

***HERB'S FIRST
100 YEARS***

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The Book of Truths

A novel by Randy Perkins

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This story is dedicated to everyone I have ever known.

You know who you are.

Thank you.

Truth #122

*Every person's life is a work in progress,
shaped every moment by the things they think, say, and do*

Sunday, December 8th, 1996

If you ever find yourself at Denver's airport around sunrise, look west and witness a sight often pleasing to the eye. On most days you will see a handful of snow-crested peaks reaching tall into the thin, mile-high air. Just ahead of sunrise, as darkness is chased west, a wave of cold air runs brisk across the landscape bringing a crispness invigorating to both skin and lungs. The sun crests the flat eastern horizon and the mountains are bathed in a reddish-pink glow.

As I watched this sight come to light, a familiar voice rolled passed my ears calling a question from behind. "Are you on time, Randy?"

I turned to find Samuel Sampson pulling a luggage cart. They moved as if attached, a tool in the hand of its master. A carpenter has his hammer, a surgeon his scalpel, a painter his brush. Sam has his luggage cart and loaded or empty, it always seems to move for him in an effortless glide. "Van is due any minute," I replied.

"New York, New York," he said ruffling through a stack of airline luggage tags as if it was a deck of cards. "You know, they're buildin' a replica in Las Vegas. S'pose-to-be quite the place. I get to Vegas pretty often. When I hit a big payoff, maybe then I'll take some money and visit the real one."

Sam is a skycap; a man experienced with the intricacies of moving luggage from city to city, country to country... He has

always been quick to provide me a much needed and always appreciated helping hand.

“How many times you been to New York, Randy?”

“A few dozen, I guess. You’ve never been?”

“Juss-cuz I work at the airport don’t mean I ever get to go anywhere. And when I do go somewhere, Vegas is the place for me.”

“You should try one of our tours. Take your wife on vacation. I’ll see you get a discount on the trip.”

“I appreciate that, Randy. I really do. But I don’t think we’re quite ready for one of your tours yet. Seems to me like all your people are... Pardon me for putting it this way but they’re...”

“Old?” I replied for him. We were both chuckling as my cell phone rang. Answering, I listened to an update from a dispatcher then answered, “Tell your driver I’m on Level Five, Door 506.”

“Close?” Sam asked.

“Five minutes.” I replied as I adjusted my tie, put a mint in my mouth and flexed the corners of my lips hoping to set my expression in some fashion of a pleasant grin.

“You ever get tired of doin’ this? I mean, it seems to me you travel a lot.”

“Do you ever get tired of moving your cart?”

Sam answered, “I see what you mean.”

“I must tell you though, this trip is something special. There is no place like New York City.”

“What-do-ya-do when ya get there?”

“Visit the sights, eat in the restaurants, see a few shows, and make sure the ladies have adequate opportunities to shop. It’s a busy trip. There won’t be any free time for me. If I’m not with the group showing them the sights, then I’m on the phone with vendors or checking in with the office. There is always something I need to do.”

“How many years you been a tour guide?”

“Four years. Almost five.”

Before long, the van appeared at the end of the causeway. Sam stepped out onto the pavement and waved an arm in an attempt to signal the driver where we were. Upon seeing Sam, the driver sped up, steered toward us and with an alarming lack of precision, brought the vehicle to a stop. Stepping up, I opened the sliding door of the van and was immediately struck by the looks on all but one of the faces.

“Good morning,” I said to the twelve people. “My name is Randy Perkins and I will be your guide for the next six days.” Some of them were frighteningly pale.

“Sir,” the woman nearest me said in a cross, anger-filled tone, “did you have anything to do with hiring this driver?”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Comments erupted from the group in a cadence of resentment and fear. “DOES HE HAVE A DRIVERS LICENSE? - HE MIGHT HAVE KILLED US. HE SCARED ME NEAR TO DEATH! – I’LL BE CALLING A CAB ON OUR RETURN.” This was not a good way to start my tour.

As I tried to process the comments my eyes moved from face to face and came to rest upon a man sitting in the far corner of the back row. A broad smile creased the wrinkled skin of his cheeks. He was the only member of the group who seemed unperturbed by the ride. Upon eye contact, he let his head bob with a nearly imperceptible acknowledging nod.

“I’m sorry folks. Please accept my apologies and rest assured we will be taking action to correct whatever has happened here. Your safety is of utmost importance and fear should never be a part of your tour.” I cast my eye to the driver’s seat and wondered where the man had gone.

“He should lose his license!” the woman nearest me reiterated, pointing at the empty seat. Other passengers nodded to agree.

“If you will all gather inside the double doors, you’ll find an area where you can sit and relax for a few minutes.” I pointed and repeated, “Inside the door and to the right. Restrooms are located a short walk down the lobby. In a few minutes, we will

all need to check in with a representative from the airline. After that you can start making your way to the gate.”

“What gate are we leaving from?” a woman asked.

“B-10, but you need to see the ticket agent and check in before you go anywhere.”

“Where do we do that?” someone else asked.

“Here,” I repeated. “An agent is on her way and we have arranged a special check-in that will happen in the waiting area just inside the double doors.”

“What airline are we flying?” another queried.

“What about my bags?” still another chimed in.

One by one, I answered their questions and offered the women a helping hand as they stepped out of the van. The last person off was the calm, smiling gentleman. As he twisted and sidestepped his way around the other seats, he shifted an ivory-handled collapsible cane and a brown leather folio from hand to hand.

“Can I help you with those?”

“Thank you ,” he said handing me his things. His cane was light as a feather. The folio felt like it contained the Denver telephone book.

“This is the hardest part of our journey,” I said, “getting in and out of the van.”

His smile grew slightly wider as he set his feet on the pavement and straightened. “Herb Conroy,” he introduced himself, took his things and extended his hand.

“Good to know you, Herb. Randy Perkins.” I shook his hand.

Herb looked to be a man in his early to mid-eighties. Tall and thin, he had a strong handshake but a very bony hand. His clothes were vintage 1960s - gray slacks, gray sport coat and a matching Landry hat. Hazel eyes were bright and alert. He had a slight bend and unnatural flat spot in the bridge of his nose. It looked to me like it had been broken more than once. With a flick of his wrist, Herb extended his cane. Folio tucked under an arm, he adjusted his hat and made his way inside.

All of the group looked to be in their late seventies or older and in spite of the problems with getting them to the airport, all seemed healthy, alert, and mobile. It's not a good thing when the first person associated with your company makes full use of an opportunity to frighten or piss off your passengers. I turned my attentions to the back of the vehicle where I expected to find Sam and the driver unloading luggage. Instead, I found the man kneeling on a rug on the sidewalk, bowing and chanting. Sam looked at me and shrugged.

"Excuse me," I said. "It's time to unload luggage."

"Can't you see I'm praying?" he replied.

"Yes, I can. It would also appear my passengers had to say a few prayers on the way in this morning." The man continued to chant and bow. "I've never seen a group more frightened by a ride." He looked up but continued to bow.

Sam read my frustration and moved with me to the back door of the van. "What religion you s'pose he's practicing?" he asked as I opened the door and handed him a suitcase.

"Why?"

"He's facin' west. Don't know of any religions who pray to the west."

"Salt Lake City is west of here. Maybe he is Mormon."

"More like a moron," Sam replied as he started to tag the bags.

Just as I finished pulling the last suitcase, the driver appeared, rug in hand. "What's your name?" I asked.

"What's it to you?"

"It's everything to me. I think I'm safe in saying you won't be driving for us again."

"Screw you, shithead," he eloquently replied. "Pay me and I will be on my way."

"You'll have to see your boss for your paycheck."

"LISTEN UP," he barked as he poked his index finger at my chest stopping just short of contact. "The only reason I'm up at dawn carting these old bastards around is 'cause I was told there would be cash for me when I dropped them off. Hand it over."

Sam moved around behind the man and winked at me as if to say he was ready to help, but I shook him off and pulled an envelope out of my coat pocket that contained a \$50 gratuity in cash.

“See ya,” he said snatching it from my hand. With a cocky strut, he made his way back to the driver’s seat.

“Good help is hard to find, Randy,” Sam said.

“Yes it is,” I replied. “Yes it is.”

With the luggage tagged and on its way, I gave Sam two \$20s, thanked him, and reminded him of when we were scheduled to be back. “You have my cell number?” he asked.

I nodded, “ I will call you if anything changes or we are late.”

Inside, I again greeted my dozen travelers. “Folks, welcome to Denver International Airport. Please let me apologize again for this morning’s ride. Let’s not let this unfortunate incident get in the way of your vacation.” Most of them bobbed their heads in agreement. “The first thing we need to do is check in with the airline. In a minute, a representative will be down to ask security questions and look at your ID’s. After that, feel free to make your way to the gate. Or if you’d rather walk with me, I’ll be heading that way just as soon as we are done here.”

“Where are our bags?” one of the ladies asked.

“The skycap has them and is checking them through to Newark.”

“When will I see it again?”

“It will be delivered to your room at the hotel in Manhattan.”

“When do I get my ticket?”

“I will give you your boarding ...”

Check-in was uneventful. The ticket agent from the airline arrived and asked her questions and checked ID’s. I used the opportunity to mingle with my passengers, pass out packets of information, and get a feel for the group. Three of them had traveled with the company before, but none of them had traveled with me. After clearing security, an underground

shuttle whisked us to our concourse. From there, it was a short walk to the gate. With everyone accounted for, I passed out boarding passes and tried to connect faces with names. “I’m sorry, you are?”

“Theda McCracken,” the woman replied. “But I would prefer that you call me Rose.”

I thumbed through my stack of tickets. “Ever been to New York, Rose?” From the corner of my eye I noticed the lady sitting next to her roll her eyes.

“Yes, but it was years ago. My husband, Frank, he’s been dead for 20 years now, we went to New York for our honeymoon.”

“What year would that have been?”

“1945.”

“Wow. I can safely say the city has changed a lot since then. What do you remember most about New York in 1945?”

“Well I guess what I remember most was the war. Frank was wounded fighting in Italy. When he was well enough to come home, the first thing we did was get married. Everything seemed so uncertain. We didn’t know what was going to happen from one day to the next. Well Frank had seen New York before he was shipped to Europe, but he didn’t get to spend any time there and when we talked about a honeymoon, he asked if it was someplace I wanted to see. We had a wonderful time. And for me, the biggest city I had seen before that was Denver. Denver wasn’t very big back then. It was a small city compared to New York in 1945. It was so exciting.” She paused for a moment and then said, “I know now what I remember most about New York in 1945. I remember being in love.”

Theda Rose McCracken seemed as gentle and pleasant as a person could be. “And I’m guessing you would be Fanny Hosack,” I said to the woman seated next to Rose. Fanny was the woman most vocal about the recklessness of the driver of the van. Rose and Fanny would be sharing a room.

“Yes, I am.”

“Ever been to New York, Fanny?”

“Oh yes, several times. Tell me Randy, is there any chance we could be upgraded to first class. I see you have tucked us in the back of the airplane. Considering the price we paid for this trip, I was sure we would be flying first class.”

“I’m sorry Fanny, we might be able to get you moved to a different seat, but none of us are flying first class.”

“I have a medical condition. I really need the extra room.”

Fanny also had a terrible case of bad breath; as sour as rancid milk. “And what would that condition be?” I asked stepping back in search of fresh air.

“My ankles swell,” she said in a near whisper.

I looked down at Fanny’s ankles. “What would you like me to do for you?”

Rose interrupted, “Oh it’s all right. We’ll be okay, won’t we Fanny?”

“Could you at least try to get us upgraded to first class?”

“That’s too much trouble, Fanny,” Rose protested. “Don’t be a pest.”

“If no one is using those seats, why shouldn’t we make use of them? Good God Rose, it does not hurt anyone to ask.”

“Ladies,” I offered, “let me see what I can do.”

Before attending to Fanny’s request, I continued to hand out boarding passes and ended up with two in my hand. I scanned the waiting area for Herb Conroy but didn’t see him anywhere. “Virginia Crawford,” I called and scanned for an acknowledgment. “Virginia Crawford,” I called again. As far away as our seating area allowed, a hand halfheartedly lifted above the owner’s head. The woman squirmed a bit in her chair as I approached. “Mrs. Crawford, how nice it is to meet you.” I handed her a boarding pass and took note that she was unusually tense. Apprehension seemed to emanate from her pores. “Are you all right?”

She shook her head no. “I’m having second thoughts about this trip.”

“Can I ask why?” I sat down in an empty chair next to her.

“I’m thinking now I’ve bitten off more than I can chew. You see, I’ve never flown. I know it’s silly. I bet I’m the only person in Colorado who hasn’t flown. I always knew it would bother me, but I didn’t think I would be shivering in my shoes. Maybe it was our ride to the airport. Am I’m overreacting? I don’t know what to do. Could you please tell me what to do?”

“What do you think would happen if you were to get on this airplane?”

“I suppose I’m worried it could crash.”

“Yes, I suppose it could. But you know, you could have crashed on the way to the airport this morning. In fact, that is much more likely to happen than crashing in an airplane. Mrs. Crawford,”

“Please call me Ginny,” she interrupted.

“Ginny, if you don’t feel comfortable getting on this airplane, then you shouldn’t.”

“But I really want to see New York.”

“Then come.”

“I’m worried I might panic.”

“Do you panic?”

“Only since my husband died.”

Visualizing Ginny in a panic on the airplane, all kinds of unpleasant images came to mind. Ginny passing out from trepidation - Ginny having a heart attack - Ginny pacing the aisle like a caged animal - Ginny frantic with fear... The scenarios went on and on. “Maybe it would be best if you stayed behind.” I suggested.

“You won’t take me?”

“It doesn’t sound like you are able to go.”

“I think I could be all right.”

“You think?”

“I just don’t know what to do. Tell me what to do and it will be okay.”

If ever in my life I had witnessed despair, it was at that moment looking at Ginny’s face. She sat back in her chair

unsure, full of fear, and on the verge of tears. “I’m sorry, Ginny, I can’t tell you what to do.”

“Come with us,” came the voice of Herb Conroy from over my shoulder. The tone carried an assurance comforting to even me. He crouched clutching his leather folio under his left arm and leaned in on his cane. “It’s going to be quite the journey. The Big Apple. Gotham. Possibly the greatest city on earth. Every street has a story to tell. Every corner will seem familiar or remind you of something - a movie - a song. Times Square, the Empire State Building, Wall Street, the United Nations, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Broadway shows and fancy restaurants. Isn’t that why you signed up for this trip, to see those things and to stand on the streets of Manhattan?”

“Yes, that’s exactly why I signed up.”

“Then this is your chance. Come with us.”

It was easy for Herb to tell Ginny to come along. He would not be responsible for her if she should freak.

“What do you say, Randy? Don’t you think Ginny should see New York City?”

“Absolutely. But I also think Ginny knows better than anyone whether or not she will be comfortable on the airplane.”

“Could I sit with one of you?”

Herb looked to me and replied with the same, comforting tone, “I’m sure Randy can arrange most anything.” His grin widened as if to playfully challenge me.

I said, “Let me see what I can do.”

Truth #43
Life is an adventure

With a little help from the agent at the gate, I managed to get Ginny, Herb and I all seated together. I figured since Herb had convinced the worrisome woman to come along, it might be helpful to have him close should the need arise to help keep her calm. Besides, I liked the man right off; there was something about him that was easy to be around. The three of us sat with