Julius Caesar Said That ...

Ann Lowry*

*Iowa State University

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INES of cars filled every lane of the Autobahn, clear to the guardhouse on the horizon. Like toy markers on a parcheesi board, one row would rush ahead and then halt, only to be overtaken by the second line. The neighboring faces in the green Volkswagen and the gray Volvo became more and more familiar as Mark and Alan passed them and were passed by them, time after time. After thirty minutes surrounded by the hazy stench of exhaust fumes and the tedious racket of idling engines, they were finally nearing the guardhouse—so close that they could see features on faces shaded by the brims of drab military caps.

"This is certainly no Indiana Tollway plaza, but I guess it will have to do." Mark glanced again at his watch as he ground out his cigarette in the already overflowing ashtray. "I figured we'd be able to make better time than this—didn't know so many people would be going through on Saturday. Everybody's gonna spend a weekend in the Free World, I guess. Say, that'd make a fine travel poster—Win a Weekend in the Wonderful, Wide-Open West. Don't you think?"

"Sure." Alan's voice answered the question, but his mind remained uninvolved. He looked at license plates on the surrounding cars—a smattering of green and silver tourist plates, one with "M" for Munich, and two with initials he had not seen before. But nearly all the cars had a black "B" before the numbers on the white plate—"B," the symbol for Berlin. Funny how that letter could sum up the city so well—brave, bustling . . . but most of all, bewildering. Physically, Berlin had been almost as he had imagined it. But spiritually (yes, he mused, that was the right word), spiritually it had not. His eyes scanned the words stenciled on the side of the truck next to him. Braunschweig, Hannover, Ham-
burg—all names which had been only black squiggles on the pages of a history book or little dots on a map—until now. But not any more. The truck's gears clashed into place, and the names moved out of range of his empty stare. The sighing exhaust filled the already-hazy air with an extra dose of acrid grayness. Alan blinked as his eyes began to smart.

"Man, I don't see how those guards can stand working out here without gas masks. It's like breathing two packs of Camels a day." Mark stifled a cough. "And as if this place weren't enough already. Gray buildings, gray sky, gray uniforms . . . even sort of gray expressions on their faces. Hardly the Land of Sweetness and Light." He smiled at his witty observation, then began humming and beating out the rhythm of his favorite song, Wilson Pickett's "Mustang Sally," on the knob of the car's gear shift.

"Do you have the passports and the green card ready?" Alan interrupted Mark's musical seance with a bit of practicality. His humming and tapping stopped as Mark groped inside the pouch of his door for the familiar booklets.

"Check. They're all here this time. Looks like they'll even have to let our beloved Volkswagen out with us, like they almost didn't in Denmark. That was really a scene, remember?" Mark shook his head and smiled in reminiscence.

"I'll say." Rifling the contents of the car in a frantic search for its ownership and insurance documents had been less than a pleasant experience. Alan remembered that, the closer they had gotten to the ferry, the more distraught he had become. He would not soon forget the wave of relief that had swept over his nervous body when he had opened a pamphlet on the Carlsberg breweries—and seen the beautiful, reassuring mint-green color of the misplaced papers concealed within its folds. Yes, that was real relief. He smiled, looking back on his unneeded (and, in retrospect, foolish) display of nerves. Never again. Everything would always work itself out if he played it cool; that was what Mark had told him. He was probably right. That was the funny thing about Mark: no matter how grim the situation, he could always find a tiny particle of humor in it. No matter how bleak the outlook, he was always willing to charge
ahead into the darkness. And he always seemed to survive. Alan glanced at his amazing, amusing companion—who was now using the edge of a "borrowed" Danish bottle opener to cut pieces off a hunk of Edam cheese.

"Oo ant fum?" Mark turned to him, trying to speak with his chipmunk-like cheeks full of food. He held the bottle opener poised over the remainder of what had been a hefty slab of yellow cheese—but was now mostly red wax covering with a small yellow lump at one end.

"Thanks. Here, I'll cut it; our line's beginning to move again. We'd better keep up."

Mark swallowed the last of his mouthful in one huge gulp, then slammed the lever into first and made the car zoom ahead ten feet. "Yeah, 'Keep movin' or we'll all freeze,' Hannibal said that."

"Oh, really? Do you even know who Hannibal was?" Alan arched one eyebrow and smirked as he crumbled the red wax and rolled it into a ball between his fingers.

"Sure. You told me all about him when we were in Switzerland, remember? He was the guy who had to take all his elephants via the Alps on his way down to conquer Rome. It was really a grim scene, the way you described it. That was some years B.C., though, right?"

"Right. Second Punic War, 218–201 B.C., to be exact." But it didn't seem that long ago, really. Why, that was before Rome was even at the height of her glory. And the Forum and the Coloseum and the catacombs ... all the vivid memories came crowding back into Alan's mind. How strange it had been, standing on a hill overlooking the Forum. He, Alan Lewis, twentieth-century American, had seen the towering columns and the arches with the government precepts chiselled into them in Latin. The ground was now covered with grass where once Caesar, Augustus, and so many others had walked; many of the pillars were now broken and crumbling. But, standing on the hillside with the blazing July sun beating down on his button-down shirt and levis, those things had not mattered. When Mark had been anxious to move on, he had told him just to go ahead. He had known that he could not explain the feeling, the awe and
the wonder and the humility, that he felt. He had stayed there, gazing down into this hollow full of history for a long time. He had not noticed the never-ending line of Fiats and trucks and multi-colored tour busses swirling around its edge on the multiple-lane highway. They were a part of the present, a present which he would not allow to interfere with his total immersion in the past. He thought only of the toga-clad senators standing in groups, discussing problems and coming to decisions which were still influencing other decisions in his own modern world. It was as though, for him, twenty centuries had been erased. He had felt the unforgettable, indescribable something that no history book could ever project to him: a feeling of total communion with the past.

Suddenly, he realized that the car was again surging forward. This time they had arrived at the head of the line. A guard walked up to the window on Mark's side of the car. Mark handed him the papers. The guard thumbed through the first passport, stopping instinctively when he felt the page with the photograph on it. He peered over and scrutinized Alan's face through the open window. Alan gave him a self-conscious grin as the sharp eyes studied his every feature. Then the passport cover was snapped shut and shoved under the bottom of the stack of documents in the guard's other hand.

"Congratulations. You have just passed your first inspection." Mark gave Alan a broad grin and a crushing handshake, pumping his limp arm until Alan thought it might be dislocated at the shoulder.

"Hey, cool it. Look, he's checking your picture now." Alan wrenched his hand out of Mark's grasp and gestured toward the window.

"Oh, well guten Tag, officer." Mark turned and nodded at the stern face, which was now almost next to his own. The guard pointed at his eyes. "Say, what's the problem, man?" Mark turned back toward Alan.

"I believe he would like you to remove your shades, Mark." That boy sometimes has a mind like an ant's, mused Alan. Amazing.
"Oh. Check." Mark yanked the sunglasses away. "How's that, officer? They're blue, right?" He gave his most personable smile to the guard, who now was scowling. Alan thought it might have been to compensate for an urge to laugh at the ridiculous expression.

'Hey, Mark, I would like to get back to the Free World, as you so quaintly put it, in one piece. I would also like that one piece to be alive at the time. So, would you please let the man go about his business with the least pain or strain. Because strain for him could very easily mean pain for us, right?"

Mark had just checked in the rear-view mirror to make sure that his wrap-around sunglasses had been replaced properly on his nose. After a final meticulous adjustment, he turned to Alan. The disarmingly innocent expression was visible, even through the smoky glass.

"Right. No pain, no strain . . . oh, why danke schoen, officer; you're very kind indeed. Up to that building a gauche? Gotcha. Ciao." Mark dropped the papers on the floor of the car, leaving the steering wheel to guide itself as he shifted gears with his right hand and waved with his left to the guard—who was looking after them with a puzzled expression. Alan was just about to reach over and grab the wheel when Mark noticed that the car was veering toward the right.

"Oops . . . had to wave goodbye to my friend the guard, though. I mean, that was only the neighborly thing to do, don't you think? He needed something to put him in a good mood. I mean, 'You lose your humor, you lose everything.' Christopher Columbus said that." They headed toward a Citroen which was backing out of a parking space near the entrance to the building. "C'mon, Citroen, get that turn signal going." Mark made a playful megaphone with his right hand as he urged on the car ahead. "If there's one thing I like to see, it's a good Citroen with its turn signal up there on the roof, blinking away like crazy."

"But it's not going to turn."

"True, true. Ah well, such is life. Win a few, lose a few, the rest are rained out, right?"
"It looks like this one may be rained out. Look at those clouds ahead."

"Yes. And we do not have a tinted windshield. Although maybe if I took off my shades . . . ah yes, much better. Still, you are right about the clouds. They're not just there to add to the gloomy atmosphere, I don't think."

The car swerved into the vacated space and stopped with a slight squeaking noise.

"We really should see what that noise is. We must have dirt in the brake linings or something."

"Right. You wanna explain to some mechanic that we have dirt in our brake linings? In Deutsch? Good luck to ya." Mark wound up his window and slammed the car door before Alan had a chance to open his own. His ears felt like they had gone through a silent version of the sonic boom as the vacuum was created in the car. He slowly opened his door and planted his feet on the concrete. He shut the door behind him. Gently. Mark was already halfway up the sidewalk toward the gray frame administration building. He paused, waiting for Alan to catch up.

"Now the way I have it figured, we can handle this in about nine minutes. Just keep that ballpoint flyin' across those forms, man!" Mark pushed the door open and gaily ushered his companion through it.

They slid around a group of bewildered travellers blocking the counter full of blank forms. Alan noticed that one of the girls had the dirtiest bare feet he had ever seen. He wondered how they could possibly have gotten so filthy. He also noticed that there were no pens attached to chains on the counter, the way they were at home. There had not been any at the checkpoint on the road entering East Germany, either, he remembered.

"Hey, hope you brought your extra pen." Mark held out his hand after he finished searching his empty pockets. "Don't know why these people can't at least supply you with the ink to fill out their forms. I guess a pfennig saved is a pfennig earned, or some such. Plato said that, I think."

"No, he didn't. Here's a pen." Alan offered a red pen with a big International Harvester emblem on it to Mark.
He mused about the untapped market for farm machinery that his uncle would find in East Germany. He had not been able to reconcile himself to the sight of women in bubushkahs and long gray dresses out working in the fields. It was like something out of his fourth grade social studies book. Even though taking photographs from the Autobahn was not allowed, the sight of those women hunched over their potatoes had formed an indelible picture in his mind. He was still thinking about the scene when he finished signing the last of the pieces of paper. Mark was just completing the illegible scrawl that was his signature on the final sheet.

“Ready?” Mark was already sprinting toward the first window as he spoke.

“Ready,” Alan was right behind him. They pushed the papers hurriedly toward the uniformed man, who automatically drew lines through the blank spaces on them. He looked at their passports and handed back all but one set of forms. They raced on to the next stop, a large desk staffed by two men. It was surrounded by a tightly-knit cluster of about thirty people.

“Well, here goes.” It was at times like this that years of living in a large city and coping with its crowds stood Mark and Alan in good stead. They slithered through the slightest gaps between adjacent shoulders, swiftly working their way up to the edge of the desk. They handed their passports and the remaining papers to the attendant, who gave them a cursory glance before stuffing them through a hole in the wall at the end of the desk.

“Hey, ¿qué pasa? That is my very life that he just stuck through that slot, you realize.” Mark looked indignantly at Alan, then even more indignantly at the man behind the desk. The man simply pointed his gray-sleeved arm in the direction of another window.

“Apparently this setup is different from the one entering East Germany. Come on; we'd better get over there before someone else picks up our very lives, as you say.”

Just as they reached the window, a batch of passports and visas spewed out onto the counter in front of it. Some were thin and green; some were small and black-covered.
But there were no blue-gray ones. Alan began to wonder where the nearest U.S. consulate was. After two more bunches of passports were disgorged from behind the window, he noticed that his palms were almost dripping wet. He wiped them on his slacks and looked at Mark, who was busy checking the appearance of a nearby teenage girl with long blond hair. Scandinavian of some sort, thought Alan. More passports spewed onto the counter. He lunged at the two American ones, grabbing them and thumbing frantically through them in search of pictures.

"Man, I haven't been so glad to see myself in a long time," quipped Mark. He jammed his passport into his hip pocket and started to wriggle back toward the door. Alan followed, his passport clutched so tightly in his hand that his knuckles were turning white by the time he reached the steps.

"Well, I'd say we were really golden now." Mark slammed his door again, but Alan got his window rolled down in time to save their ears from another assault of air pressure. They sped off toward the last set of guards. Beyond that, thought Alan, the Free World. He sighed; then he wondered whether it was a sigh of relief or not. The guard came toward them and pointed at the front of the car.

"Oh, yeah, our folksy East German Hertz rent-a-plates. We have to turn them in again, don't we?" Mark yanked up on the emergency brake, then hopped out of the car. As an afterthought, he yelled, "Hey, where's the screwdriver?"

Alan handed him the tool, then got out and walked around to the rear of the car to check the other plate. When his feet stopped moving, his heart stopped, too. He stood, gawking at the car like a country boy dragged onto a New York City traffic island. One of the screws was missing from the holder. And so was the license plate.

He looked furtively at the guard, who was watching Mark work on the front plate. Just then Mark stood and started toward the back of the car, beating a syncopated rhythm on his hand with the plate he had just removed. The rhythm slowed when he looked at Alan's face, and it ceased when he saw the plain white surface of the car, its tiny screw hole glaring up at him like a beady black eye.
"Uh-oh. Well, now what?"

"We'll know in a minute. Here he comes." The guard, too, noticed the missing plate. He looked quizzically at Mark, then motioned for him to follow as he strode toward a small frame shack nearby. He called another guard by name; the guard came sprinting toward Alan, who was still standing motionless by the car.

Mark looked back at Alan and waved, whistling a chorus of "Happy Trails to You, Until We Meet Again." But Alan's immobile mask was not cracked in the slightest.

The guard pointed to the back seat, speaking a few words of German to Alan. Since there was nothing on the seat, he looked at the guard blankly for a moment. Then he realized that he was supposed to remove the seat. He yanked it forward, noticing that all the strength had gone out of his arms. The guard looked at the empty space beneath it, then nodded. Alan shoved the seat back into place.

Then the guard pointed at the trunk. What next, thought Alan. He opened the trunk and watched in astonishment as the guard pointed at the luggage and then at the nearby shack. Alan hoisted the two suitcases out of the trunk. He wondered what they would do with his body if he died on the spot. He almost wished he would.

The guard attempted to make a little conversation while he thoroughly searched the suitcases. Seeing that Alan either did not understand or was too frightened to respond, he lapsed into silence. He shut both suitcases, shrugged, smiled, and signalled that Alan could take them back to the car. He hauled them blindly out the door, afraid to look back for fear the guard might change his mind. He sank back into the car seat. And he waited.

And he waited. Twenty minutes later, Mark still had not returned. Alan began to think about concentration camps and striped uniforms. He again felt the searing pain that struck his mind like a bolt of lightning every time he thought of the horrid, fantastic, but real place that was Dachau. Barbed wire, guard towers, trenches, gas chambers. That such a place had ever existed . . . that it still remained today. . . . He saw a guard walking casually across the road
a few yards ahead. He had to stifle an almost unconscious need to scream at the sight of the uniform.

Just then, his eardrums exploded. He looked around. Mark was turning the key in the ignition and lighting a cigarette.

“What . . . what did they do?”

“Oh, that guy didn’t speak English, so they took me to the head guard. He told me it would cost twenty marks for the lost plate. I tried to get him down to ten marks and two packs of Kents, but he said no.” Mark waved gaily at the last guard as they sped onto the Autobahn.

“YOU WHAT? You’re lucky he even let you and your Kents out at all!” Alan rubbed his sweaty hands on his slacks again, shuddering as he visualized Mark holding his American cigarettes under the nose of the chief border guard.

“Oh well, why not? I paid him in the end. Don’t worry—I played it cool. And we’re in the Free World now, right?”

Alan turned and watched the last rolls of barbed wire diminish on the horizon. He sighed again. This time he knew it was a sigh of relief.

“And, as the saying goes, ‘You lose your humor . . .’”

“‘You lose everything.’” Alan looked at Mark and smiled.

“Julius Caesar said that, didn’t he?” Mark blew a cloud of smoke at the windshield.

Alan settled back into his seat and nodded resignedly.

“Right.”

To Live

by Alan Lowry

Electrical Engineering, Fr.

I turn my paper brain to the world,
Without a script or a soundtrack.
Get out there and fail.