotel steakhouse. And then George will say, "John will know." John's the handler who picked us up at the airport and drove us to the hotel. And then Irving will say, "I think we should do the Broiler Room." And then George will say, "John will know. Ask John."

And then Irving will say, "I'm making a reservation at the Broiler Room." But not moved towards the telephone. And on and on and on. It's like dialogue that David Mamet would write if David Mamet wrote scenes where absolutely nothing was at stake.

We head down to the Broiler Room. All through dinner there's this constant traffic of fans, including at one point four cheerleaders. They're wearing short skirts and tight sweaters and their nervous energy fills the room. "Go, George, Go!" they scream over and over again while they shake and wiggle and do air splits and rattle their crepe paper pom poms. Then, floor show over, they run out in a single file as if everything they do is part of a routine.

Then in comes the chef to ask for George's autograph. But George Burns likes these intrusions. He's nourished by them. When it's finally quite he says to me, "Aren't people nice?"

Because I'm a reporter, I'm a blip. But the public gets his full attention. He establishes eye contact with each approaching fan and he smiles at them and he asks how they're doing. And when he leaves the Broiler Room, he'll choose the most complicated route, slowly threading his way through the tables of the main dining room, touching people on the shoulder lightly, and saying things like, "Don't pay the check."

> **George Burns** It's nice to be here. It's nice to be anywhere.

Margy Rochlin While we're on the road I probably see him do his act five times. Each time it sounds totally spontaneous, like he's making it up right there, just riffing for the crowd, even though, give or take a gag or two, it's the exact same act he's been doing for 15 years.

> **George Burns** And thank you for that standing ovation. But it made me nervous. See, as a rule, an entertainer gets a standing ovation at the end of the show. You were afraid I wouldn't last that long.

Margy Rochlin What's amazing about all this is that on the surface the act doesn't seem to vary from city to city. But to George it's an eternal work in progress. Every night he makes microscopic changes. Maybe he'll decide to sing "Young at Heart" before "Old Bones." When he does this, he gets all worked up about it, thinks about it all day long. But this is how he's been able to be on the road for so long. This is how he keeps the act feeling fresh for himself.

Sometimes he'll change a punchline. He has a gag in his act about people having to retire when they're 70. He says, "When I was 70, I had pimples." But one day George tries out a new line on me. He says, "When I was 70, I had cupid's eczema." I think that sounds sort of dirty, but I'm not going to be the one to tell him. In fact, I have tape of this, of myself lying to the nicest man on earth.

George Burns What would you think that is, cupid's eczema?

Margy Rochlin Is that like, I don't know, young--

George Burns It doesn't sound dirty, does it?

Margy Rochlin No.

George Burns Good. OK. That's all.

Margy Rochlin Is it?

George Burns No. It's not supposed to be.

Margy Rochlin Oh. No it doesn't sound dirty.

George Burns When I was 70 I had cupid's eczema.

Irving Fein Well, that is dirty.

George Burns It isn't dirty. You're making it dirty. You don't know what cupid's eczema is. It could be anything.

Irving Fein Well, eczema is a--

Margy Rochlin A rash.

Irving Fein A rash. And cupid is the love. It's a love rash.

George Burns OK. A love rash. What's dirty about a love rash?

Margy Rochlin That's true.

Margy Rochlin George and Irving can go on like this for hours. They go back and forth and back and forth. And that night, George tries out the cupid's eczema line. It doesn't get laughs. On the way home in the car we're silent. George and a driver in the front. Me in the back, squeezed hip to elbow between Irving and Morty. Suddenly, George's rumbling voice cuts through the darkness. "I'll never do that again," he says. It's quiet for a while more. "Morty," he says, "tomorrow night let's--" and then the conversation starts all over again.

Normally when I think of going on the road, I think of waking up at any hour, of not having to be anywhere at a certain time. You're on a big adventure. The rules no longer apply. There's no accountability. But that's a civilian's road trip. I am on a very different kind of road trip.

The road trip I'm on is not about adventure and unpredictability. The road trip I'm on is about making sure that everything is the same. This is the secret to George Burns' longevity, of how he's been able to stay on the road for so long without going crazy. He wakes up at a certain time. He goes to sleep at a certain time.

When he goes on the road, he likes his driver to take him to the airport in the late morning. When he agrees to a booking it's stipulated in his contract that he'll be provided with a backless stool to sit on, a lightly rehearsed orchestra, an ashtray to flick his ashes in, and a pre-show speed ball made up of a couple of martinis chased by a cup of black coffee. He will only smoke El Productos. In the afternoon he likes to take a two hour nap. He hates fresh fruit and vegetables.

By the end of our time together, I could order for him in a restaurant if necessary. He likes bay shrimp cocktails. He likes roast chicken. He likes his martinis, but doesn't care what brand of liquor they're made with. He just wants them to come one after the other. He is 92 and no one can tell him what is good or bad for him to put in his own mouth. Same goes for what comes out of it.

As the gin and vermouth kick in, his conversation tends to get naughty. One night he recites to me a particularly memorable limerick that involves a mouse, the phrase "hickory dickory dock" and a reference to his own private parts. Morty and Irving laugh, but I don't know what to do. If I laugh too hard, I'm scared they're going to think I'm some sort of slut girl. And if I don't, then I'm a pill, no fun at all. I feel as if I'm in another country with different customs and mores, and so I simply try every possible reaction one after the other, laughing, groaning, shaking my head, waiting for something that works.

The pace is very slow. I wake up in the morning, drink coffee, wait for Irving's call. Mostly I have free time. I lay on a variety of queen-sized beds in a variety of shag carpet hotel rooms and stare up at the ceiling.

One day Irving calls to invite me to talk to George as he eats breakfast.

Irving Fein You want something, kid?

Margy Rochlin Nah. I'm just going to--

Irving Fein I could have ordered something for you.

Margy Rochlin It's OK. I already had breakfast.

Irving Fein You did, eh?

Margy Rochlin Yes, I did.

Irving Fein Did you do your cereal already, George?

George Burns No. I don't know if I can do the cereal.

Irving Fein You can do the cereal, George.

Margy Rochlin George is wearing a thick beige terry cloth bathrobe, beige pajamas, and slippers. His stiff grey toupee is somewhere in the other room. It's startling to see the man that lives underneath the hair, the stacked heeled shoes, the crisp tuxedo. He looks vulnerable, bird like.

I have this realization. This will be a man who I will get to know in the moments between words. Even on a road trip designed to avoid surprises, I find myself surprised by these men. My view of them comes to change as we spend more time together.

11:00 AM. Reno, Nevada, Bally's hotel. I'm trying to keep my focus, but I'm tired. Tired of the empty hours, tired of waiting for Irving to call. Whenever I call my boyfriend, his answering machine picks up. Finally I take the elevator to the hotel casino. I play the slot machines, mindlessly pulling down the handle. Somehow Irving finds me. I'm playing the quarter slots. I'm risking a grand total of $10, but he's positive that I will return home having handed over the title to my car. He goes away, then comes back and tells me it's time to quit. He goes away, then comes back 15 minutes later and tells me again. I'm annoyed at his nagging, and touched. To save me from financial ruin, he asks me to take a walk with him.

Irving takes my hand and loops it past his bent elbow. Arm in arm, we stroll past places with names like The Mapes Hotel and the Liberty Bell Saloon. The way Irving is almost bouncing down the street lets me know he's enjoying that we come off like a mismatched couple, that I'm his babe and he is my silver-haired, energetic sugar daddy.

Most of the time Irving does the talking. He tells me about his past. It's a history of 20th century show business, big jobs at CBS radio, in the movie studios. Jack Benny hired him to be the president of his production company. It's a long story. Every once in awhile, though, Irving asks me personal questions about my

family, about my friends, about my boyfriend. And then we head back to the hotel.

And when we get to my room, he drops me off with this thought. He says, "Leave your boyfriend. He's no good. Find someone else." And he walks away, and I stand there feeling conflicted. I think, I'm no longer a blip to Irving, but who does he think he is? He doesn't know me. He's never met my boyfriend. A couple of years later I foll his advice. And every once in awhile I think back, trying to remember what it was that I said to him, what allowed him to distill this conclusion from my small talk. How come he knew something that took so long for me to figure out?

All I could come up with was how transparent I must have seemed to these men. Transparent like teenagers are to me. I mean, how many different human stories are there? These men had already been there.

Finally, we are on the road for so long that George is treating me like old news, which is where you want to be with George. When Irving lets me into George's suite before a show, George emerges from his room wearing shiny patent leather loafers, a crisp white shirt, a bow tie, and a knee-length paisley dressing down. He is pantless. He doesn't want to put on his tuxedo slacks until the very last minute so they don't lose their knife-sharp crease.

In the pocket of these pants is a watch chain. On the watch chain is Gracie's tiny gold wedding ring. The way he tells the story of their marriage is that he discovered his one true talent when he met Gracie Allen. And he stayed married to her for 38 years. He was the brains of the act, the one who wrote almost every word she said. But she was the one who the public loved. He tells me that since her death in 1964, he visits her once a month at Forest Lawn Cemetery so he can tell her what's been going on in his life. But at first, his need to see her was so great that he'd go every day.

Tonight he shows me the ring.

George Burns When Gracie died, it was terrible. Terribly dry. Then finally I started sleeping in Gracie's bed, and that helped a lot. The night where Gracie died, that night, Bobby Darin said to me, George-- Mr. Burns he always called me-- he says, you don't want to sleep alone. Why don't I go home and sleep with you? I says, Bobby I'd love it.

Margy Rochlin That's a wonderful thing to do.

George Burns Yeah, he slept with me that night.

Margy Rochlin But I mean, did it take you a long time to get your life back together?

George Burns I was shocked when Gracie died. I didn't think Gracie should die. But you can't do anything.

Margy Rochlin So, how long did it take you to get back to work?

George Burns I started to work right away. That got nothing to with it. Show business has got nothing to do with that. You're doing your act. You're making a living. It's a different kind of--

Margy Rochlin But at that time, you were financially solvent. I mean, you had plenty of money. Wasn't it more just to take your mind off of things?

George Burns I've got plenty of money now and I'm working.

Margy Rochlin But you enjoy it.

George Burns That's right.

Margy Rochlin OK, so at that time was it more to-- what are you going to do? Just sit around.

George Burns What would you do if somebody died? You sit home and cry? How long can you cry? Cry for two hours? You cry. And you cry, and you cry. Finally there are no more tears. Now you go to work. And you feel bad. Every time you come home, you feel bad because Gracie isn't there.

Margy Rochlin One night, years later, I was sitting in a restaurant in west Los Angeles when I saw George come in. He was with a couple of men and a youngish woman. And they all hovered around him. He had aged so much. He moved slowly and was so tiny that he seemed to be lost inside of the dark suit he was wearing. They all slipped into a red booth and ordered dinner. I think the waiter brought George a martini.

When it was time to go, I walked right by him, but I didn't say hello. To George I was always a blip, just another friendly face on the road.

Ira Glass Margy Rochlin is a magazine writer in Los Angeles.

Act Four: Paw Paw for Jesus

Ira Glass Act Four, Paw Paw for Jesus. So what we want on the road, many of us, is adventure. And what is adventure but a moment or a series of moments that you never could've predicted before you left home?

We have this story about one such moment from Cheryl Trykv. A warning to listeners with children in their car. This story contains a lot of anti-social behavior.

Cheryl Trykv It's 1990 and she's wearing a 1977 bleached blond Farrah Fawcett feather do and electric blue Maybelline mascara which contrast nicely with the lime green polyester manager's pantsuit she's got on. And she's telling me, no, not for under $50 dollars a night. Not for under $50 a night will she let me leave my car in the parking lot of her Paw Paw, Michigan Speedway convenience store gas station. This, after an hour and a half of my going in and out, buying chips and juice and cigarettes, wondering what I'm going to do with the Ford Lynx I have

borrowed from a friend, which has now got a split valve or something and is busted all to hell and I'm in the middle of goddamn nowhere on the other side of Dowagiac on my way to Kalamazoo for a getaway weekend. I wanted to see America.

I ask her why I can't leave my car in the parking lot. She says it's the rule. I ask who makes the decisions about that rule. She says she does. She says, company policy. Well, whose company is it? She tells me it's her company and she doesn't break the rules. Well, you little [BLEEP] [BLEEP] [BLEEP] can you be a friend, I'm thinking to myself. I don't say it, but boy I'd like to.

Instead I remind her very softly about American hospitality and how Americans are known the world over for their friendly, peaceful, helping nature. I tell her that I noticed on my way in through her charming little town a sweet and simple church with a banner out front that read "Bold yet humble. Paw Paw for Jesus." There are few customers in the store, so I say it again, louder. Paw Paw for Jesus. Paw Paw for Jesus.

An older gentlemen with an Abraham Lincoln beard and an Elvis Presley coiffe stares at me blankly. The manager tells me to cut the crap and get out of the store. OK, I say to her. I look at her name badge, Mary Ann. I'll get out of your store. But I ain't never coming back to Paw Paw.

And I turn and walk away. As I walk away, I accidentally shove my body against a candy bar display case, knocking over hundreds and thousands of Three Musketeers, Reese's, Special Dark, and Snickers. Sweet Tarts fly and spill. A grand gesture of public nuisance. That's it, missus, Mary Ann says from behind the counter. Your big city ass is cooked. I'm calling the police. You idiot, I think to myself on my way out the door. Do I look married to you?

I make it to the highway in no time flat, speed walk backwards with my thumb in the air, calling out to passing cars, Paw Paw for Jesus, Paw Paw for Jesus. A few cars honk and wave, but nobody stops.

I can't imagine it might be what I'm wearing, the same jet black cocktail dress I wore the night before. Maybe my lipstick is too blood red for broad daylight in a small town like Paw Paw. Maybe I just don't seem like I belong here. Finally a van pulls over. It's a Chevy van, one with a mural painted on the side depicting what King Arthur and Guinevere might look like in the year 2500.

King Arthur wears a gold mesh nuclear cleanup suit. He carries a sword in one hand and a laser gun in the other. Guinevere is nude and amply buxom. Where her pubic hair might be she holds the Holy Grail. The driver leans over and opens the door. It's a man. What a surprise. I get in.

He asks how it is he's never seen me before. Maybe because I don't pose nude for Playboy. At the mention of Playboy, he steps on the gas, speeds it to 105. I've never gone 105 in a Chevy van before. it feels pretty good. Faster, I say, and we both start laughing.

I roll down my window, stick my head out, and yell Paw Paw for Jesus to the wind. I feel like taking off my top, but I don't. Instead I sit back down into the passenger seat, bucket, severely vinyl, light a cigarette and enjoy as best I can the REO Speedwagon tape he's got blasting. He asks me why I'm hitchhiking, and just as he does, a sheriff's car speeds past us on its way back into town. That's why, I say. Cops.

What have I got against cops, he wants to know. Nothing, it's just that I'm allergic to pork. It occurs to me at this point to shut up. I really don't know this man and, in all likelihood, he is brother of Mary Ann, manager of the speedway who is daughter of the Sheriff of Paw Paw and that I am headed for a trap.

And in one great, whirling moment of brilliance it becomes very clear to me what I must do and that is sham this vic. It isn't all that difficult. I've seen it in the movies. Just before Treat Williams gets his hair shaved in the woods, Beverly D'angelo steals a four door Ford from an army officer by seducing him down to his underwear. She takes off with this car, his money, and his clothes, which is exactly what I mean to do.

To prepare myself for this role of a lifetime, I change the tape to "Hotel California." The vic's neck is nasty with sweat, which I ordinarily wouldn't mind. But it has the stale, sweet taste of a flat Mountain Dew. I force myself to enjoy it. By the end of "A Last Resort," "New Kid in Town," "Wasted Time," and "Wasted Time Reprise," he is down to his Fruit of the Loom and I am wearing dark blue corduroy Levis, a Queen concert t-shirt, and a feed cap with an American flag that reads "Try Burning This One Mother[BLEEP]."

Shortly, I create in him the most urgent desire to pull over to the side of the road. And while I'm straddling his lap I somehow open the door with my foot and with my very strong legs kick him out of the van, down onto the asphalt, his stunned, sorry eyes looking up at me in surprise. Did you lose something?

30 miles or so up the road I spot a hitch hiker. Hmm, somebody needs a ride. I pull over. She's a frosty little lezebel with a shaved head and a backpack. She asks me where I'm going.

To hell. Want to come?

Ira Glass Cheryl Trykv is a writer here in Chicago.

[MUSIC - "HAPPY TRAILS" BY DAVE DUDLEY]

Credits

Ira Glass Our program was produced today by Julie Snyder and myself with Alix Spiegel and Nancy Updike. Our senior editor for this show, Paul Tough. Contributing editors Jack Hitt, Margy Rochlin and Consigliere Sarah Vowell. Production help from Jorge Just, Todd Bachmann and Sylvia Lemus.

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Margy Rochlin Don't pay the check.

Ira Glass I'm Ira Glass, back next week with more stories of This American Life.

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