

SCENIC BYWAYS

"Foggy Coast"

Written by

Ben Sembler

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

I miss the humidity. That wet heat ticklin' my skin. And the sharp cool, right before the summer storm breaks. The thunder rollin' on. Raindrops chasin' the skeeters away. Here is dry. The forests I drive through are one giant tinderbox, waitin' for that fateful spark to set 'em ablaze. Wasn't so on the coast, though. It was plenty wet from the sea, and the rain. And the fog.

MUSIC CUE.

CREDITS.

INT. TRUCK - DRIVING - MIDDAY

Ocean waves crash against the shore outside the truck.

The Narrator drives along the coast south.

NARRATOR

I'm in the thick of it now. Been patches of fog since I hit the Cascadia coastline, castin' everything in an eerie glow. This one just won't let up. Summer hasn't come here quite yet. Not that I mind, though. There's something calmin' about the fog, the way it wraps Old Stars up like in a blanket. Just wish I could see the road. Hopefully it clears before I hit the bridge across the Columbia. You know how I feel about bridges.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

You were always wantin' to take a trip to the old Oregon coast.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I remember you had that calendar, a picture of Haystack rock for the month of June. It stayed June for a while where you had it hung, all through the summer. You never did change it over, did you? If I close my eyes and I can still it there. Shouldn't be closing my eyes, though.

He pauses.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I couldn't see the coast at first for the fog, but it cleared about halfway across the causeway before the bridge, and then there she was. All sunny and on display. The old Oregon coast. The start of her at least. I didn't plan on takin' her south. It's tricky on the coastal roads. And you can't trust too many bridges. The first one seemed sturdy enough, though, a sea-green truss, not a sign of rust on her. I drove over her and into Astoria, the Victorian houses still standin', paint unpeeled. She looked a quaint town as I passed through the Main Street, but I didn't feel much like stoppin'. Course it rarely matters what I feel like. Events tend to take on a course of their own these days.

RECORDER OFF.

EXT. ASTORIA CITY STREETS - MIDDAY

NORWEGIAN FOLK MUSIC floats on the air outside the truck, traveling slowly through the town.

NARRATOR

Hmm. Streets are clean, but nobody's out, despite the fine weather. Crazy how there ain't a cloud in the sky after all that fog.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

Just my luck the fog had settled on the inland road out of town, too. The one that ran alongside the Columbia. Only short bridges that way, at least. I'd just have to go slow. Turn on the low-beams. Can't be too careful in that soup. Don't know what you'll run into. Or who.

RECORDER SWITCHES OFF.

INT. TRUCK - DRIVING - ROAD OUT OF ASTORIA - DAY

Truck slowly drives on.

NARRATOR

There goes one more. Dazed and wanderin'', wearin'' that same traditional folk dress. I wonder what they're hearin', what it is that's got 'em shufflin' along this road away from Astoria, swayin' back and forth like that. What's that quote? And them that were dancin' were thought crazy by those that couldn't hear the music? Well, I'm the last person to judge another's sanity.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

I saw a fair bit in that fog out of town. Soft glowin' lights to the sides, flickerin' like campfire flames. Large shadows and shapes. Somethin' that appeared like a massive serpent, swimmin' above Old Stars and I. Then I started seein' the people. Vest and britches on the men, blouse and colorful skirt on the women. Off to the side of the road, must've seen a good couple dozen in total, each one alone. They'd draw up out of the fog as I drove along, their backs to me, headed out of town, swayin' back and forth.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I didn't recognize it as a dance at first, seemed more like the prelude to a permanent collapse. I stopped for the first few, but they kept trudgin' past, slowly, payin' Old Stars and I no mind. Disappeared right back into the fog ahead. Didn't see the same one twice. Once they were back in that fog, they were gone. The next few or so I got out and tried reasonin' with, the fog seepin' into me, chillin' me deep, enough to envy those that had built the fires. For all that, the trudgers acted like I weren't even there. Just kept swayin' along to some far off tune only they could hear. So I quit stoppin'. Drove on the wrong side, gave 'em as wide a berth as I could when I passed. Kept creepin' through the fog.

RECORDER OFF.

INT. TRUCK - DRIVING - ROAD OUT OF ASTORIA - DAY

Truck slowly drives on.

NARRATOR

Here's another one comin' up. Hunched over, long white hair hung down to her waist. Much slower than the rest. And much older, from the looks of it. Still swayin'. Can't imagine she'll last a whole lot longer out here, in these conditions. Fog's clearin' ahead, though, it seems. Good, she can't disappear on me now. I'll just pass through the last of it and--

EXT. ASTORIA BRIDGE - MIDDAY - CONTINUOUS

The truck brakes hard.

Sitting inside the truck, the Narrator stares up at the Astoria bridge.

NARRATOR

Hmm. Now this is a new one. Even for me.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

Sea-green trusses above, not a sign of rust on 'em. Victorian houses on the slope in front, paint unpeeled. I was out of the fog, all right. And back on the bridge into Astoria. The sun hung up in the exact same place in the sky. And no sign of the older woman. Not for the long while I waited, at least. What else for I can't really say. I guess knew she wouldn't be comin'. The sun didn't budge a degree. And I didn't get a bit thirstier or hungrier. Time seemed stuck. Eventually I drove on. Down the same road through the deserted town, back through the same fog. Seein' the same flickerin' flames. Passin' the exact same trudgin' people. Then the older woman. And arrivin' right back on the bridge. Legs not a lick stiffer. Belly not a mite emptier. Sun still in the same place in the sky. I drove through that inland fog more times than I'd care to admit before I tried for the coastal route. The bridge there was a stone's throw from the sea-green one, yet the same fog hovered over her. Only the town seem spared the gloom. It was a quicker loop, then, a few minutes though the thick of it before I was right back on the sea-green bridge. The whole town was closed in by the fog, it seemed. For all that expended effort, I figured I might as well find out why.

RECORDER OFF.

EXT. SCANDINAVIAN FESTIVAL GROUNDS - MIDDAY

The Narrator dances with a WOMAN around the maypole, REVELERS dressed in the same clothes as the fog wanderers around them.

The NORWEGIAN FOLK MUSIC PLAYS.

DANCING WOMAN

(excited)

Have you just arrived? Where have you come from? How have you come?

NARRATOR

By truck, ma'am, from the North. Truth told I'm fixin' on leavin', as well. Just can't seem to get the hang of it. Fog seems to want me to stay. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

Norwegian folk music plays in the background.

NARRATOR

I drove through the town again. There weren't many places to park an eighteen-wheeler, so I stopped in the middle of the street. Not like anyone else was usin' it. I lumbered out, my knees stiffer than I thought. That's when I heard it clearly. What I'd have heard before, if it had occurred to me to listen. When did I ever listen, though?

The folk music FADES UP, then low.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

There were other hints besides the calendar, of course. When we'd pass by the Gulf you'd say it was warm like bathwater, that you'd rather take a cool dip in the Pacific. And the wine clubs. You joined more than a fair few, said it'd pay off when we visited the vineyards in the Willamette valley. Yeah, I guess I coulda been more perceptive. Definitely coulda done a better job listenin'. I was the talker. Still talkin' now. Some habits stick harder than others. And you can't teach an old dog new tricks, can you?

The music comes back stronger.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

The music was comin' from the hills out of town, rollin' down past the Victorians and out to the water. Peterin' out over the rocky beach. Well, if there was music, stood to reason someone was makin' it. I got back into Old Stars and lowered the windows, followed the music up the incline, the town's roads some of the nicest I'd seen in long while. I passed more houses, all in good repair. Followed the bends around to the park. That's where they all were. The dancers and revelers. The music makers.

RECORDER OFF.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

The Narrator parks the truck at the Scandinavian festival grounds. The music plays.

EXT. SCANDINAVIAN FESTIVAL GROUNDS - MIDDAY

He get out of the truck and approaches the revelers, a few hundred, dancing, talking, laughing, eating.

He walks up to a woman.

NARRATOR

Hello there.

REVELING WOMAN

Hello, you're just in time for the celebration.

NARRATOR

I can see. It's quite the shindig you've got goin' on. What's the occasion?

REVELING WOMAN

It's the midsummer, the longest day of the year. There's plenty of food, if you're hungry. Or if you'd rather join the dancing--

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

She didn't finish the thought before a jovial man came from the side, grabbed my arm and guided me toward the center of the park where a pole was raised. Sun was still shinin' high in the sky, bathin' the clearin' in bright light. A couple hundred people were gathered there, all in the same folk dress worn by the wanderers in the fog. Some sang, some played instruments, most danced. All lively, energetic, the exact opposite of the poor lost souls that were probably still trudgin' down that foggy road. The pole was tall, thirty feet most like. A cross at the top, two hoops hung from either side of the horizontal beam. The whole thing covered in vines and vegetation, green from top to bottom. Across the way one of the dancers kept glancin' over. She was young, I'd place her in her twenties. Almost all of 'em danced with others, hands clasped in groups or doubles. She was alone. She seemed friendly enough, a wide smile on her face. The man and I made our way to the pole, and the circle of dancers goin' round it. He started up with them, and I felt compelled to join in. Couldn't tell you why, my feet just seemed to jig about of their own accord. Felt like I'd known the steps forever. Like they'd been discovered and locked away in a long forgotten dream.

RECORDER OFF.

EXT. SCANDINAVIAN FESTIVAL GROUNDS - MIDDAY

Continued from before.

DANCING WOMAN

By truck? Over the roads, then?
What have you seen?

NARRATOR

All manner of things. Wouldn't properly know where to start.

DANCING WOMAN

No, in the fog. What did you see in the fog?

NARRATOR

People. A couple dozen or so. They seemed fixed on leavin' too, only I don't imagine they'll get so far on foot.

DANCING WOMAN

Could you... would you... take me to them?

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

We danced around that pole for what seemed like ages, the smiles never fadin' the music never falterin'. My legs were as limber as ever. After a time, how long I couldn't tell, the young woman made her way over to me. I looked over to the man who had shepherded me in, but he was well absorbed in the dancin'. When she came near, the young woman smiled, grabbed my hands and spun me to the tune. As soon as she touched me I felt the fatigue set in, my knees near givin' out, the sweat drenchin' my clothes. And yet I couldn't stop dancin', like my feet were stuck in that jumpin' jig of their own accord. The woman was smilin', though, as energetic as ever. Only now it was more a nervous smile. A lot of expectation seemed to be packed into it. She started asked her questions, more than her share curious about how I came into Astoria. And my plans to leave. She said there was a way through the fog, only I had to take her with me. She could guide me through. Well, all right, then.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Soon as I agreed she led me out of the circle, and I collapsed to the ground. Took more than a moment before I could stand and hobble back to Old Stars, her beside me, supportin' me part of the way. The entire time the sun hung up in the exact place, beatin' down us, never budgin'. And then we were off.

RECORDER OFF.

INT. TRUCK - ASTORIA - DRIVING - MIDDAY

The Dancing Woman sits in the passenger seat as the Narrator drives through town.

NARRATOR

You live here in town?

DANCING WOMAN

I did. I do, I mean. It's just been a while. Since I've been back.

NARRATOR

Back?

DANCING WOMAN

Never mind. You were saying?

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

I wasn't sayin' much. She asked me to describe the swayin' trudgers, but for some reason I could only remember their colorful folk dress, the same she had on. Couldn't recall a thing of their faces. The memory of them seemed locked away in that same forgotten dream. As we drove through the main street out of town she had her face pressed against the window, gazin' at the storefronts goin' by. An odd duck, that one. She pointed at some shop across the way, face lit up with delight, and that's when I saw the small gold ring on her finger.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

She darkened quick when I asked her
about it.

RECORDER OFF.

INT. TRUCK - ASTORIA - DRIVING

DANCING WOMAN

My wife. She was one of the first
to leave. We danced together, hand
in hand, and then... I danced
alone, for so long. But now you've
come!

NARRATOR

Is she out there? In the fog?

The dancing woman nods.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Well, okay then. Let's go find her.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

Someone once told me the hardest
part of communication is listenin'.
Not plannin' your response, not
thinkin' about your next meal or
the movie you're keen to see,
actually listenin'. Wish I could
tell you who it was. But you know
me. Whoever said it, I wasn't
really--

RECORDER OFF.

INT. TRUCK - DRIVING - ROAD OUT OF ASTORIA

Old Stars drives down the foggy road. The Dancing Woman opens
the door, and the Narrator slams on the breaks.

NARRATOR

Careful, she ain't stopped yet.

The dancing woman hops down from Old Stars, and the Narrator
follows her.

EXT. ROAD OUT OF ASTORIA - MIDDAY

The Dancing woman runs up to one of the trudgers.

DANCING WOMAN
Min? Minnie? Minnie?

The Dancing woman walks in front of the trudger and gasps, then moves out of their way and walks back to the Narrator, dejected.

DANCING WOMAN (CONT'D)
It's not her.

NARRATOR
If she's on this road, we'll find her.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR
Went that way more than a few times. Too many, I would think. Even from behind, even with everyone wearin' the same clothes, shouldn't she recognize her wife? Couldn't she? She was shiverin' pretty bad, though I had the heater on high. The serpent swam over us and gave her a start. She didn't go for the door, though. We passed the tenth far off fire, the last of them I had counted from my previous passes through. I told her we were almost out of the fog, that all was left was the old woman. Didn't phase her, though. She seemed... well I wouldn't say worried. Anxious, maybe? Trepdiatious? Is that even a word? I'd look it up, but... hmph. She started hummin' absentmindedly--

Dancing Woman hums the song.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)
--the same tune they played by that pole. I was goin' slow, barely a crawl. A figure drew up out of the fog in front of us. The last of them.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Her long white hair hung down to her waist. Swayin' back and forth. Dancin'. Slow, labored, but still in near perfect time to my passenger's hummin'. We were almost beside her when I felt a twitch, a hint of that folk dance, and slammed on the breaks before my feet could jig about of their own accord. The dancer kept hummin', not sayin' a word. I didn't speak neither. Just listened.

RECORDER OFF.

EXT. ROAD OUT OF ASTORIA - MIDDAY

The Dancing Woman stands in front of trudger, the last one, the old woman.

DANCING WOMAN

Minnie. Minnie, it's me. I'm...

The Dancing Woman breaks down and cries.

DANCING WOMAN (CONT'D)

I'm sorry I went back. I was weak. I shouldn't have stayed. I should have left with you. I'm sorry, Min. Please. I'm so sorry. I should have listened. I'm sorry I didn't listen.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

No, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. But an old dog can certainly learn new tricks, they put their mind to it. There lies the difference. The motivation has to come from within. You can't change unless you want to, and you won't want to unless you have to. Too comfortable stayin' the same, otherwise. I had all that opportunity to listen before, and now... I shoulda listened to you then. Chalk that up as one more regret amongst many.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I'm learnin' now. To listen. Not as fast as I'd like, though. Not enough. If I'd have better listened to that woman, maybe I could make more sense of what happened on that foggy road.

RECORDER OFF.

EXT. ROAD OUT OF ASTORIA - MIDDAY

DANCING WOMAN

Can... can you forgive me?

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

The old woman turned, swayin' on her feet. I can't describe her face, but the smile she gave the dancer will haunt me for a while to come. There was forgiveness in the smile. And love, and warm memories, and not a thought of the fog, or the trudgin'. Or the swayin'. She took the dancer's hands, and laughed. And before my eyes the dancer's hair grew white and long, hung down to her waist. And then, hand-in-hand, the two grayed women walked down that cold road, heads high. I got out, of course, hollered over to 'em, offered them a ride. I was headed that way as well, and the old woman, Minnie, that is, she'd been walkin' a long time, from all signs. They couldn't hear me, though. Or else they weren't listenin'. Too lost in each other, reunited after what must've been ages. They walked through the break in the fog, disappeared down the road. No sooner than they did the fog started to dissipate. I could make out the road ahead, no sign of them, or anybody. But it was clear. Clear enough, at least. So I got back up into Old Stars and started down her. Didn't get very far. Only this time it wasn't for the fog.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

The first turnout came upon me quick, but I didn't even think. I maneuvered Old Stars around, no easy task on a two-lane road. I managed though. Drove back toward Astoria. Didn't see any of the other trudgers, or the far off fires, or that serpent. They all went away with the fog. Just clear roads straight into the town. The sun was low in the sky when I got back, the sunset drawin' near. Already the coastal clouds had taken on an orange tinge. The longest day of the year was comin' to a close. Time had finally caught up with Astoria.

RECORDER OFF.

EXT. ASTORIA CITY STREETS - AFTERNOON

The Narrator gets out of the truck.

NARRATOR

Don't hear the music now. Don't hear anything, really.

That's not exactly true. The sounds of the ocean and seagulls are not too far.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Except the ocean. Yeah, I can hear that.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

The main street was cracked to hell. I'd place that on that on the salty air. And time. The stores that entranced the dancer an hour before had collapsed, only rubble to mark their places. The Victorians still stood, good craftsmanship there. The paint had long since peeled, though, the underlyin' wood bleached white by the sun.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I drove past 'em all, right by that sea-green truss, clear of fog. Only now she weren't sea-green, but a brown rust. Partially collapsed as well. I thought for a second I might've been wrong to turn around, that maybe the coastal road south would be impassable, the only thing to greet me more collapsed bridges. I knew I had to try, though. Had to make up for everything somehow. And if I couldn't show you the Oregon coast, well, I could at least let you hear her. Were you listenin'?

RECORDER OFF.

EXT. CANON BEACH OREGON - MORNING

The Narrator stands on the beach, looking out at Haystack rock.

NARRATOR

Haystack Rock. That calendar didn't do her justice. Massive thing, risin' out of the sea like nothin'. There are these crazy lookin' birds, like a cross between a toucan and a penguin. Hundreds of 'em, all nestin' on her. Seagulls get along with 'em just fine. It's early morning, tides far out. I can walk right up to the rock. I wish you were here. I wish you could see her. I really do.

INT. TRUCK - LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON.

NARRATOR

For all that talk of avoidin' bridges, there were very few down the Oregon Coast. I did finally run into a collapsed one, just north of Coos Bay. Took the inland road then, linked up with what was once I-5. Pretty soon after saw a sign that read "Scenic Byway Crater Lake, Next Right." Of course I took it. The roads since have been passable enough.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I've had to stop a few times, mostly to clear fallen trees. I've gotten decent at that. But I'm makin' progress. I'll be at Crater Lake soon. Could use the bit of water. Here is dry. It won't be winter when I get there, but I'll still recognize her, I'm sure. Wizard Island off to the side. The whole place was covered in snow in that picture in your calendar. December, was it? Yeah, it stayed December for a while where you had it hung, all through the winter. You never did change it over. The lake'll be different in the summer. I'll let you hear her, too. Although she might not be as noisy as the coast. Audio can only account for so much. I'll tell you what I see, then, when I get there. I'll try, at least. To do her justice. I like to think I have a way with words. Though I should probably lay these tired cliches to rest. I think I can manage that much. Give you the kind of description the place deserves. I'm motivated enough. This old dog's got a few new tricks in him yet. You'll see.

RECORDER OFF.