

# PROLOGUE

It was 'way back in 1995.

Back then when things had long ago gotten far beyond starting to get really strange.

Then again, maybe it was in an alternative universe somewhere.

I can't quite remember.

Anyhow...

## JUNE 16

As far as highways can claim to have character, U.S. Highway 1 has always been the one that has had the stuff of romance in it. Especially before the age of Interstates and overabundant urban sprawl, it was THE famous U.S. highway, hugging the East Coast from Fort Kent, Maine, which is all the way up at the very tippy top of the country, down to Key West, Florida, which is all the way at the bottom. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond, Miami, they were all connected by U.S. Highway 1.

But nobody has ever paid any attention to U.S. Highway 2, the one that runs along our northern border. The one that connects Everett, Washington, and Houlton, Maine, the one that strings together Havre, Montana, with Bemidji, Minnesota, and St. Johnsbury, Vermont. It is probable that no one outside of such places even knows that the road exists, even though it is the only U.S. Highway that has the distinction of stopping off at one place (Lake Huron) and starting up again at another (Lake Champlain). (Footnote: Okay, U.S. Highway 10 does jump across Lake Michigan, but you can take a ferry over to Wisconsin, so that doesn't really count.)

For that matter no one has ever paid much attention to North Dakota, the state that is in the middle of Highway 2, either. Even though it has been the birthplace of such famous Americans as Eric Sevareid and Peggy Lee and Lawrence Welk. Even though it is home to half of the International Peace Gardens, and even though it contains both units (North and South) of the Theodore Roosevelt National Historical Park.

And that isn't quite fair in our egalitarian society. Nor is it surprising that it is a point of some sensitivity to North Dakotans. For no matter how much they tell their fellow Americans of the world class grouse hunting or the abundant lignite deposits to be found in their state, all they get is ridicule. No, they get worse than that: they get ignored.

And the good folks of Rugby, North Dakota, (population 2909) have always had a special reason to have a special sense of hurt. For not only are they right on U.S. Highway 2, and not only are they the principal American gateway to the International Peace Gardens, but they are also situated at the Geographical Center of North America. That's right, right smack dab at the center. And yet where are the tourists?

Krishna Batterjee surely wished that he had known all that before he had gotten involved. The family mango chutney business had been going along so well back in Madras; they'd had a nice house out in the suburbs, servants were cheap and plentiful, and he and his brothers had been all set to branch out into such new exotic fruit chutney flavors as grape and blueberry.

But his cousin Ravi had kept pestering him about coming to the United States and buying a motel. Ravi already had a motel--in Wenatchee, Washington, on U.S. Highway 2--and whenever he was back in India he was always talking about the good life and showing everyone pictures of the mountains and the apple orchards and the Columbia River. And then a year ago he had telephoned Krishna from the U.S. and had told him that there was an unbelievable deal on a motel on the same U.S. Highway 2. Except that it was just a little east of Wenatchee, in Rugby, North Dakota.

Krishna had looked on a map and had noticed that North Dakota didn't seem to have too many mountains. But there did appear to be a number of lakes, and he liked that. And Ravi had assured

him over and over again that not only was U.S. Highway 2 THE tourist route in the summer for people going to the Canadian Rockies and the Northwest, but that thousands of people came to Rugby every year just to be in the geographical center of North America. Not only that, but the town was the principal American gateway for the International Peace Gardens.

That had clinched it for Krishna. International Peace! What he had always been dreaming of! For Krishna was nothing else if not a sincere and devout Christian, ever since he had converted at the age of sixteen. And what had sustained him through his ensuing years of humdrum existence amidst the chaos and the insanity of a disputatious Hindu India was the shining vision of a land somewhere of Christian brotherhood and unity, of love and peace, of calm serenity.

And now finally he would have a chance to go see that living, breathing Christianity for himself! To live amongst it. To be right next to the International Peace Gardens and to provide an inn where weary travelers and pilgrims could spend the night. What communion! His eyes would water over when he would imagine it all. And so he had bought the motel from Ravi.

He realized now how blinded he had been by idealism. He hadn't even paid any attention when his other cousin Arjun had warned him that Ravi was just trying to unload something that he had gotten in a bad dowry. And now here he was stuck in this thirty year old motel on the edge of town somewhere in this flat frigid state dreaming of fresh mangoes and a languid sun.

Watch that negativity!, he told himself. A Christian is patient and accepting. A Christian's work, no matter how humble, is worship. And Krishna knew deep down that indeed he could be humbly proud, because he and his wife Govinda had thrown themselves into fixing the motel up and turning it into the best possible motel in Rugby. Not that there was that much competition, but that wasn't the point. God noticed everything. God knew.

He stood expectantly in the office, lit another stick of incense under the picture of the Virgin Mary, and smelled the curry wafting in from the kitchen. He was so eager, yet the motel still wasn't getting too many guests, even though it was now the middle of June. Prospective customers would come in the office and then for some reason just turn right around and leave. And drive all the way to Devil's Lake or Minot. He hardly ever even got a chance to show them the new Serta box spring mattresses or the Waterpik shower heads or the Sony color tv's with Trinitron or all the rest.

He turned down the volume a bit on the Gregorian chants. Maybe Govinda was right, maybe they just didn't fit in with this American culture. Maybe he shouldn't be lighting these candles in the office. He caught himself again. No, that was un-Christian thinking. Better to...

Oh no! Not again! The neon sign was flickering once more, with the giant apple and the "Red Delicious Motel" lettering going on and off. Why had he let his cousin Ravi talk him into taking that old sign from HIS hotel? It made no sense out here in the prairies. There weren't any apples here. And it kept breaking to boot. Now he was going to have to pay for somebody to come all the way from Fargo to fix it again, and in the meantime it was going to make the whole enterprise look shady.

But look, a van was pulling up in front of the office. Okay, stand at attention, he told himself. Speak slowly and clearly. Each customer is an opportunity to serve. The door opened.

And in walked a man well over six feet tall. And the fedora on the top of his head made him seem even taller. Not only that but he was dressed like no one else Krishna had yet seen here in America. He wore a scarf around his neck, gloves on his hands, a long overcoat, and very large rubber galoshes. He had on sunglasses and his face seemed to be covered with some kind of pancake makeup. Still, each customer is an opportunity to serve.

"Yessir," said Krishna. "I am so pleased that you have come to our motel. Everything that you wish for we provide, from the new box spring Serta queen mattresses and the Waterpik shower massage units to the Sony Trinitron tv with full cable hookup and remote. You can..."

"I want room," the man said in a strange deep growl.

"Yessir," said Krishna, confused that the sale was so easy. "I am sure you will like the television. I am so happy for you. How many are you and how many nights will you be staying?"

"Two people," the man said. "I have small friend. Not child. We stay some time." He pulled out a big wad of cash, obviously unfamiliar with it. "How much?"

Krishna's eyes looked longingly at the money. Maybe this man didn't know the going rate. But his Christian honesty intervened. "Thirty-five dollars a night," he said.

"Not enough," said the strange man. "I give eighty." And he peeled off four twenties and handed them over.

Krishna couldn't believe his good fortune. And he didn't even bother to mention registration. He just said, "Yessir. I will be so glad to take your luggage for you and show you your room."

"No," said the man. "I take myself. Thank you." And he bowed slightly and left.

Krishna watched the van start up and head on down to the room at the far end of the motel. What an interesting man. How extraordinary America was! And he had thought that that kindly, strange old German man of a few months ago was about as unusual as Rugby was ever going to get.

Perhaps God had a plan. Perhaps this hadn't been such a bad move after all.