



Season 3
Episode 1 Transcript

Internet Sleuth Saves Lost Hiker

Torah Kachur:

The Angeles National Forest — over 600,000 acres of rugged slopes, rocky canyons, and hiking trails with incredible views across California's San Gabriel Mountains. On a good traffic day, this wilderness is less than an hour's drive from downtown Los Angeles, and it's a favorite spot for René Compeán, a U.S. Navy veteran. It's where he went for a short hike he'd done many times before. But that was 13 hours ago. Now, he's completely lost.

René Compeán:

I don't have any water. I have no food, and I was wearing shorts. I was just wearing my hoodie. I wasn't prepared for any of this.

Torah Kachur:

René has already imagined the worst-case scenario.

René Compeán:

I'm not ready to die right now. God, I'm not ready to die.

Torah Kachur:

René doesn't know if help is on its way or if anyone even knows he's missing. And just when things couldn't get worse...

René Compeán:

All I know is rocks coming down, hitting the boulders, coming down. We hear the rocks, and I look more closely, like, "Oh, wait." It was a mountain lion.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur, and this is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day.

9:00 AM, April 14th, 2021. René Compeán parks his car in the primary lot of the Angeles National Forest. He works as a forklift driver in a warehouse, so these days off are precious. And the mountains are a special place for him. René grew up in Mexico near the border and later moved to Houston.

René Compeán:

All those areas were all flat. There's no mountains. There's no scenery. So I always, always look at TV and see all these sceneries and how beautiful it is, and I always wonder what it's like to be in there too. I moved to California when I joined the military.

Torah Kachur:

René remembers his first flights over the area.

René Compeán:

I was looking down the ocean, the mountains, I'm like, "Oh my God." And then from then on, I just fell in love with looking at and hiking up these mountains. I built it up from there and I've never stopped. I love it.

Torah Kachur:

Today, René is heading to Buckhorn Trail, one of his favorites, to get a little exercise.

René Compeán:

I've done it many times. I like it because it gives me a view of the horizon towards the city. It's a pretty easy hike, and you see a lot of people with the little ski sticks using it to hike up.

Torah Kachur:

At least that's something you used to see a lot. In December 2020, a massive fire tore through the Central San Gabriel Mountains, burning over 115,000 acres in and around the Angeles National Forest. It became known as the Bobcat Fire. This hike is René's first time back since that fire devastated the region.

René Compeán:

I was just keep on going my regular route. There was a lot of trees that were just completely burned.

Torah Kachur:

René pushes onto the top.

René Compeán:

The trail normally zigzags to go up, so it wouldn't be that strenuous. So it's just zigzags, keep on going up.

Torah Kachur:

But when he gets to the summit.

René Compeán:

I was sad because a lot of the trees were burned. It didn't look like what they used to look like when it was fully green.

Torah Kachur:

René takes some time to absorb this different view but realizes he needs to get moving. He has a doctor's appointment at three. It's taken him months to get this appointment and he's not going to miss it, but there's more traffic on the trail now.

René Compeán:

Oh, I'm not going to get down on time because I don't want to be cutting through them and telling them to move or whatever. So I told myself, "Okay if I just go down straight instead of zigzagging, I'm going to get down to the street faster."

Torah Kachur:

René goes off trail.

René Compeán:

Just trying to rush to get back home, that was my first mistake.

Torah Kachur:

He doesn't plan to do this the whole way down, just a couple of times until he can get around the slower group. But as we all know, what we plan for and what happens can be very different things.

René Compeán:

I kept on going down. It's like, "Okay, I shouldn't go no more down." But it was hard for me to go back up because the soil and the rocks were loose that I couldn't really grip anything to get back up. So I said, "Okay, let me keep on going down a little further down and maybe I'll get to the road."

Torah Kachur:

So René keeps going straight down the hill, or at least he thinks he's going straight down.

René Compeán:

As I kept on going down, I was like, "Wait, I'm going too far. I don't see the road. The road's no longer there."

Torah Kachur:

Now, René's not sure what direction the parking lot's in or even how to get back to where he was. René's quick, familiar hike is turning into an epic trek, one that he's not prepared for.

René Compeán:

I only had a 16-ounce water bottle and also a belVita cracker or breakfast biscuit.

Torah Kachur:

Every step is taking René further away from the trail, but he hasn't given up hope. He keeps calm and tries not to panic, still believing he can find his way back to the parking lot.

René Compeán:

I reached Little Creek, and I'm like, "Okay, if I follow it, it's going to take me back by where I parked the car."

Torah Kachur:

It doesn't. René follows the creek, but he doesn't come to the road or the parking lot. In fact, now René's in an area he doesn't recognize at all.

René Compeán:

It was like a little cliff. It was maybe 10 feet high. So I jumped down and I scraped my knees. So I started bleeding a little bit. I'm like, "Oh, God. Hopefully, I didn't break my leg."

Torah Kachur:

Injured and disoriented, with little water and almost no food, René's situation keeps getting worse. And that's when he realizes...

René Compeán:

I couldn't see the points of the mountain peaks or anything, and I was like, "Oh darn, I'm lost. I'm lost. I don't even know where I'm at."

Torah Kachur:

The afternoon sun is beating down, and René's still walking, struggling over rocks and through trees, trying to figure out his next move.

René Compeán:

I was so tired. I was like, "Okay, I need to let somebody know that I'm here and that I'm lost," but I had no reception.

Torah Kachur:

To make things worse, the battery on his phone is running low. He hasn't got a backup battery. He turns his phone off to conserve what's left.

René Compeán:

Okay. So I need to get higher so maybe I could get a signal.

Torah Kachur:

But getting higher means climbing up a very steep, rocky incline.

René Compeán:

I don't do rock climbing. I never done rock climbing. So literally, I was crawling

up and holding myself to rocks, and I'm like, "Oh, hopefully, I don't fall because if I fall, I'm done. I'm not going to survive the fall."

Torah Kachur:

René finally gets to a spot where he can rest. He holds the phone high over his head and discovers he has reception, but...

René Compeán:

My phone had already gone to like 10%. So I sent an SOS message to my friend, and I put that I got lost. I'm by Buckhorn Trail, around two, three miles down the mountain.

Torah Kachur:

René also sends two photos.

René Compeán:

One picture was of my legs, had a lot of burned charcoal and it was bleeding a little bit. The other picture was of the horizon of that street, that road that I could see in the horizon. I don't have any water. I have no food. And I don't know if my message was received.

Torah Kachur:

René's battery's running dangerously low, and he's lost signal. He has no idea how long it'll be before help comes, if it comes. The only thing he knows for sure is that if they don't come soon, he's out there all night. This is *Tell Me What Happened*, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase the importance of a human connection when you need help, whether you are trapped in quicksand or standing on a cliff wondering how to get home.

Now, it's late afternoon. René Compeán has been lost in the Angeles National Forest for a few hours. The sun will go down soon. He has no water, no food. His only hope is a short text message SOS and a couple of pictures that he sent to a friend. Meanwhile, less than 50 miles away from where René stands, Ben Kuo is surrounded by the comforts of home, having an average workday.

Ben Kuo:

I was running a technology news site and just tracking what's going on in the world.

Torah Kachur:

Just before dinner, Ben's checking Twitter and a call for help catches his eye.

Ben Kuo:

I saw a post from the LA County Sheriff asking about this hiker. The post said, "Are you an avid hiker in the Mount Waterman area? LASD SAR teams need help locating a missing hiker." And it had a picture of somebody's feet sitting on a rock.

Torah Kachur:

René's text message and the first photo had made it to his friend who reported him lost. The second photo of the road in the distance, which would've been much more useful, didn't go through. A search and rescue team sets out for René's last known location, Buckhorn Trail, but the search area is massive. The police are hoping someone on social media might recognize the location in the photo.

Ben Kuo:

I saw that, and I bet you I can figure out where he is. So that's when I sat down at the computer and started working on figuring out exactly where the photo was taken.

Torah Kachur:

Ben has an unusual hobby.

Ben Kuo:

It's called geolocation, and that is taking a look at a photo and figuring out from that photo can you figure out where was it taken. And you can figure it out to the last centimeter where someone is based on the views, what's in the background. I've always done that just for fun, never did it for anything really serious. I always thought of it as a silly hobby.

Torah Kachur:

Usually, Ben's challenge is finding locations he sees in movies and commercials. He's also used geolocation to track wildfires and share information on how they're spreading on social media. Today, his skills could save a stranger's life.

Ben Kuo:

They'd given enough information, saying, "Oh, he'd kind of started here." I looked at the recent photos of the Angeles National Forest.

Torah Kachur:

An average hiker can cover as many as 20 miles a day. René could be anywhere. Ben starts by downloading 3D images of the Buckhorn Trail from Google Earth.

Ben Kuo:

You can set the day and time for any image in 3D. The beauty of that is the shadows, when you look at a 3D image, you can see a mountain will cast a shadow depending on what time of day it is.

Torah Kachur:

Ben compares the shadows from Google Earth to the picture René sent. This allows him to narrow the search area, but it's still too big. Ben's about to give up, but then he has a breakthrough.

Ben Kuo:

If you look at the picture of his feet, you can see, you know, there's a green valley. Well, there was just a wildfire in that area, so there's not that many green valleys, right, because a lot of it is ash.

Torah Kachur:

So Ben begins scanning satellite photos for patches of green in that area, compares them to René's picture.

Ben Kuo:

And I had a picture of the satellite view from what I thought was where his feet were, and it looks pretty good. It matches with the right color of the canyon and the hills. And I was able to go, "Hey, I know exactly which corner it was."

Torah Kachur:

And now, Ben can calculate the exact coordinates of where René stood when he took the picture of his legs.

Ben Kuo:

34 degrees, 18 minutes, 52.67 North, 117 degrees, 54 minutes, 34.92 West.

Torah Kachur:

Ben sends his information to the authorities and waits for a response. Out on the mountainside, it's starting to cool off.

René Compeán:

I was wearing shorts. I was just wearing my hoodie. I wasn't prepared for any of this.

Torah Kachur:

René's found a spot where he can shelter in some rocks and see the whole area. That's when he realizes he isn't alone. René looks across the canyon.

René Compeán:

And there was rocks coming down, hitting the boulders, coming down. You hear the rocks. I looked more closely, and it was a mountain lion.

Torah Kachur:

All René can do is keep perfectly still and not make a sound.

René Compeán:

And I was like, "Okay, so it's over there on the other side." So I'm thinking, "Hopefully, it doesn't come over here where I'm at."

Torah Kachur:

Not long after, René spots another animal across the canyon.

René Compeán:

I heard, again, rocks moving. Then there was a black bear that was walking on that side, and I'm thinking, "Okay, there's a mountain lion, there's a black bear, and I'm totally exhausted."

Torah Kachur:

René tries to focus on staying alert. It's starting to get dark when he hears a noise that gives him hope.

René Compeán:

I was just yelling and jumping around, but it was maybe like two, three miles.

Torah Kachur:

The helicopter is too far away to spot him, but so close, it's almost cruel. The rescue team is searching the Buckhorn Trail based on René's text message, but René is miles off that trail now. For hours, René yells and moves around trying to catch their attention. He uses up the rest of his phone battery flashing the screen. For a moment, the helicopter searchlight lands on René.

René Compeán:

But it was so brief that it only lasted few seconds because they're moving it around in the mountain. One, two seconds, I'm like, "Ah, that was too quick. They cannot see me."

Torah Kachur:

Eventually, the helicopter flies away.

René Compeán:

And that's when I told myself, "Okay if they're going to come and look for me tomorrow again, I need to get to the other side of the hill."

Torah Kachur:

René decides it's safer to try the climb in the morning and stay put for the night, but sleep doesn't come easy.

René Compeán:

Every time I try to close my eyes and rest for a second, I will hear something in the twigs or rocks, and I will open my eyes and I'll just look around, look around.

Torah Kachur:

If the authorities had received Ben Kuo's geolocation tip, René might have come home that night.

Ben Kuo:

After the fact, I learned they actually never got to that information. It went to a giant Bitbucket and they never would've seen it.

Torah Kachur:

However, Ben didn't just give the coordinates to search and rescue.

Ben Kuo:

I posted all this stuff on social media, and it turns out that someone who follows me for wildfires also knew the search and rescue guys who were looking for René at the time. And he passed that information along, saying, "Hey, this guy kind of knows what he is doing."

Torah Kachur:

It's this connection, one more stranger coming to René's aid that eventually gets Ben's information into the right hands. René's night on the mountain has been terrifying. Alone in the dark, every noise sounded like a threat. When the sun rises, René is exhausted but determined to get higher so if the rescue team returns, they'll be able to see him.

René Compeán:

I was thinking, "I don't know if I was going to make it there another night."

Torah Kachur:

A thick fog creeps in. René realizes he's got to climb high enough to clear it. At one point, René thinks he hears people walking and talking nearby.

René Compeán:

I would yell as loud as I could get three times, "Help, help, help," and then stop. I'm like, "Are they not hearing me?"

Torah Kachur:

René is actually hallucinating. He's so tired and hungry that his mind is starting to play tricks on him. In this state, it would be easy to fall, get injured, an error that could be fatal. Now, the fog is so thick he can't get a sense of direction. He starts to pray.

René Compeán:

Within 15 minutes, the clouds opened up for 10 seconds. They opened up for 10 seconds, and I was able to see the tip of the mountain where I was at. And that's how I told myself, "Okay, no matter how hard it is, I'm going to have to follow that straight up."

Torah Kachur:

But René is low on energy. He stops for a pee break.

René Compeán:

My urine was like blood red, and I read about that like, “Oh, that means I’m dehydrated.”

Torah Kachur:

René knows another night alone on the mountain isn’t an option. He keeps climbing and finally reaches an open area. And then René can hear the helicopter, but they can’t see him. Just before 4:00 PM, 25 hours after René’s missed doctor’s appointment, the rescue team finally receives Ben’s tip.

Speaker 4:

Okay, and where did this information come from?

Speaker 5:

So the info came from somebody on Twitter thinking that it might be in that area. When I added that in —

Ben Kuo:

What I heard from the crew chief is they went toward the location and the fog was rolling in. They couldn’t actually see the latitude and longitude, the point that I’d given to them. And so they started going up the hill.

René Compeán:

I could see the helicopter coming through the edge of the mountain peak around, and they’re coming my way.

Ben Kuo:

And as they pulled out of the fog, René was right there.

René Compeán:

And then I was like, “Oh, God, they see me.” I started with a little tear crying.

Torah Kachur:

A member of the rescue team descends on a line and appears in the fog, puts René in a harness, and pulls him up.

René Compeán:

I think they said I was in shock because I was just looking out. I was just looking. I’m breathing and looking. They gave me a blanket and gave me water. And then the guy was telling me, “You’re so lucky we found you.” Just a week ago, another hiker was found, but she was found dead in the same location, area.

Ben Kuo:

It really did bring tears to my eyes to see somebody alive with their family. I was also really happy that someone actually took my information and acted on it because it could've been a really bad situation.

René Compeán:

I feel he really wanted to do his best to help locate me, and that to me says a lot about an individual who's willing to extend and whatever their expertise are to helping save a life. He's a great person.

Torah Kachur:

Since that day, Ben has given a few seminars to the search and rescue team explaining how he located René.

Ben Kuo:

I think they were surprised because it was a technology thing. They use technology I've seen in everything they do, but it's not like, "Oh, hey, let's calculate where someone is and go get them." It's more like, "Oh, hey. Well, we'll go do a search, and we'll throw a lot of people on the ground to do this." I was told the amount of risk that I removed by finding somebody or having a good idea of where they were is huge. They had 100 people out there looking for the guy, and everybody out there is at risk. So I think they were very happy that it worked out as well.

René Compeán:

Even after the whole incident of me getting lost, I still go out. I'm not afraid. I'm just more cautious now, and I know what not to do anymore. I just am grateful that I'm able to still continue doing what I love and enjoy doing outside in the outdoors.

Torah Kachur:

Knowing what to do and what not to do on a hike is so important. Even though René was lost for just over 24 hours, he was in serious danger. This show is produced by OnStar, and they're focused on keeping you safe. So I'm turning to a very experienced wilderness survival expert, Jessie Krebs, for some tips, starting with what's the first thing you should do when you realize you're lost?

Jessie Krebs:

Make yourself stop moving. It's called the S.T.O.P. acronym. So stop, the T is think, the O is observe, the P is to make plans, and all four of those happen sitting on your butt. Sit down, take a drink of water, breathe. The worst thing to do is to just keep walking, and that's what most of us do. We end up a little disoriented. We step off the trail, realize we're not in the trail. And instead of stopping immediately and now doing a systematic test of our environment, so basically, doing out and back, out and back, out and back in different

directions, always coming back to the same center. And by doing that, that's a basic scouting technique you can find the trail. People often cannot get themselves to stop moving. Short, one-hour, two-hour hikes are generally the most dangerous because people know, they think, "Hey, I'm just going to be back home. I'm going to be back at the car in just a couple hours, so what's the big deal?" So that's what gets people in trouble the most.

Torah Kachur:

Can you tell me a little bit about the difference between preparing for a trip outdoors, whether it's a day or just an hour? What's the difference in how you prepare?

Jessie Krebs:

Hopefully, if you're just going for an hour or for a day, you're packing the same stuff basically. That doesn't need to be a lot of gear, but it does need to take care of all of your basic needs. One of the basic needs is sustenance, and water is most important when we're talking about sustenance. Food, I could care less. Most of us can go easily 30 days without food, so I don't care about food. Most survival situations last three days or less. So food, irrelevant. But water, water is pretty critical. If we don't get enough water, we're going to start feeling pretty bad pretty quickly and start making bad decisions. So, how much water is in your area, right? Whatever area you're going into, is it water-plentiful? Is there lots of snow you can melt down? I can figure out what I need for water or sustenance for this particular environment. That's one basic need.

Another is signaling. What are you going to use to signal with if you end up in trouble? If you know that the area you're in your cell phone is going to work, it gets good signal, great. That can be your primary signal if that's what you want. And if it dies, or you drop it off a cliff, or you tumble down a cliff and when you go to reach for it it's now shattered, whatever happens, so having a backup battery for your cell phone is smart. And a lot of signaling and navigation starts before you even leave. Do you have a map of the area? It's very easy to get online now and print out a map for free of the area you're going to.

If for some reason you can't tell people, you just on a whim or something decided to stop at a trailhead and go for a hike, at least put a note on the dash of your car that says, "Hey, if this car is still here at this time on this day, please contact 911." And then your last one is fire, and fire is awesome for a lot of things but it's your last line of defense. I can have a lighter in a pocket. There's no such thing as cheating in survival. So have a lighter in your pocket.

Torah Kachur:

- All right, no cheating in the backcountry. So you can use your phone. What's the first thing you should do if you're worried about what happens when the phone dies?

Jessie Krebs:

The best thing is to text or call 911, and that way they can hopefully tell you if you don't have your location on. Hopefully, you've done that ahead of time. But if the first thing if you can only get a couple of words out, try to tell them approximately where you are. That's the most critical part. Once they find you, they can deal with everything else. Keep in mind as well one more thing that happens a fair amount with folks is cold soaking is a thing with anything battery operated. If it gets cold, it doesn't work as effectively, and the battery drains a lot faster. Take backup batteries.

Torah Kachur:

What about hiking and terrain that you're familiar with but in a changing landscape? So you're now, all of a sudden, decide to go for a winter hike, you're hiking after a wildfire. What kind of precautions do you take for that?

Jessie Krebs:

Don't get cocky. Don't get overconfident. And once in a while, we say in the military, "Check your six," and that means, "Look behind you." It's basically a way to look back and see what is it going to look like in the other direction. And that can be really tricky for people. If they don't think about that, then it can look completely different. And now you're coming back and you hit this Y, and you're like, "Uh-oh, which way was it?" Just be smart. We're out there to go have fun, and then we want to get back home. So make sure you can do that.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people. If you'd like to read more stories like this one or if you want more information about how to prepare for a hike and what to do if you get lost, there's a link in the show notes to take you to our website. Or, you can go straight to onstar.com and tell us your favorite story about a time that a stranger helped you. Let's share some love for people who help others in big ways and small.

On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur, and please be safe out there.

Find more episodes of *Tell Me What Happened* at OnStar.com/podcast.