

# **THE TRAVELER'S CURSE**

TJ Huizar

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## CHAPTER 1

Not everyone flies direct. At least not me, TJ. It was pitch black on the platform as far as the eye could see. My head was pounding from fatigue and my limbs felt faint, a discomfort that made it all the more difficult to brave the frozen winds rushing in from the east. I was all alone at a ghostly station on the outskirts of New York City—still in Jersey, last time I checked—and I needed to find a way into Lower Manhattan by train. It was unacceptably early in the morning, and I hadn't slept much the night before. Even on the first day of many months of adventure around the world, I was already in a losing battle for warmth and safety. But if New York was cold, then Russia would be colder.

From a void of darkness, a pair of lights emerged. Surely my desired train, if not a teasing mirage. I reached for the heavy backpack resting at my shin, peeled it from the floor as if there were some magnetic force keeping it so stubbornly still, and I threw it over my shoulders with a commanding force. I was a strong teenager by most comparisons—genetics helped on that front—but any bag with such an unforgivable weight would be enough to make even the bulkiest man groan.

“Incoming train,” the overhead whined.

The frail, tinny carcass of a once-healthy train screeched into the station. I stepped into the skeletal remains of one of New York's infamous subway cars and crept through several rows of seats, carefully avoiding the chairs diseased with strange odors or unidentifiable liquids. I found one row,

noticeably less foul-smelling than the others, and decided to claim two seats for myself and the backpack, which was about the size and weight of a young toddler. The doors shut abruptly with a crash, the engine moaned, and the train began to move.

I took a deep breath and appreciated the warmth. With a dramatic exhale, I worked my way into a cozy position for the next hour of the ride. The train rocked me into a light sleep.

“Tickets ...”

I rubbed my eyes and spun my head to locate where the faint groan had come from.

“Ticket, please.”

There he was. Six rows up, a burly man in his forties, and nothing short of a giant, was making his way toward me. In any other situation, it would've been standard to produce a ticket and go on with my day. At Newark Liberty, however, there was no gap in my tight schedule to buy a ticket if I wanted to make the first train on time. But I would have to retell that story to the largest man in Metro New York.

“Where's your ticket, kid?”

“You see ...” I searched for the right words through a gaping mouth. I had no more than five seconds to create a perfect alibi. “I must've dropped it somewhere. Let me try to—”

“You know you need a ticket.” The man's figure was as imposing as his booming voice and rancid morning breath.

“I know it's somewhere around here,” I patted my countless pockets, “but I don't know where I put it.”

“Take your time,” the conductor snarled with the same sneer of a troll under a bridge.

He continued to tower over me for some time, refusing to give up ground. His eyes were fixed sleepily on my dancing curly hair. I was forced to continue a frantic charade of looking through every hole in my clothing to drive home my act.

Getting caught without a ticket was a costly sport, and I certainly didn't have the budget to cover the potential losses.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not from around here if you can't tell. We don't exactly have trains in Arizona."

The man didn't laugh.

The wailing locomotive replaced my inner train of thought as it screeched to a sonorous halt. I looked up at the conductor, at the train doors, then back at the conductor with concern. "I'm sorry, sir!" I picked up my bag and dashed for the metal doors as they flew open.

"Hey, kid! Come back here!"

But I was not interested. I wrapped the backpack around my left and then my right shoulder, as I sprinted away from the ogre of a man who was eager to punish. The conductor raced behind by foot, each step a thundering clap that shook the platform. I committed to fleeing at any cost as the man on my tail gained ground. There was a turnstile a few strides ahead, one that required a ticket to exit, so I had no choice but to jump over it. I mentally prepared for the leap, keeping in mind that the backpack would weigh me down on the landing. I knew that if I couldn't clear the turnstile, I would be in for some serious trouble.

"Hey, you!" the conductor's voice boomed.

I pretended it wasn't directed at me, even if the most elementary sense of social awareness told me it was. I glanced around for other conductors who could relay his pursuit. The coast was clear. I gracefully leaped over the turnstile, recalling countless mornings working out at the park with my father, and slipped into a train waiting patiently on the other side.

The conductor groaned in defeat, trapped by the barricade between us. I caught sight of a subway map and noticed I was on the correct train, only two stops away from the World Trade Center. I dove for a seat as the doors slammed and the

engine roared into action. I was in the clear, and my getaway vehicle was on the move.

Although I panted heavily and suspiciously, none of the other passengers looked my way. The early-rising crowd of college students, construction workers, and medical professionals had no interest in the bizarre affairs of others around them. They simply wanted a few extra minutes of sleep before another laborious clock-in. I recognized that I had made it to the East Coast because of the funky smells, but I knew that I was officially in Manhattan because of the back-breaking work ethic shown in the early-risers all around me.

I collected my breath in the stale subway air. As I slouched defeated in a rock-solid seat, I noticed the skyline of Lower Manhattan outside the greasy window. The horizon was draped with a dazzling arrangement of gothic high-risers and skyscrapers, the only source of light in a day breaking sky. Each shadowy tower seemed as intimidating as they were mesmerizing. I knew the unwritten rules of life would change once I set foot in those alleyways, but that very enigma only drew me closer to the metropolis.

I had finished high school one semester early, so I was taking the following winter and spring as an opportunity to explore parts of the world I had dreamed of seeing for years. I had been to many countries as exotically distant as Egypt, China, and Guatemala, though every other trip had been with friends or family and under less intense circumstances. New York was already proving itself a harrowing beast, and the ominous skyline tased me with a rush of seriousness. I was truly alone, which meant every action would come at a cost. Every minute of sleep—or lack thereof—would be paid for in the following days and hours.

“Next station, World Trade Center,” the overhead unintelligibly roared.

The train went into a tunnel, and the distant skyline melted into the blemished waves of Hudson Bay. The second half of the journey was riddled with views of darkness and conformity, but I was gaining energy and ready to ascend into the streets of Manhattan.

The train came to a shaky halt. I disembarked and made my way through the soggy puddles of old snow and up a small flight of stairs. Within minutes, I was in the World Trade Center's central station, which was as large as it was busy. People coming here all had something to do and somewhere to be, even at the crack of dawn. It was the same New York City that I had known from golden-age films and classic literary works.

I passed locals speaking languages from every linguistic family imaginable—from men in yellow construction vests chatting in West African dialects to Eastern European women speaking with distinctly Slavic sounds on the phone. It was an organized chaos that I quickly grew fond of.

I walked out of the station and onto West Street. Every step I took was a battle against the strong winds, which were all channeled through the gridded avenues of New York, making them feel even harsher against my skin. While my torso was prepared for the weather with the protection of a heavy jacket, my face and hands were much more exposed to the cruel seasonal elements.

There was no time to waste. I turned right as I exited the station, passing the September Eleventh Memorial pools where the Twin Towers once stood. To the right of the fountains, the gleaming One World Trade Center towered in pride despite a trying past. I pushed against the breeze for over ten minutes to complete a walk that would've taken less than five on a normal day. I wasn't complaining, however, when the sky turned to a royal tone of purple and I was treated to a view of the waking metropolis.

To my delight, I had reached the southernmost end of the island in one piece. I could even make out the Statue of Liberty's metallic figure with a strong squint. I looked back towards the heart of the city where the skyscrapers were too tall to see all at once. To get a complete view, I had to crane my neck upwards, further exposing my throat to the biting cold.

I appreciated the omni-directional urban scene, which became even more satisfying as the rising sun painted the sky with a familiar incandescent orange. Naturally, I took a deep breath to savor the moment. *Bad idea.* The air was far too cold, and it stung my sleepless lungs. I tried to keep my hands warm in my coat, but pockets alone were simply not enough. My palms turned into a beet red and quivering mess within seconds.

With a second look around the bay, I traced the sun as it climbed over the eastern horizon. It was the first sunrise I had seen in quite a long time, but I knew that with my upcoming plans, it would be far from the last over the next few weeks and months.

"What a beautiful sunrise," I whispered into the air. I was never shy to talk to myself. Nobody understood TJ like TJ, after all.

"Hey, kid," an airy voice rang in my ears.

I mistook it for the brushing of wind.

"Hey, brotha," the voice sang again.

I spun around.

A few steps to my right was a homeless man with an untamed beard, and more than likely Jamaican judging by the accent. He had appeared out of nowhere. In fact, I was completely alone when I had first arrived at the pier.

"What's up?" I addressed the Jamaican man calmly.

"Is it a botha to ask you for some spare change, man?"

“Do you need cash?” I asked, a bit preoccupied with fighting the cold.

“Ya, man, just four-hundred dollars is all I need.”

“I don’t think I have four-hundred on me.” I was stunned to receive such a request, but oddly unsurprised.

“OK, alright. Just tri-hundred, c’mon.”

I slowly backed away. Only in New York City would someone ask a stranger for a week’s salary at sunrise. I was not only in a battle with the cold but also with a local lunatic. It was a war on two fronts, and I needed to escape quickly.

“Man, I need it. I have to pay the boss man today,” the Rastafarian bum pleaded.

“I don’t have money. I’m sorry.” I turned around and picked up the pace. I wasn’t terribly fond of prodding beggars or curbside strangers.

“At least twenty, man? I know you have twenty dollars!” he shouted as I fled in the direction of uptown.

“Why are people so *weird* here?” I muttered to myself. In less than a block, the homeless Jamaican gave up on his pursuit and retreated into the shadows of Battery Park.

I made my way up to the heart of Tribeca, a highly exclusive triangle of luxury real-estate below Canal Street that wasn’t particularly accessible to the common buyer. I approached the apartment with the address that I was given. The diagonal streets and domineering high-rises were rather dazing and disorienting. I paced back and forth on the same street, eventually finding building fifteen, which I had already passed. Outside of the door of the residence was a bellman, with whom I had already made eye contact with several times, but it was only the fourth awkward stare that began a conversation.

“Hello, sir. Are you Zach’s guest?” the doorman inquired. He already seemed to know the answer, expecting a guest of my similar age and appearance.

"Yes, TJ Huizar. Did he already tell you?"

"Yes, Mr. Huizar," the man said with a residual French accent. "He told me to call once you arrive so he can come down and meet you."

*Call him?* I wondered. I knew Zach's uncle had made a nice living, but I wasn't expecting a full-service bell desk. I stepped into a long, elegant hallway that led to a golden elevator at the end. I was standing across from the doorman, who returned to his desk and pressed a few buttons on the intercom system.

"So, tell me, young man," the doorman asked as we waited. "What brings you to New York?"

"I'm only here for the day, but I'm on my way to Europe later tonight."

"Later tonight? You're telling me that you'll be in Europe this afternoon?"

"Yep. And yesterday I was home in Arizona."

"Amazing! A world trip with that size of a bag? And you're going entirely alone?"

"For now, I'm alone. After New York, I'll be with a British friend of mine for the next few weeks. I'm meeting with him first thing tomorrow."

"And you're staying in London?"

"We'll be flying to Russia the day after that."

"Oh, my! Russia is ..." the doorman gasped and nearly lost his balance.

"Crazy? Suicidal?"

"I wasn't going to say *that*—"

"But we're all thinking it," I interjected.

"And what next? Don't tell me you'll be in another country the day after that, too."

"Not another country, exactly. But in a few weeks, I'll be back in New York City and I can tell you how it all goes."

"Looking forward to it. My name's Jacques, by the way, if you need anything during your stay here."

“Nice to meet you, Jacques. I’m ... TJ.” I bit my tongue when I realized we had already exchanged pleasantries at the beginning of the conversation.

“Pleased to meet you, TJ. I can’t wait to hear how Russia goes!”

Before I could respond, the elevator at the far end of the hall interrupted with a commanding ring. The lustrous silver doors opened and out came Zach Reisler.

He was on the taller side—certainly a few inches more than me—but also somewhat slimmer. His wavy hair and bright olive skin suggested a mixed Italian-Ashkenazi ancestry, which I knew he was proud of. He walked towards me with a star-struck countenance, the same face of a young mother begging a politician to kiss her baby.

I wasn’t just any traveler. I had made a name for myself in the travel niche through my documentaries from around the world. I also had a somewhat superhuman ability to speak over twelve languages proficiently. This was the first time Zach had seen me in person, someone he revered as an iconic figurehead of teenage adventure, and he finally had the chance to pose dozens of questions pressing on his mind. For me, it was an opportunity to make a quality local friend in one of the largest cities in the world, a city I suspected I would be coming back to for many years to come.

“If it isn’t Mr. Languages himself.”

“How’s it going, Zach? Did you make it here alright?”

“It was a chore to get here from Jersey this morning with the snow, but I made it just in time.”

“Tell me about it.” I recalled my tricky journey from Jersey.

“Should we go up?”

“Please. I’m tired of playing Sherpa.” I whipped around to present the parasitic backpack leeching onto my shoulders.

“Perfect. See you in a bit, Jacques.”

"Have fun, *les gars*." Jacques called the elevator as he fixed his tie.

"So, which room number is your uncle's place?" I closely studied Zach under the soft light of the lift.

"Four." Zach pressed the button.

"Four what?"

"All of floor four."

The elevator came to a calm halt, and the door opened directly to another equally sized white door. It was already unlocked, and Zach pushed the handle in.

"My uncle's not here for the weekend, but we at least have a place to stay warm for the day."

"I have no idea why I chose to come on the coldest day of the year," I said, marveling at the view of the gloomy streets below through the series of glass panes bordering the living room. "If I'd known New York was experiencing a nuclear winter, I probably would've picked another weekend to fly here."

"It's not much better where I'm from in Jersey, maybe an hour and a half from here. We get a nasty marine breeze coming in from the Atlantic every morning and it's simply unbearable."

I put the bag down and inched over to the far end of the room. We sat in two swiveling sofa chairs in a small nook, separated by a mahogany coffee table, with a perfect view of a roundabout below. My gaze was fixed on the chilling and empty streets of the city. There were so many people in the station, yet I couldn't find a single pedestrian braving the cold that morning.

"So, Russia tomorrow, is it?" Zach was still taking in our first-time interaction.

"First London, then Russia the day after. I already sense that it's gonna be the trip of a lifetime. And I've been around."

“You want something before we go out? Soda, water, anything?”

“I never say no to water.”

Zach went into the room behind him, across from the large windows, and reached into the cupboard for two glasses of water.

The apartment was professionally decorated with precision and international taste. My ethnographic mind was quick to notice the delicate Persian rug coloring the floor, Congolese tribal masks and Polynesian string instruments resting on the bookshelves, and delicate china in the kitchen. Each handmade bowl and plate was proudly displayed on the walls and shelves. Abstract art filled much of the wall space, yet the overall design was quite minimalistic.

Zach came back into the living room, juggling two waters and a seltzer. He set the two glasses on the coffee table using ivory coasters and kept the sparkling water for himself.

“Dang. I wish I didn’t have school this week. I would much rather be going to Russia with you. We don’t even do anything in class these days.”

“What’s the farthest you’ve been from home?”

“I’ve never been to Asia or Europe or anything like that, but I guess Jamaica on family vacations would be the farthest. So, nothing too crazy yet, sadly. But you, on the other hand,” his eyes lit up as he took a sip of his seltzer, “you’ve really been everywhere. Egypt, Italy, Guatemala—even China! Where haven’t you set foot?”

“Somebody has done their research. But I still haven’t been everywhere. That’s why I can’t get enough of traveling.” I looked around the room and admired the relics. Many of them reminded me of my travels.

“How do you pay for it all, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“With the documentaries. It pays nicely. At least enough to cover the costs of my trips.”

“That’s amazing. Seriously. I’m trying to start a business this year, so when I’m free from high school, I’ll already have plenty of pocket change for travel.”

“I always say travel is the one thing that always delivers your money’s worth.”

Zach took his last gulp of seltzer, and we both grabbed our coats. I left my backpack in the room to retrieve later in the afternoon.

Once in the streets, we were both taken aback by the intense cold, as if we had already forgotten what it felt like to be in sub-zero temperatures. We journeyed north for a few blocks to the Meatpacking District, where normally filled shops were strikingly barren of customers.

We forfeited our walk just shy of the High Line, a long aisle of greenery, modern apartments, and stunning views of the World Trade Center to the south as well as the Empire State Building the other way. We found a wall of plants wide enough to shield us from the wind as we took in the cinematic scenery.

“How exactly do you get to travel so much with school and all?” Zach asked while wrapping his face with as much fabric as possible.

“I’m technically graduated, as of one week ago,” I yelled behind my scarf. “I was able to get my credits, finish high school early, and now here I am in the Big Apple.”

“I would do the same in your shoes. Especially if I knew twelve—no—thirteen languages like you. Forget about it! What are the languages that you speak, by the way? I’m not really sure.”

“Don’t worry. Nobody truly knows, not even my own parents. It depends what level of fluency we’re talking.” I had been asked this question too many times to count.

“The ones you speak at least conversationally?”

“The best ones are English, obviously, French, Spanish, Russian, Italian, and then some Persian, Slovak, Turkish, Arabic, Mandarin, Portuguese, and just a bit of German and Czech, but only enough to get by. Something around a dozen if you add it all up. But of course, it depends on the day.”

“Twelve languages! Even *Arabic*. Where did you have the time to learn all of this?”

“I just collected them over time. I like to think of it as the only superpower that can be learned by us simpletons.”

“Does it make you feel different when you are the only one able to understand basically any language being spoken in a room?”

“I certainly don’t take it for granted. And I won’t ever stop learning them. These next few months will be a chance for me to practice all of my favorite languages in all of my dream countries—lots of new places, too, like Russia. I’ve been waiting for the time to come when I could travel a lot like this. It’s been five years of planning, but my grand tour is finally underway.”

I dismissed the harsh cold with my yearn for adventure. Zach forgot about the numbness in his fingers at the thought of doing something similar one day.

“It shocks me that my adventure is no longer just ideas on a page. I can’t believe I’ll be going to New York, London, and Moscow all within the same week. I would like to say I’m ready for this—”

“But who can prepare for Moscow until they set foot in Russia itself?”

“Bingo.”

Another gust of wind breached the banks of the bay, whistled through the streets and avenues, and crashed into the buildings. One more blow of a similar magnitude and the skyscrapers would topple like dominos.

"Let's get out of here before the wind launches us into the Hudson," I suggested through my chattering teeth.

"I'm right behind you."

\* \* \*

We went out for a calm lunch in a Bodega nearby, where both of us pinched for every last crumb of pear salad and licked our plates clean of crispy chicken. We then returned to the apartment by foot through the lifeless city.

In the apartment, we spent a few minutes thawing in the sofa chairs. Once I felt warm, I wasted no time retrieving my bag and returning to Newark. As much as I wanted to stay in the penthouse for weeks and take in the priceless view of the World Trade Center down the avenue, I knew that my journey had barely even begun, and there was plenty more in store once I got to Europe.

"First, you have to get to Jersey to catch your flight. Then, by tomorrow morning, a new continent. And the next day, a new region of the globe?"

"When you put it that way, it sounds like I won't be getting a lot of sleep this week." I wasn't looking forward to the self-induced insomnia, but it wasn't my first rodeo. I was primed for adventure. "I'll be here in exactly four weeks. We can meet at the flat if it's easier for you." I had a strict travel schedule to stick to the entire winter, which included a lot of back and forth between Europe and North America.

"Your British friend is also coming with you?"

"Oh, yeah. And it'll be his first time in the USA."

"Then we ought to show him around the best parts of the city."

"And maybe the worst, too. That way, he gets a real taste of Manhattan."

"I like your thinking, Teej."

The elevator arrived, and the white door automatically unlocked. I entered the shaft with a nod of appreciation for my new friend.

“Remember, four weeks,” TJ said.

“Four weeks, floor four.”

“See you then.”

The elevator doors shut. I had got along well with Zach in the short time I’d got to know him. I was already excited about my return visit, hopefully on a warmer day.

The elevator reached the lobby and opened to the long hall. I slid down the red carpet, taking in the overall elegance as I admired the opulent detail on the walls.

“You’re already heading out?” Jacques’ voice echoed from the other end of the hall.

“Unfortunately, I’m already on my way to the airport. But as you know, I’ve got a plane to catch.”

“The journey continues indeed. Remember, if you have any problems in Russia, just make sure you at least have your jacket. I heard it can be cold this time of year.”

“Cold? Russia? Yeah, I’ve heard a thing or two myself. I’ll tell you how it goes! And I’ll keep this on me at all times.” I slid into the sleeves of my navy-blue coat and threw the fur hood over my head.

“*Au revoir, Monsieur TJ!*” He doffed his cap and gently closed the door behind me to protect the lobby from a chilly draft.

“*Au revoir, Jacques.*”

I was once again on my own, almost as quickly as I had arrived. I had three hours to get back to Newark Airport, arguably one of the worst airports I had ever set foot in due to its haphazard atmosphere and soulless staff. I recalled the way back to Jersey thanks to my early morning adventures, and I knew to find a ticket machine and save the headache on the return.

The Traveler's Curse

An hour later, after an equally uncomfortable subway experience, I got to the terminal and found the gate for London Heathrow. I reached the end of the boarding line just a few minutes before the gate closed—a specialty of mine as a spontaneous traveler. I boarded the plane, found my seat, and forcefully threw the bag into the overhead compartment.

*Seven hours of freedom from the backpack ball and chain.* I was safe from the elements and out of the cold, so it didn't take me long to start dozing off.

"Good afternoon, passengers," the pilot announced. "This is flight seven-five-nine to London Heathrow. We'll be expecting ..."

I was already asleep, fully postured in my chair. I had a big day in London the next morning and I needed to gather as much energy as possible. I would have killed to stay in the New York apartment, stretched out on the sofa looking over Manhattan's vacant streets, but I had places to be and people to see.

Besides, if a spell of fatigue was the price to pay for the adventure of a lifetime, then so be it.