

# **Sailing Against the Wind**

A Memoir

**Sebastian de Assis**

# PART I



I came from a well-to-do family. I lived in a beachfront house with a swimming pool, sauna and all the amenities of an affluent life. I studied in the best private schools money can afford. I vacationed abroad, owned boats, cars and motorcycles, and was a member of a yacht club. Then, all of a sudden, I found myself homeless and alone in a foreign country hoping my living nightmare would end soon.

“Stop!”

I yelled with a trembling voice from the back of the substandard interstate bus. I wasn't sure whether it was an unexpected call to the bus driver or my mind screaming out for the inner turmoil to cease. The bus stopped but the emotional tempest raged unabated in the overcast horizon of my being; and it would continue on for some time to come.

Chugging my two canvas handbags through the narrow aisle under the scrutinizing eyes of curious passengers, I made my way to the front and off the bus after a five-hour drive. It was the longest bus ride of my life; not in terms of time or distance, but in the sum total of anguish and anticipation to I'd have to endure.

Watching the cloud of dust swirling as the bus drove off from the gravel road shoulder, I dropped my bags down to the ground with a thump as if they stored the heavy load of my battered self. Squinting while rubbing the dust off my eyes, I followed the sight of the bus until it disappeared in the semi-deserted road. Suddenly the realization that I was alone, broke, and in the middle of nowhere in a country I did not know anyone hit me like an anvil falling on the crown of my head. Overwhelmed with feelings of searing sadness and crippling angst, I sat down on the pebbly ground, crossed my arms over my bent knees to ensconce my exhausted mind, and then surrendered to my despair. With no one

around to witness my vulnerability, I wept and sobbed with unbridled abandon hoping that my tears would temporarily wash away my pent-up sorrow. They failed me.

“I can’t just sit here all day,” I said to myself after a long bout of crying. I dried up my eyes with my long sleeve covered forearm, took a deep sorrow-filled breath, and shook my head aware that dusk would arrive in no time and I needed to find a place to sleep before then.

Not even in my wildest nightmares had I ever thought that one day I’d experience something like this. For the first time in my life I was homeless and alone without any support system. The odds that one day I’d have to endure this inauspicious circumstance were close to nil at best. However, considering that I had to find my bearings around an unknown environment before nighttime, I could not afford to spend my time mulling over the absurdly low odds that befell upon me, for I had more immediate survival needs to take care of. I needed to scout the area to find a place to spend the night.

“Alright, dude, get on your feet and start walking,” I said in a commanding tone to myself. It’s interesting how loneliness compels one to talk out loud to himself.

I stood up and realized I had no idea what direction to go. Without giving it a second thought, I picked up my bags and began walking aimlessly; like a rudderless vessel drifting in a sea of uncertainty toward an unknown destination. I kept walking for what it seemed to be a very long time and distance without any idea of where I was going. With the traumatic memories of the past 36 hours still churning inside of me, I knew I had no other alternative. The decision I had made, as irrational as it might have seemed, was the right thing to do; and at least of that I was certain. Nevertheless, the anxiety of roaming about in a foreign

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country not knowing where to go occasionally made me question my choice. But at that moment there was only one thing for me to do: keep walking and shedding tears as if they were liquid bread crumbs marking the emotional path of my dolorous kismet.

After walking on the roadside for what it felt like an interminable time, I spotted from the distance a sleepy fishing village. I picked up my pace fueled by the hope of making an acquaintance, or at least finding a safe place to spend the night. Alas, neither one happened. Other than an old man riding a beat-up bicycle on a narrow sandy pathway by the cobblestone street, I didn't see another soul anywhere. The only other sign of life in sight was an emaciated stray cat foraging the grounds of a closed fish market. As for a place to sleep, I decided to walk along the beach and see if I could find a secluded and cozy nook to rest my exhausted body and emotionally drained self. For the next two nights, I sheltered myself under one of the several fishing boats resting upside down at the end of the beach. And once I rose with the Sun, I spent the day roaming about aimlessly dragging my sorrows along toward nowhere. I was both physically and emotionally lost.

On the third day my luck would take a favorable turn. As I strolled along the shore of the long white sand beach beholding the Sun coming down piecemeal, I started feeling very hungry. I needed to get something to eat or it would be an even longer night as a homeless man sleeping under a smelly fishing boat on the beach. Although I'd spent most of my money in my past 36-hour ordeal, I still had some cash left over for food and other basic necessities; at least for a couple of months. However, there was not any place in sight where I could purchase even a candy bar. Then, to my pleasant surprise, I spotted a large hotel not far inland from the beach. Like a famished beast that just spotted a helpless prey,

I charged for it determined to silence the ferocious roaring in my stomach before retiring for the evening to my improvised outdoor lodging.

“Excuse me,” I said meekly while sticking my head inside the backdoor kitchen of the hotel by the parking lot. I waited anxiously as I heard sounds of banging pots followed by footsteps.

Then, walking toward me from inside the kitchen, a short and stout man wearing a grease-stained white apron and a chef’s hat greeted me with a beaming smile. He interacted with me as if he’d encountered; not a stranger, but an old friend he had not seen in a long time.

“A piece of bread? That’s what you want?” He reacted after I disclosed the purpose of my visit. “Come, c’mon in and I’ll get you something to eat.”

Next thing I knew I was sitting at a white tablecloth covered table in the kitchen devouring a succulent steak, baked potatoes, stir veggies, green salad, and, of course, bread. Also, he set on the table a carafe of red wine for me to wash down the dining extravaganza. Considering my circumstances and what I’d been through recently, that food and wine looked and tasted heavenly divine.

“Ah, you are from Rio de Janeiro,” he said as we engaged in small talk while I chomped on the delicious food he served me. “I hear it is the land of beautiful women, samba, and soccer.”

“It seems to be the city’s international reputation, I suppose,” I said barely pausing my eating with gusto.

“I suppose,” he said curtly as his facial expression took on a serious look as if he’d suddenly realized something odd was going on.

“There’s also an ugly side of the city that neither the rhythm of samba nor the excitement of soccer can hide,” I said trying to

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disengage him from whatever was causing his brow to furrow. “They do not show shantytowns in the post-cards or advertise the widespread poverty and crime in the city.”

“What’s a young man from Rio doing at the backdoor kitchen of a hotel in a far away land asking for a piece of bread?” He asked me unexpectedly by-passing my sideline comment. With his elbows on the table, he leaned forward seemingly interested in hearing my answer.

After a brief and embarrassing eye contact with him, I lowered my head and kept chewing in silence. I wasn’t ready to share my recent trauma with anyone yet. However, if there was someone to be the first to hear what I’d been through—or at least part of my story—that man who welcomed me with friendly generosity deserved to be the one. I lifted my chin to look at him again before grabbing the wine glass to take a mouthful swig. Then, I let the dam holding my pent-up emotions break loose and gushed out more details about my anguish than I anticipated. Perhaps it was the empathetic look in his eyes that compelled me to speak out; or maybe I just had an irrepressible need to unload my heavy emotional cargo. Whatever it was, I felt lighter and relieved to digest my feelings while doing the same to my meal.

“I just had an idea,” he said standing up abruptly after we’d been talking for awhile. “Stay put. I’ll be right back.”

I watched him speedily walking toward an office space at the end of the kitchen. I noticed the peculiar waddling of his footsteps as he moved his short-statured plump body as if he were in a state of urgency. Despite his diminutive appearance and cumbersome motion, that man looked monumentally impressive to my eyes. What I saw in him was a colossal human being; a dignified soul existing among us disguised as a chef in a hotel kitchen.

“Alright,” he said upon returning a few minutes later. “My boss told me he’ll be here shortly.”

“Did you call your boss?” I asked puzzled about his purpose.

“Yeah, he’s a good man. He said he might be able to help you out,” he said smiling at me with his bright brown eyes before engaging in small talk again. “What do you think about the last World Cup?”

It didn’t take long for his boss to show up. The tall dark-haired man wearing jeans and a sports jacket stepped out of a pick-up truck and walked briskly toward us. I sized him up from afar as he headed in our direction and I immediately felt a sense of kinship and trust. Although physically opposites in appearance, the tall man walking toward me and the short one standing by my side shared a similar ethereal essence; as if they were branches of a common tree—and I felt trustingly at ease in the shade of their presence.

“I have a membership to a camping ground nearby and a tent in the bed of my truck,” he said shortly after the perfunctory introductions. “You can spend the night there and we’ll figure out a more stable housing situation for you at a later time. Meet me at the front-desk of the hotel tomorrow morning and I might have some work for you. As for the tent, just leave it there when you wake up and I’ll come by to pick it up later.”

The chef beamed with delight as if he were the one benefiting from the arrangement. I thanked him with deeply felt words of appreciation before hopping on the Food & Beverage manager’s pick-up truck on the way to a much improved sleeping situation.

To this day, whenever I think of the chef’s smiling face and the tall man’s willingness to come to the assistance of a complete stranger, I send them loving thoughts of gratitude through the



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networks of the quantum field. And just as I am sure the electronic mails I send at the click of a button arrive at the intended recipients in a distant part of the globe, I'm equally positive that my gratitude-infused thought messages reach them wherever they happen to be in the time-space dimension at the moment.

Because of my fortuitous encounter with genuine human kindness, my short-lived brush with homelessness was curtailed; at least for the time being. But for a couple of days, I'd experienced firsthand what it's like to wander aimlessly alone without any support system. And that night, though I was lodged in a nice zipped up tent in a camping ground instead of under a boat on the beach, I shivered all the same and all night long as a thief-chill robbed me from a restful sleep. But I was grateful, indeed. The learning that those two men passed on to me through loving generosity of spirit, along with the empirical knowledge of scarcity and homelessness I acquired on my own, opened a whole new perspective in my awareness of what human nature is supposed to be. From that day onward, I was no longer afraid of the adventure I'd put myself into in the pursuit of a promising destiny. Whatever challenges awaited me on my long journey—and there would be plenty—I felt confident that I'd be protected and guided as I was that day. And considering what I'd just gone through, I experienced an unusual state of tranquility; and tranquility is courage in repose. Somehow I felt emboldened in the midst of intense emotional turmoil.

Using the same technique I applied sleeping under the boat, I curled myself into a fetal position hoping to amass some much needed body heat. With my mind racing inside my shivering body, I realized that as long as I never quit a challenging situation again, as I did in the worst 36-hour period of my life, my back would be covered and I would live to experience the opportunities

that were promised to me. After all, perseverance is the key that opens the door of opportunity. But if the key gets rusty and warped by burning trepidations, the will to carry on the struggle can be severed and failure ensues. Alas, I had to learn this lesson the hard way before fulfilling my destiny to immigrate to the United States of America.

In the meantime, feeling cold in a transitional homelessness situation was where I was supposed to be.



“Just go straight ahead to the front-desk and they’ll show you where to go,” the Food and Beverage manager said when I met him in front of the hotel in the morning. “I’ve already talked with the HR department and they’re expecting you.”

“Thank you,” I said looking into his eye. “Thank you very much.”

He simpered, shook his head, and walked away without saying a word.

Other than the day before when he came to drive me to the campground and that morning directing me to the front desk, I’d see him only one more time. I don’t remember his name and not even what his countenance look like. But never; never, have I forgotten what he did for me at a time I was in dire straits. His caring generosity of spirit benefited me in manifold ways. Not only had I received much needed help, but also became empirically aware that there are some genuinely caring people in the world. Watching him vanish in the distance, I wondered whether there was some sort of natural law of encounters that brought people together by some mysterious cosmological force.

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When a well-dressed older couple exited the hotel, my chimerical wonderings were suddenly interrupted. I greeted them with a smile and friendly nod when they passed by as I walked in to the front desk eager to find out what lay in store for me.

“Sebastian?” The pretty young brunette with shoulder length hair addressed me with a broad welcoming smile. The two men flanking her behind the desk didn’t look as affable.

“Here, fill out this paperwork and take it to the HR office down the hallway to your left,” she said ramping up her gracious demeanor in disguised seductive manner.

“Are you applying for the doorman job vacancy?” One of the men asked me abruptly barging in my pleasant interaction with his female colleague.

“Doorman? I don’t know. I’m applying for a job, but I don’t know what it is,” I said intrigued by both his impromptu questioning and what apparently I was about to become.

“You’re applying for a job you don’t even know what it is?” He asked in a condescending tone of voice.

“Down the hallway to my left,” I said returning my attention to the gracious girl while utterly ignoring her obnoxious male colleague. I took the papers from her hand, casually touching her soft manicured fingers before thanking her for her kindness and walking away. As soon as I turned my back, suddenly I had to stop and turn around to deal with a type of discrimination I would encounter many other times in the future.

“They always give the shitty jobs to these foreigners,” I overheard the man who addressed me talking to the other at a volume clearly intended to reach me.

I stared at him as if punching him in the mouth with my eyes. I could feel my fist itching and my feet twitching to move in his direction to shred his prejudice with my bare hands.

“Down the hallway to your left,” the young woman intervened in the tense silent moment that could have turned rowdy. I was grateful to her for rescuing me from a potentially troubling situation.

Although I was not oblivious to the existence of discriminatory behavior, I was not used to being a target of this common vice of ignorance. Perhaps had I known at the time that I was going to endure similar biased conduct many other times in the future, I’d likely be thankful to that man’s impudent comment, for it offered me the opportunity to practice self-restraint.

I did not know whether it was true that they gave the shitty jobs to foreigners. However, as much as I didn’t like that man’s attitude toward me, he was absolutely right about the shitty job part of it. And having just endured a very shitty job right before my 36-hour dreadful ordeal, I wasn’t sure I would be able to handle another one immediately afterwards.

Dressed in full regalia; I mean, matching hat, white gloves, and golden braided locks cascading down from the shoulder pads of the oversized jacket, I looked and felt like a foolish soldier guarding the five star palace where the affluent came for vacation. As if it were possible, this job was even shittier than my previous one. Except for my half-hour lunch break and a couple of 15-minutes rest in the morning and afternoon, I had to stand on my feet all day doing nothing but open doors and greet the occasional hotel guests coming in and out. And since it was low season, there was not even much menial action taking place. The job was a boredom endurance test that, as it’d happened before, I failed miserably from day one. I spent all day longing to return to the miniscule room I rented next to a chicken coop in the nearby fishing village. It was there that I surrendered my emotionally and physically exhausted self to the solitude of the expatriate fugitive

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I had become. Thinking of the privileged situation I forsook to go after my dreams and what I'd been so convincingly promised, I cried myself to sleep with nothing good to dream about.

On my second day on the job, I'd figured out a way to manage the boredom of my new occupation. According to European tradition, even the hotel served red wine with lunch for all employees, whom I surmise, drank it responsibly as a pleasant accompaniment to their meals. I'm afraid I was an exception to the rule; but in fairness to my foibles, I wasn't European. Thus, as a foreigner doing an extremely tedious job, I didn't consider my indulging consumption of Dionysius' nectar an issue of grievance. However, on the fourth day on the job when the hotel general manager caught me tilting like a human Pisa Tower propping itself up against the wall, he reprimanded me for my unprofessional stance.

"This is not quite the way I intend to advertise the relaxing atmosphere of the hotel," he said after showing up unexpectedly accompanied by a V.I.P. guest who chuckled at the way he berated me. "Please, be aware of your duties and don't ever let me see you leaning against the wall again."

Although I was pleased to have been able to conceal my tip-siness, I knew my time doing that job was up. Either I quitted it or I'd be fired in a matter of time. Like the last menial job I had a week before my 36-hour ordeal, I knew I'd reached my limit of tolerance. I'd learned there are certain types of jobs I cannot do even if my life depended on them.

After five days of literally inebriating monotony, I took my day off to explore the charming marina right next to the snazzy hotel where I worked myself to deadly tedium. There were some couple of hundred plus yachts and medium-sized sailing boats from all over the world mooring in the idyllic marine setting. As I

strolled along hearing the pleasant sounds of rigging gear banging against the masts of gently swinging vessels, I rejoiced in the atmosphere of that environment. With the Sun warming my blue jeans jacket-covered back while the ocean breeze brushed against my face, I was determined to make something happen. I needed another job and the thought of working in that environment appealed to me immensely. Perhaps I'd even be able to live there. However, it proved to be more difficult than I anticipated.

In spite of my unwavering determination, there was one major hurdle to overcome that was beyond my control: it was early April; the sluggishly-vacant season when the few people onboard were boat residents who took care of their own needs. It would take another couple of months before the beginning of summertime when the region supposedly sizzled with excitement of booming tourism. But I could not afford to wait that long. I needed another job right away. It was a matter of both psychological and financial survival. Thus, I spent the next two days knocking on every single boat's hatch looking for a deckhand job or any other work that did not involve standing up still all day long. By the end of the afternoon of the second day of my search, I'd already made contact with most inhabited boats in the marina to no avail.

Discouraged and dreading the next work day at the hotel, I headed to the small and quaint marina shopping area. As I walked around mindlessly, I passed by a marine supply store when I immediately halted my steps. It dawned on me that kind of business would be the most likely place to store valuable information about both the seasonal patterns and the who's who in the area. I turned around and walked in taking a last breath of hope. Alone behind the counter in the empty store, a lady welcomed me with a most friendly smile as if I were a regular customer she'd not seen

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in awhile. I began wondering whether I was attracting good fortune after having recently endured a traumatic experience. Perhaps I was being rewarded for my courage born out of despair. Regardless of how everything was playing out, I felt blessed with the continuous favorable serendipity.

Walking into that store marked the beginning of my almost one year sojourn at Marina de Vilamoura in the Algarve region of Southern Portugal; the departing harbor of my setting sail to the United States.





# PART II



**H**aving not dropped my eyelids over my eyeballs longer than a blink of an eye for hours straight, I should have been feeling exhausted. Instead, I felt invigorated and excited with the anticipation of what I thought of as my American adventure.

“We’ll be landing at JFK international airport shortly. Please observe the fasten seatbelt light,” the captain announced as I peeked through the window and saw the expansive New York City skyline below. I could feel my soul dancing to the exhilarating rhythm of my heart beating like drums in a carnival party. I was happy to be back to the United States; and this time it would be like no other. Somehow I felt as if I were a long gone son—albeit adopted—who had come back home at last.

“What are you doing here?” My sister exclaimed in the intercom of her apartment building when I rang the bell. “I just got your postcard from Portugal yesterday saying you were going to sail across the Atlantic Ocean to the U.S. Boy, you sure sail fast.”

She buzzed the gate open and I came in thinking about her observation. Only a few days ago I was aboard a yacht on my way to crossing the Atlantic Ocean by sea. Suddenly, like the gale winds that changed the weather that deviated the original sailing route to Morocco, my fate had once again taken an unexpected turn of events. I knew that either in the Caribbean or after crossing the Panama Canal, eventually I would have to make up my mind about what to do in the U.S. However, I didn’t feel pressured to make any premature decisions because I still had some three weeks of sailing to mull over my options. Besides, I didn’t know what or whom I might encounter along the way that could unwittingly determine my next step. But change happened so fast that I now had to adapt and contrive a what-to-do-next strategy in a hurry. I had no intention of crowding my sister’s place for long;

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and as exciting as New York City was, I had no intention of staying there either. The time to come up with a moving forward strategy arrived much quicker than I'd anticipated.

On my third day in NYC, I was already feeling antsy about not knowing what to do next. I decided to go for a long walk in Central Park to sort things out in my head. After a pleasant stroll late in the afternoon, I was still unable to concoct a plan of action for the near future. But as the dim light of dusk began fading in the early evening, its last glimmer illuminated my intuitive perception with a sudden epiphany that made absolute sense to me.

“That’s it!” I spoke out loud to myself abruptly halting my steps. “I’m going to Los Angeles.”

Since my first opportunity when I decided to leave Portugal was to go to L.A. on David’s yacht, I figured it was an indication that it was where I was supposed to go to in the first place. If it weren’t for the encumbering details that hindered my ability to join David and his wife, I’d likely have sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in what could have been one of the most exciting—and potentially most dangerous—adventures of my life. And yet, not having done so might have also saved my life from an agonizing seasickness death. Also, in all likelihood, I wouldn’t have met Ursula either, which would have been a significant loss of a unique and meaningful love experience in my life. But now it was all coming full circle. The natural unfolding of events I could have neither controlled nor predicted was revealing the magic and the mystery of the true meaning of kismet. It was as though life guided my steps without my needing to know where I was heading. At the right time and under the right circumstances, the answers emerged from the depth of the unknown to the surface whenever they needed to be revealed. By the time I reached the

corner of Fifth Avenue and 37<sup>th</sup> Street my mind was made up: I was going to Los Angeles.

The following morning I woke up enthused and resolute to purchase a one way airfare ticket to L.A. My enthusiasm was temporarily tampered when it dawned on me that, not only I'd never been to Los Angeles, I didn't know anybody there either. Although I felt emboldened by my recent successful experiences in Europe, going to a big city without any connections was a significantly more intrepid undertaking. Nevertheless, I was determined to follow through with my plans and I wasn't going to allow my trepidations to obstruct my will. That afternoon I shopped around until I ended up in a travel agency at the Rockefeller Center mall where I found the best deal. Bereft of any qualms whatsoever, I purchased the airfare ticket to L.A. to depart in three days. Alas, those three days would prove to be uncomfortably longer than the hours within them could pack. They ended up being very painful days—literally.

“Damn!” I blurted out in the middle of the night feeling my upper left molar tooth throbbing like a hard hit war drum. I spent the rest of the night awoken, moaning and worrying about the unexpected inauspicious happening. Holding my pulsating face as if my heart beat between a molar and a wisdom tooth, I dreadfully realized I was experiencing a toothache from hell—and maybe only severe vertigo can be worse than an acute toothache.

Unable to get any sleep at all, I rose before the Sun did. With a cold ice pack pressed against my face, I paced back and forth more troubled by the fact that I was supposed to leave in a couple of days than the excruciating toothache itself. Going to Los Angeles harboring an agonizing toothache was tantamount to getting on a boat for a transatlantic voyage already afflicted with debilitating vertigo. I couldn't possibly go to a big city I didn't know

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anybody handicapped by an incapacitating toothache. I had to see a dentist, but I could not afford the prohibitive cost of a dental office visit, and even less so treatment that would siphon my meager savings to oblivion. Furthermore, I'd already purchased the airfare ticket and didn't have time to spare either. All of a sudden, I was in a real bind with a major challenge to overcome.

The next two days I oscillated between panic and despair, both of which were accompanied by incisive oral pain. Torn between giving up my plan—and losing the money on my nonrefundable airfare ticket—and embarking on a daunting adventure magnified by an adverse physical handicap, I realized that the cause of my emotional terror and physical discomfort was rooted on wavering psychological disturbance. In spite of my swash-buckling attitude to conquer the next traveling adventure regardless of the circumstances, after removing the layers of my bravado, at the core I found a natural apprehensive human element that exposed my vulnerability to myself. Deep inside I knew that going to a big city without knowing anyone was no small assignment, and that was unwittingly giving me the heebie-jeebies. Yes, going back to Portugal from Brazil in similar circumstances and with less money in my pocket was a very difficult undertaking, though it was facilitated by a gargantuan desperation that I didn't feel about going to Los Angeles. My going to L.A. was motivated, not by fear or despondency, but by a conviction that my destiny was to be fulfilled by taking that next step in the grand tour journey of my life. Thus, I was not going to allow an awful toothache—or even a severe bout of vertigo for that matter—to become an impediment to my calling.

Valiantly, I packed my duffel bags and headed to the airport determined to go through with my plan. In an unexpectedly bizarre turn of events, by the time I entered the aircraft I started

feeling lighter and more relaxed. After placing my carryon bag in the overhead compartment, I sat down at my window seat, buckled up the seatbelt, and exhaled while exuding a mixed monotone sound of anxiety and relief. As the plane headed to the runway for takeoff, a titillating anticipatory excitement took over me. Once I felt the landing gear lifted off the ground, I realized I'd forgotten about my toothache. I wasn't in pain anymore and I had not even noticed it. As mysteriously as it'd shown up, my toothache vanished in thin air—and I never experienced any other teeth-related issue again in nearly a decade.

The likely psychosomatic toothache served me very well. It gave me the opportunity to rise above my fears and doubts while solidifying my commitment to my goal. Although the anticipation of the challenges ahead still tickled my self-assurance, I felt more emboldened than ever before. I felt primed to embark on a new adventure; and who knows, maybe I'd earn a heavenly reward in the city of angels.



**A**s soon as the airplane approached Los Angeles airspace, I caught myself involuntarily cracking my knuckles. Peeking through the window from a few thousand feet above ground, I watched in dismay a sea of lights stretching through the horizon as if I flew over a luminous concrete jungle. Curious, I glanced at the window across the aisle and the lights didn't seem to end on that side either. Suddenly, I started nibbling on my lower lip feeling my anxiety level rise while the airplane descended. I'd just realized how huge and spread out of a city Los Angeles was. Although I was heartened by my previous experience in Europe, this time around the chips on my gambling table seemed stacked up

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against my odds. I knew right away that this leg of my journey would require summoning up all my survival skills and chutzpah I'd amassed in the last year, for I would need every ounce of it.

With a clear visual memory of the expansive light covering the horizon of the city etched in my mind, I thought I'd better spend the night at the airport before venturing into a big city I knew nobody and had no idea where to go. I ambled around LAX looking for some cozy and quiet spot I could doze off until sunrise. Once I located an inconspicuous ideal setting, I placed my duffel bags down on the floor and leaned against it to spend the night. As my mind incessantly wondered what I would do in the morning, I casually surveyed the crowd moving about. Parading before my eyes, there were blond and beautiful young tanned people; speedy businessmen swaying their briefcases in sync with their fast moving feet; talkative airlines flight attendants rolling their luggage along; subdued Mexican-looking cleaning crews minding their business; dressed to the nines goodie-two-shoes with their design name suitcases; and even a scary and rowdy group of young African Americans wearing red bandanas. Later I'd learn they were likely members of the "Bloods," the rival gang of the "Crips;" some of the various disreputable cadres of crooks in town. Eventually, I'd also find out that in the city of angels criminals and riffraff abounded in every segment of society. But at that moment, I had an inkling that the people of Los Angeles were afflicted with some sort of schizophrenic collective personality disorder.

When I woke up in the morning rubbing my eyes before releasing a lion's yawn, I reluctantly stood up, stretched my arms out, and took a deep breath contaminated with both air pollution particles and feelings of apprehension. There I was, alone in a ginormous city, with no idea where to go, and no connections to

assist me. Although I was aware of the enormity of the challenge before me, I felt confident that I'd pull it off somehow. After all, I'd done it before—albeit in a much less intimidating and strenuous environment—and I trusted I'd do it again. But as it's often the case, the first step of a thousand mile journey is the most difficult to take.

With a Styrofoam cup of coffee in one hand and a local area map in the other, I scrutinized my surroundings on paper and realized that nearby Santa Monica looked like my best option to get started. Once I'd decided what to do, I tossed both the coffee stained map and the empty cup in a trashcan and walked out of LAX like a gladiator walking into the coliseum imbued with both excitement and fear. I hopped on a city bus and shortly thereafter I arrived at my first destination in Southern California. The game was on and I'd better be ready to play, otherwise I'd be trounced by the overwhelming adversity I was against.

On a strictly instinctive initiative, I got off the bus as soon as it drove past Pico Blvd. Unsure of which direction to go, I started walking toward the ocean until I ended up at the Santa Monica Pier. As soon as I got there, I dropped my duffel bags on the ground and soaked in the loveliness of my surroundings. The offshore sea-salt breeze flowing into my nostrils; the squawking of seagulls circumventing the fishermen on the pier; the sight of palm trees lining up Ocean Ave.; and the warmth of the shining Sun light on my body, all made me feel comfortably at home; except, of course, for the fact I didn't have one. Hence, my most pressing need was to find out where I'd spend the night.

After a long time basking in the pleasantries of the moment in a brief respite of positive indulgence, the rumbling in my stomach let me know it was time to move. I walked a couple of blocks inland to a fast-food restaurant where I ate and set up office to put



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together a plan of action. With the local newspaper in hand, I perused through every single advertisement searching for any information that might offer a hint to an opportunity. After a couple of hours circling ads and taking notes, I realized that I needed to get acquainted with the area before dusk. Thus, I removed a small backpack from one of my duffel bags and filled it with essential items, as well as the rolled up mummy sleeping bag Ursula gave to me. As for the large bags, I was wondering what to do with them when I looked across the street and had an idea.

“I can definitely keep them for you,” a friendly young woman at the front desk of a modest hotel chain said when I asked if she could keep my bags overnight. Her affable demeanor reminded me of the young lady at the hotel in Portugal where I worked for a week. “We have a safe storage space for our guests’ luggage. I’ll keep yours there and you can come to pick them up any time tomorrow.”

Free to explore the area, I walked around Santa Monica like a sleuth on an investigative mission. I identified addresses and locations in the newspaper ads I’d circled, familiarized with streets and neighborhoods, while at the same time keeping my eyes open to a potential sheltered place to spend the night. After a long circuitous exploratory walking, my growling tummy reminded me that it was time to go back to my fast-food restaurant office to work on my immediate needs: to eat and determine where I’d spend the night.

I don’t know what time it was but the Sun had set for quite some time by the time I finished my insalubrious meal. At that point I’d already decided that I was going to sleep somewhere on the beach; probably under the Santa Monica Pier. I figured it would be a much more convenient place than it was under the smelly fishing boat that sheltered me on the beach in Portugal.

I was about to get up and head toward the pier when a freckled-faced young blondish man approached me.

“Are you done with the newspaper?” He asked walking in my direction as I gathered my belongings getting ready to leave.

“Other than the classified section, you can keep the rest if you want,” I said.

“Cool. I appreciate it,” he said before a long pause in which he frowned at me in an inquisitive way. “I noticed the accent. Where are you from?”

Usually, this is a question that I—and most foreigners and immigrants I know—resented when asked shortly after meeting me. Although I understand the curiosity factor, sometimes it is laden with bias that can lead to discrimination, which I’d experience many times in the future. But in that particular case it didn’t bother me at all. I could tell the friendly young man was more interested in establishing a welcoming bridge than opening a chasm of prejudice between us.

“I’m Brazilian,” I said hanging my backpack on my shoulder and getting ready to leave.

“No shit! Brazilian? You got to be kidding me?” He said sounding surprised and oddly excited with my answer.

I smiled awkwardly and nodded feeling as surprised with his unexpected reaction as he was with my response.

“Man, that’s one of the coolest people I’ve ever met,” he said unable to contain his excitement. “I spent some time in Rio and I loved it.”

“That’s my hometown,” I said.

“No shit! What are you doing in Santa Monica, man?” He asked.

I paused not knowing what to say, until I decided to copycat his comment. “I’m spending some time in Southern California.”

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“That’s so cool, man,” he said. “I can show you around if you’re interested. Where are you staying?”

His last question left me stumped. I hesitated until I stammered a one-word answer out of my mouth. “Nowhere.”

“What do you mean nowhere?” He asked looking puzzled.

“I just got here today and I don’t have a place to stay yet. I’m still finding my bearings,” I said.

“Well, now you do,” he said smiling broadly as if he were the one who’d just found much needed shelter. “If you don’t mind crashing in the garage of my parents’ house tonight you can come with me. Eventually, we can look for a more stable lodging for you. What do you say?”

There was nothing for me to say but thank you. I was stoked. All of a sudden, as I’d experienced many times before in my journey, my fate had taken an unexpected positive turn. As we walked on Santa Monica Blvd. toward 14<sup>th</sup> street where he lived, Clint shared with me that when he was in Rio someone he’d met on Arpoador Beach took him home and lodged and fed him. He was amazed with the hospitality bestowed upon him by a stranger and he felt this was his opportunity to pay it forward—and I was the beneficiary of a fellow Brazilian citizen’s kindness.

Later that night after ensconcing myself in the sleeping bag Ursula gave to me, I wondered about the truth expressed in the words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s famous quote: “Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves, too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one’s favor all manner

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of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.”

My life in Southern California had just begun.

## *About the Author*

**Sebastian de Assis** is a writer, teacher, philosopher, intellectual artist, and a consummate bibliophile with an unquenchable thirst for acquiring knowledge.

A graduate of the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and California State University at Dominguez Hills, he has lived in several countries and traveled extensively through Europe, South and North America, Africa, and the United States. He is fluent in Spanish, Portuguese, and French.

He lives in Oregon where he reads and writes in his personal library while listening to J. S. Bach, Miles Davis, and other inspiring music that nurtures his spirit.

For more information about Sebastian and his work visit [www.sebastiandeassis.com](http://www.sebastiandeassis.com).