

5 -Men Cannot Read Maps

Throughout his life, John continually showed me that he was a man with a drive and energy that was remarkable and a determination that was unbelievable. Anyone who succeeds in life has to have a complete determination as well as talent. John was a powerhouse of single mindedness.

The summer of 1942 we prepared to leave a hot and humid New York for good old California. We ended the lease on the house at Snedens' Landing. John decided he wanted to take everything with us, including our fine record collection and all our china, and pack it all into his grey-blue 1941 Packard convertible, which he called "Baby." He called all his cars "Baby."

"Why don't we store the china?" I asked. "We'll take it. We might be living in California and we'll need it," he replied. Even then he was not sure what he wanted to do, but his mind was made up about California, and when John made up his mind, that was it, nothing changed it.

He built up the back of the car and fixed it so that Willie (our sheepdog) could ride high up and see out; he made it so Willie could be level with our heads sat right behind us. I packed all his files and his clothes and he packed the car. We had a heated discussion over how to pack the records, some five hundred dollars' worth, of records. He packed them all one way, and I told him he should alternate, a hard end one side and then a hard end the other side. He became angry. When anyone argued with John, it was like talking to a brick wall. He was so adamant that I left him to it. He piled the records on the floor and our luggage on top, and the rug on top of that for dear Willie. The unfortunate thing was that he had the luggage we were going to use from night to night packed in the trunk! "How are we going to have fresh underwear and other necessities?" I asked. We had a few choice words over that, very choice.

"To hell with it," he blasted at me. "You can last with what you have on until we get to Wake Robin!"

That was that! Wake Robin is in Michigan, and it was the home of Paul and Rhea de Kruif, his friends. Why argue, I told myself, it won't do any good. I grabbed an overnight bag, opened two suitcases, and pulled out two pairs of socks and shorts, a couple of clean shirts and a sweater and put them in the bag. We started out for California early one morning. It was such a beautiful day as we headed out through the country. After a while we came to an "Apples for Sale" sign, and he wanted to buy some. He came back with two great big bags of apples, plus a gallon of hard cider. He was as bad as a woman at a white sale!

"We won't stop for breakfast, we'll eat the apples," he said.

We ate apples all morning. By noon John was feeling sleepy but we kept going and we stopped at some motel in Pennsylvania. In those days, in the early forties, motels weren't quite as lenient about taking pets, so poor Willie had to stay in the car all night. That upset us, and we didn't sleep very well. And the apples worked on both of us all night long, too. Needless to say, it was a restless night. I would get up, throw on some slacks and take Willie for a walk, then take him back to the car and go back to bed after the bathroom. We didn't get much sleep. Believe it or not, John found some ice and chilled the cider. That was our breakfast.

The next day John really pushed the car, and we arrived at Wake Robin exhausted. I had suspected that I was pregnant, but the ride removed that problem and by the time we arrived in Wake Robin it was all over. John was greatly relieved, and so was I.

Wake Robin is a pretty place, and we spent four glorious days and nights there, cooking and drinking with Rhea and Paul, and John and I melted into each other bodies. John also cleaned

some guns he had bought and had not told me about. Throughout our relationship and then our married life he always had to have loaded guns around the house. He had this maniacal attraction for possessing all kinds of firearms. Why, I don't know. Guns create violence, yet in John's writing there was such a wonderful bond with his fellow human, a feeling that was rich for the land, the sea and its people. There was no great emphasis on violence, just human failings and emotions.

Autumn was on its way and we repacked the car (thanks to Rhea's support), and again headed west. John kept really pushing that car; he was simply anxious to get to his beloved California where we would stay with my mother and stepfather until we found our own house. I did not drive because I am near sighted. Besides, anyone else driving always made John nervous. Oh, I would relieve him for a while in some of those lonely parts of the desert so he could put his head back. After all, he was pounding out some ten hours a day on the highways. Nothing was going to stop him from getting to Los Angeles as fast as he could.

After we arrived in Albuquerque, New Mexico, he began to complain about his back; he did have a problem with his spine and legs. We decided to relax. "I've never been to Sante Fe," he said. "Let's go." Now I love the Southwest, and travelled through it a lot when I was a kid. We stayed in some motel and John poked around the museum. He had a tremendous interest in anything historical, in fact, he was quite a historian. He went to all the Indian art stores and in one found an Indian blanket he liked and bought. That went piling into the car. The weight of "Baby" was something, what with the records, luggage, a ninety pound sheepdog and the two of us. When we hit bumps, and we hit many, we sure did know it! I felt then at any moment the transmission would go. Fortunately, it did not.

In Sante Fe John asked me about Taos. "Did you like to hang around that place? How far is it from here?"

"About seventy miles."

"Let's go." It was as simple as that. So off we went to Taos, a place steeped in history, the resting place of the legendary Western hero, Kit Carson, and a place where there are many fine reminders of the Old American West, plus a marvellous Spanish restaurant that had been there since I was a child. Taos also has, among other things, a beautiful gorge where the Colorado River begins. John was intrigued with this town. We lunched at the Spanish restaurant where they still made sopaipillas; John had been raised on that kind of food and he ate six for lunch and six more with dinner. John never ran short of an appetite for solids or liquids.

We spent a perfectly wonderful time in Taos. We spent a night in a little hotel off the Plaza where people were nice to Willie. They had never seen an Old English sheepdog, so Willie had a ball, too, with all the Mexican dogs. Dogs are such wonderful animals, often human thinking, and kinder and more loving than many a man or woman. We played around, and were the typical tourists for two days, and then John was his serious self again and anxious to get to Los Angeles.

The only way to get back on Route 66 from Taos is through Sante Fe. We piled into the car and off again we went. John drove like Bernie Oldfield, the race driver, at the wheel, staring ahead as we moved along sixty or seventy miles an hour. If he wanted a cigarette, he just leaned over and patted me on the knee, which meant, "Light me a cigarette." There was no conversation; that was his signal. Perhaps we might sing together to the radio with me carrying the harmony. After a brief stop in Sante Fe for gas we headed towards Route 66. We had been travelling for some time when I said, quietly, "John, I hate to say this, but I think we took a wrong turn."

"No we haven't. I studied the map this morning and we're going to hit Las Vegas."

“Las Vegas?” I said, with surprise.

“Yes, I’d like to look it over, see what it’s like” he went on.

Politely I said, “Well, I’ve been looking over the land and it doesn’t look familiar to me.”

“Well, I studied the map and it says Las Vegas 150 miles, and the map isn’t wrong.”

How could Las Vegas, Nevada, be 150 miles from Santa Fe I asked myself? I shrugged my shoulders. There wasn’t any point in further comment. By this time, Willie was drooling over my neck and pawing me. “I think we’ll have to stop for Willie, darling.”

“He’ll have to wait. I want to be in Las Vegas for lunch.”

I kept quiet, although by now I knew it wasn’t the right road. John asked me to reach in the funny box, the glove compartment, and get his dark glasses. I did, and put them on him. “John dear, if we’re heading west, why is the sun in our face and it’s already eight in the morning?”

“For God’s sake, I don’t care how many times you’ve gone over this country with your family – I looked at the map!” was his retort.

Actually, we had already gone some ninety-nine miles due east!

“I don’t think you know as much about this country as you say you do,” he said.

“Want to stop the car and we’ll get out your compass, dear?”

He kind of laughed, but he was mad and drove on. We began to come across funny little towns and then, suddenly there was a sign that read “Las Vegas 25 miles.”

“That’s impossible! We’ve only been on the road two hours, and if we’re going due west, how the hell can the sun be in our eyes?” I said.

With that, he slammed his hands on the wheel and said, “Goddammit! I’m doing the driving.”

“All right, all right,” I said and lapsed into silence. Soon we came into something as well populated as Los Alamos bombing field – a few shacks and a sign that read, “Welcome to Las Vegas.”

There was never any arguing with John. He was right and I and everyone else were wrong. That was all there was to it. We came to this little town and spotted a kind of cantina. “It must be the outskirts,” he said. By now I gave up and he gunned the motor to a short rise. Over the top we found some men doing some construction work, a tough looking bunch. “Lock your door,” John snapped. I pushed the lock button. “Get the gun out,” he said. I did. Suddenly, there was no road and we hit bottom. We were stuck because the car was so damned heavy.

I realized that John was really frightened. We sat there as the wheels spun. “We’re going to have to get these men to help us, dear,” I said.

“Let me do it my way,” he answered. Always, always it had to be his way, the Steinbeck way, never anyone else’s, because he said that was the right way. The men began to walk toward us. Whenever John was nervous or angry he broke out in perspiration. Sweat just ran down his face. The men came over, three of them, and one said in a heavy Spanish accent, “I theenk you’re going to need some help, meester.”

“I think I am,” John said through a window open about two inches. Right beside him he had a cocked thirty-eight. The men had brought some planks and pushed the car and we got out of the deep sand.

“Isn’t this Las Vegas?” John asked, greatly relieved and very grateful.

“Si,” answered the man. “Si, Las Vegas.”

“Nevada?”

“No, New Mexico.”

The rest of the day John did not utter a single word to me, and we never did reach Las Vegas, Nevada. He went back on Route 66. He still did not speak to me. I did not dare ask him to stop and let Willie out, and he did not ask me if I wanted to go to the bathroom, either. I knew that whenever he was in that kind of mood the only thing to do was shut up and be quiet.

We drove something like five hours in total silence. Finally, he stopped at a diner and said he wanted coffee. It came as a relief to me, not to mention dear Willie. I took Willie for some exercise and wrung his tights, as they say. We took off again, and still John didn’t talk to me. The radio was on, and, except for the purr of the engine there was total silence. Nothing to break the ice. In a way I was frightened. I was afraid that if we stopped for gas he might go off and leave me: that’s how angry he was over making a mistake. It was nearing twilight and the sun again was in our eyes. I broke the silence. “Where do you want to stop for the night?”

“I’m going right through to Los Angeles.”

We arrived in Los Angeles the following morning and he had done nothing but pound that highway. It was almost daylight when we woke up my mother and stepfather. They were not expecting us until the following day. John was completely exhausted, and I wasn’t feeling any better. Even poor Willie was shaking. John had a stiff Scotch and mother made a pot of coffee. I don’t remember what John did, but I know I slept solid for twelve hours. It had taken us less than five days to get to Los Angeles from New York.

I don’t really blame John for his frustration. He had goofed, badly. I do not believe any of us want to make a mistake, even though of course we do. And of course, that time he did.

John decided to rent a house. He found one, furnished, in the San Fernando Valley. By this time he was involved in the filming of *The Moon is Down*, the story of the Resistance in World War II. That book sold over a million copies, and Twentieth Century Fox bought the film rights. The motion picture was released in the spring of 1943. Anyway, John arranged for the Haitian woman who had worked for us at Snedens’ Landing to join us. Her voodoo intrigued him, and besides, he loved the way she fried fish. She would not fly, so she came by train. She stayed with us the whole time we lived in that house in the valley.

John returned to a normal state of communication with the world around him, and his life once more was pleasant. We spent Thanksgiving and Christmas in the valley with Mother, my stepfather and numerous friends. There was plenty of party action, but John still worked. He worked Monday through Friday on the script of *The Moon is Down* but when the weekend arrived we saw friends and the corks were pulled. We had some great times with the Burgesses and the Milestones. We went to most of the Hollywood restaurants and usually ran into people we knew, maybe at Mike Romanoff’s or Dave Chasen’s, heavy movie star and celebrity hangouts. The Wagner boys were around and we often had dinner with them.

While we were in the valley, Jack Wagner approached John with an original story, but he could not write it. John did. I have the original outline of that story, which John typed. It was *Medal For Benny* that on screen starred John Arturo de Cordova and Dorothy Lamour.

The first part of January 1943, we headed back to New York. John decided he did not like Los Angeles any more nor did he like living in southern California either. It lacked privacy, he said. Being on the move again did not matter to me. We were together.

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