

A Cornish Odyssey by Axel Forrester

Chapter One



I didn't know the first thing about Cornwall before I went there, and that was probably for the best. When my finger landed on Penzance, in Land's End, Cornwall, the westernmost part of England, I knew that's where my adventure would start. Penzance! It even sounded like adventure. Pirates of Penzance! This was exactly what I needed for my summer holiday this year. As a high school art teacher in North Hollywood, I was in desperate need of change. It was getting harder each year to convince myself that I had the life I wanted.

My parents were both teachers. I had three older sisters. Teacher. Teacher. Teacher. Check. Check. Check. As the youngest and the only son, I was determined to break with this relentless pattern. Cultivating an Oscar Wilde look, I wore a black beret to high school, and for good measure, a cape. My parents declared this to be a phase, saying it too would pass. They liked to remind me that up until this point I had been sure I was going to be a professional snowboarder.

I reminded them in turn, that it was their fault it hadn't happened. They were the ones who made me live miles away from the nearest ski slopes.

While I wasn't Valedictorian of my high school, like my sister, I did get the class award for 'most likely to do something creative.' During my last year as an art major at Cal State Northridge, my older sister, Greta, suggested I go an extra year and get a teaching credential, just in case. 'In case of what?' I had asked. 'Oh, you know, in case you want to eat.'

The arguments at the dinner table got more heated. One night, my father, a political science professor at UCLA, quoted John Adams at me. 'I must study politics and war, that my son may have the liberty to study mathematics, philosophy, and art.' I responded with a quote of my own, from Benjamin Franklin. 'Many people die at twenty-five and aren't buried until they are seventy-five.'

While I won that battle, I lost the war. I knew I wasn't cut out to starve, or borrow money from my father, so I caved and got the credential. It landed me a job at an arts and science high school in North Hollywood (Noho). I taught photography. It was brutal my first year, but gradually, I nailed it. The one perk of this job was that I had summers off, and long breaks to make my own art, the photographs I developed in the darkroom I set up in my apartment.

The arts faculty at NoHo Arts and Science might have looked artsy, but I was the real deal. My photographs were edgy. Dark. Very dark. I had a one-man show at ArtHYPE. Some of my students came to the opening. Some girls anyway. The boys could not have cared less.

This year I turned forty. Yeah. I know. Unbelievable, right? I'd been teaching there for fifteen years and, I'll be honest with you, it was not going well. There were grey hairs at my temples, flab around my waist, and I had jowls. Clearly, the toxic school environment was to blame. There were bells every hour to jolt us on to the next activity. Everything was so scheduled, so over organised. The place was totally risk-averse. The faculty meetings went on to infinity. And there were these soul... crushing... pep rallies. Watching the football team warm-up was, in my opinion, a torturous waste of time and, frankly, humiliating. Parading all that equipment in front of us was meant to drive home the fact that the sports budget was ten times greater than the art or science budget.

Cornwall, on the other hand, sounded like just the sort of place to get my mojo back. A walking trip along the Cornish coast would revive me! The stunning scenery. The fresh air. Cornish pasties! It would give me a whole new perspective, ignite my creativity, and restore my balance. Best of all, I could visit an exotic country without having to learn a foreign language! I'd read up on the place and learn things. Cornwall must have had pirates. Pirates of Penzance! I'd photograph the landscape and the colourful Cornish people. The new digital camera I just bought would be my faithful companion. Maybe I'd write a grant when I got back, to fund an exhibit of the photos. It would look good on the old resume. My department chair, Bill Bentley, would like that. He was always telling me to take more initiative. So, I'd take initiative! I'd go to Cornwall!

An intensive Google search brought me to the website of a company called The Intrepid Traveller. Their website was reassuringly old fashioned. Quaint. I fired off an email, telling them I wanted to walk the coast of Cornwall, from Penzance to St Ives, in five days, in early July.

A chap named Graeme got back to me via email and said he could arrange for me to stay at highly rated, private B&B's at Mousehole, Porthcurno, St Just, Zennor and St Ives. Breakfast included. Full English. Full English? Did this mean my hosts would be 100% English? Well, why not? Give me the Full English! He also said my bags would be transported from place to place. How convenient!

Graeme called the following week. He sounded full English.

'So, you're an American? What state are you in?'

'California.'

'And may I ask your age?'

'Thirty-five.' There was nothing wrong with a little white lie. Everyone lies about their age in California. It's expected.

'Your weight and height?'

'Whoa! Dude! You NEVER ask someone's weight in California!'

There was a momentary silence as he gathered himself.

'Well, uh...we need to get an idea of your fitness level, for our insurance, Sir.'

'Oh, I'm fit. No worries there.'

Graeme took a deep breath.

'This walk is listed on our website as moderate, but as an American, you'll find it difficult.'

I laughed.

He went on.

'In our experience, Americans are not used to the strenuous nature of our coastal walks. There are a lot of ups and downs, and rough walking. You'll probably need to do some training before you come. Do you take the stairs at work?'

'I told you. I'm fit. Very fit, in fact.'

'Yes, well, the first day is fourteen miles. But don't worry. You can always take the bus.'

'I am in tip-top condition, Graeme. I take frequent walks in the High Sierras. I've noticed that Cornwall hasn't any mountains to speak of. I will have no trouble with this coast walk, I assure you.'

I thought I was sounding a little English now myself.

Graeme went quiet again. Then, he cleared his throat.

'Right. I'll be sending the safety information to you in a few days. Please read all of it carefully, sign the waivers, and be sure to get everything on the equipment list. You'll have to be prepared for all weather.'

'In July?'

'Especially in July.'

'OK. Fine.'

'And remember. You can always—'

'Take the bus. Yes, I remember, but I wouldn't dream of it!'

'As you wish. Good-Bye, Mr Decker.'

'Grant. Call me Grant.'

'Good-Bye, Mr Decker.'

I hung up the phone. There was no way in hell I was going to take a bus on my walking adventure around Cornwall. I'd show this Graeme person what I was made of. Not all Americans were obese and lazy. Some of us were fit, intrepid travellers.

It was May. I didn't get to the High Sierras that weekend, or the next, but I did see a movie called High Sierra, which was great. Humphrey Bogart stars in this classic noir film about a bank robber on the lam in the High Sierras with his mother, his associates, and the loot. He meets a beautiful, young, crippled woman and must make a terrible choice. I won't spoil the ending for you.

At the end of June, the school was, once again, the scene of mass panic attacks as students ran around seeking help with their over-ambitious final projects. At the end, there were awards ceremonies, more awards ceremonies, and farewell parties. At the very end, there was the grading. All our art students got 'A's'. It was more or less expected. The art teachers just had to find a way to justify these grades with numbers. On the last day, in the last hour, I was there in my office, as

usual, adding everything up and dividing by prime numbers until things came out right. When my grades were finally uploaded, I shut down the computer, secured my classroom door and headed home, free at last!

I changed into my running clothes and drove up to Rocky Peak Park. It was a lot closer than the High Sierras and would do for one last shot at training. Parking by the side of the road, I locked the door and went for a five-mile hike, my keys jiggling in my pocket. It seemed like hours, because—it was hours. When I finally limped back to the car, I had a stitch in my side and was breathing hard. My training done, I gave myself an 'A,' for effort and drove home, sweaty and satisfied. It was June 30th. The next day I was on a plane bound for London.