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## **I'M WORRIED ABOUT DAD**

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Joel Wittenbach the author of the children's book MACH THE TRUCK is self taught. He reads (How to write) and text books.

## I'M WORRIED ABOUT DAD

"I'm worried about Dad. He won't answer his phone." Marge, a stay at home house wife now, a retired school teacher in her mid fifties, said into her cell phone. She was behind the wheel of her mother's old Ford LTD. Her father had given the car to her after the death of her mother. The car had low mileage and was in great shape for an old car. It reminded Marge of her mother every time she was behind the wheel. Dad couldn't stand to drive it any more. It reminded him of mother too. She squinted into the sun.

Dad shouldn't be driving anymore anyway. His heart was failing, as was his eye sight. Who knew how much he could actually see anymore. He still had his pickup and he only drove in the day light, or so he said. Marge wished he wouldn't drive at all. "I'd like to make one more west coast run", he would say every time Marge came over and he was polishing his Peter Built. How could she do what she knew she would have to do, to a man who had driven for a living most of his life?

"Maybe he forgot to charge it, he does that sometimes." There was a pause in the male voice on the phone. "Or maybe he, um, just doesn't feel like answering it. Or maybe he is out and simply forgot to take it with him." Marge's husband, Herford, owned his own insurance agency. He liked his sports, at least from his lazy boy and was built like a lineman, or was at one time. He still had that big barrel. He was a real tough guy that never even played high school ball. Some days he had nothing better to do at work than catch up on some old football game. He saved hundreds for reviewing.

"Or maybe he's had another heart attack, or something worse." The woman's voice cracked. She stepped down hard on the accelerator. "I wish you were going with me."

"I said I'd go." He bounced back.

"Yea, you said you'd go right after you got out of work. You don't care about Dad. You said to keep trying to call him. I just couldn't stand waiting another minute." She blurted out fast, and a little sharp.

"Listen, we'll head right out after work." She snapped the phone off. Was she going to be able to bring her dad home this time? She wanted to take care of him at her house. She wished Herford, her new husband, was going with her. He didn't understand Dad. Maybe she should call John. Daddy always liked John, even after the divorce. Dad was more forgiving. Marge couldn't stand the sight of John and hadn't talked to him in over five years. Damn it. She dabbed her left eye under her glasses. If she had John's number she'd call him. He'd come.

Dad wasn't going to come back without Old Pete. He'd said it enough times. Herford wouldn't have Old Pete. He'd said that enough times. Herford said the association wouldn't allow it. They lived in one of those high class suburbs, anyway the people that live there think they are high class. They'd never accept Pete.

Maybe she could stop at the gas station and pick up Stoney. Dad and Stoney had been friends a long time. They both grew up in Atwood and were in the same class in school. They were lifelong friends.

Maybe Stoney could talk some sense into dad this time and she wouldn't have to go through this again. She felt twisted, like a morning without coffee. Forty five minutes more. I'm coming dad.

After Marge married John, Mom and Dad became an over the road team. Dad got old, had a couple heart attacks. He went through that pacemaker thing. Dad couldn't pass his Dot physical anymore to drive truck. Now he thinks he's as rested and as good as ever.

Dad's old truck sits in the yard facing the road waiting for a trailer, waiting for a load. Dad keeps him clean just like he always did. Dad is always climbing all over him. She swallowed hard. What if he fell? What if he is lying on the ground beside an over turned ladder with a spilled wash bucket and wet soapy towel. Maybe he was lying on the ground with the hose running, wet and cold. He could catch pneumonia. She cinched her lips together. Forty two minutes. I'm coming dad.

She tipped the left turn blinker and moved into the passing lane around an eighteen wheeler. Dad called them a big truck. If that driver only knew how he might turn out. Some day he could find himself sitting in a rocking chair, staring out the window at his old truck rusting away and sinking into the ground. Maybe he'd polish the wheels and dream his was the brightest truck on the road. Maybe someone wouldn't even allow the truck into the neighborhood. And he'd have to live an hour away from family. Thirty eight minutes. I'm coming Dad.

Maybe Herford was right. Maybe it was nothing. She liked to call Dad every morning and he knew it. He'd be waiting. He was always waiting for her call. This morning, there was nothing. She shook her head. She reached for her cell phone again. Who could she call but Herford? She put the phone down.

She wondered. Is a cheating husband that was always there better than... than... a man that didn't care? John said it was only one time, but it was Toolie Brown. Why did it have to be her? John should have known better. Her phone was ringing. She picked it up and looked at the number. Herford. She let it ring. Thirty one minutes. I'm coming dad.

She tried Dad's number. One, two, three, four, five. She counted the rings. "You've reached the numb..." She hung up. She tried again. Maybe he didn't hear it. One, two, three, four, five. "You've r ..." Dad please. She dabbed her eye again. Twenty nine minutes.

Mom and Dad hadn't started team driving until after Marge had married John. Mom called as often as she could, usually once a day. Even then sometimes Dad would make a west coast run alone. Dad was going through Vegas alone when he had his first heart attack. Marge and her mother flew out and sat by Dad's bed side together. That's when it happened. John. Toolie Brown. She pursed her lips and shook her head.

Dad got better for awhile and drove some more. His health slowly got worse until he failed his DOT physical. Mom tried driving with Dad in the shotgun seat. It tore Dad up.

They retired to the house Marge grew up in. Mom pasted suddenly at home. It took forever to get there that day. Just like today. Marge shook her head again. She sat forward and upright in the seat. She

gripped the wheel. The phone ring again. Herford. She let it ring. Twenty four minutes. I'm on my way, Dad.

She looked down at the speed-o-meter. She was traveling way too fast. She hated it, but she knew she had better slow down. She brought her foot back some, off of the gas. She could see on the water tower, ATWOOD, in big bright letters. She'd stop at Smitt's Gas. Stoney was always hanging around there. He'd entertain the customers as they waited for their cars to be repaired. Eighteen minutes. I'm coming Dad. I'll be there soon.

Marge pulled into the gas station. Things change. The coke machine near the door, and the bench where Stoney sat on warm summer days were gone. What was she thinking? She had grown up in Atwood. She and John as kids bought cokes from the old pop machine.

She had to find Stoney. She pushed through the door. The wall had been knocked out and what once had been service bays were now a mini mart and a SUBWAY. A young girl stood behind the counter. Do you know a man named Stoney? Her face dropped. Definitely, no Stoney here. Fourteen minutes. I'll be there soon.

She bumped a man who was coming in the door as she rushed out. She tried to side step him to keep from running him down. She slipped and was falling. She threw out her arms to stop herself. The man grabbed one of her arms before she hit the floor and pulled her up.

"Margie?" The man said. "What are you doing here?" She pulled free as she got to her feet. She looked up into the man's face.

"John" She said almost disgusted. Her jaw quivered. "It's dad." She almost collapsed.

"What about him?"

"He won't answer his phone. I've been trying all day." Her shoulders drooped as if she was a balloon person someone had let some of the air out.

"You're shaking like a leaf. I'll drive you out there." He put his arm around Marge's shoulder. He led her to his pickup truck, opened the passenger door and helped her in. He had always done that for her. He slid in behind the wheel.

"Your phone is ringing." John said.

"Yip" Marge said flatly. John knew that tone. He didn't say another thing about it. He drove towards dads. Nine minutes. Hang on Dad. John and I are on our way.

"Eddie's grandson Tony saw Dad, I mean your dad, the other day. He was at the filling station buying diesel. Tony had to help him lift the five gallon cans into his old pickup. What would he want with

diesel?" John was puzzled. John slid his hand across the seat to the right. Marge was looking out the windshield. She saw his hand come over and took it.

"Dad often talked about making one more west coast run. You don't think he's going to try it do you?" Marge asked. John didn't answer. The truck responded to the extra pressure on the gas. Four or five minutes.

"We've got to stop him." John's chest swelled as he took a deep breath. His hand squeezed down on Marge's. "I should have watched him. I'm sorry." John said. "I wasn't thinking." She pushed her right cheek out. John had said that before, (I wasn't thinking). Marge stared straight forward out the windshield. Toollie. She loosened her grip on John's hand momentary. She could let go of the past at least for a while. She tightened her grip on John's hand.

"It wasn't for you to do" came out of Marge's mouth in a flat tone that John could not decipher. They rounded the bend in the road. There was the house. It looked silent. John drove into the drive. Pete was gone. Nothing was left except for ten indentions in the yard and a grassless spot in the lawn.

"Dad" They said almost at the same time.

"You don't think?" Marge said. Her phone was ringing again. She ignored it.

"I don't think anything yet. Where could he have gone? Do you want to call the police?" John asked

"Do you think that's necessary?"

"Yea, It's best." John said. She pushed 911. John walked to the end of the drive way as if he might be able to see Old Pete just pulling away, maybe he could see him on the hyway. He could not. Marge walked out to the end of the drive too. She looked both ways just like John had. Her shoulders drooped and her eyes looked down at her feet. John put his hand under her arm pit and pulled her up. He walked her to the house as Marge talked on the phone to the police.

"The police said to wait." She sighed out with a lot of air.

"I know . That is what they always say. Do you think we should wait in the house?" John asked.

"I'll make coffee." Marge found the key under the welcome mat. Marge wandered into the kitchen to make some coffee. John stood in the living room for a moment.

"Why don't you build a fire? He'll like that when we find him." Marge asked from the kitchen. John was standing there as if waiting to be asked. He wouldn't presume anything like that.

He proceeded to wondered around the house. Marge could follow them around by the sound of his footsteps. He opened the door to the bedroom.

"Found him." John said flatly. Marge raced to the bed room. Dad lay peacefully face up in bed. He wasn't moving.

“Dad?” Marge raced to his side. She touched and stroked his face. She jerked her hand back.

“He’s cold.” She turned and dropped her face into John’s chest. He put his arms around her.

“I’ll take care of everything.” He said as he stroked her hair. He helped her back to the kitchen. He sat her in a chair. He turned down the coffee. He found a bottle of wine and poured her a glass. Her phone rang. “Dad died.” She said flatly. She hung up.

The phone rang almost immediately. She turned it off. She picked up her glass and headed back toward the bed room.

“I’m going to build that fire now, OK? It’s going to be a long night.” Marge stared at her glass. John went into the living room. He phoned the police. John had often built a fire. Many an evening, John, Marge and Marge’s parents sat before the fire place and watched the flames. Talked and laughed. The glow and the warmth always warmed them on the insides as well as the outsides. It wouldn’t be like old times but it might take the chill off.

John crumpled some paper then stacked some kindling over it. He reached for the long metal tube that held the fire place matches. He pulled off the lid to retrieve a match. Inside the match can John found two envelopes. One was marked John. The other was marked My Little Margie. John lit the fire. He stood there thinking. He turned.

“Marge Come in here.” He shouted. “Your dad left you and me something, a note actually, two notes.” Marge came out of the bedroom. She’d been sitting with dad. The sun was getting lower. The shadows were long and dark. No one from the police had arrived yet. John sat Marge down on the couch. The fire, in the fire place flickered throwing dancing glowing yellow figures around the room. He handed Marge her envelope. Margie opened her envelope.

*Honey I sold Pete. It broke my heart. A bright young man bought him. He thought he might take Pete on a west coast run. Maybe he said that to please me, anyway, I liked the young man. You’d a liked him too. Pete is in good hands.*

*I always wanted to take your mother on a honey moon cruise. I did not, but I can send you. Here’s two tickets, on me. Have fun.*

*May God Bless, I Love My little Margie*

*Dad*

Marge read it a second time out loud. Tears filled her eyes and she choked. Her throat was dry and sore. Then she asked what did you get? John read his note.

*John I knew it would be you who found the notes. I knew you’d light a fire. You enjoyed them so much. I would hope Marge was there with you. Take good care of her for me. Alas, I no longer can. I can count on you I always could. Thanks, I always thought of you as my son. I wish I could give Marge to you again, like I did the first time. I cannot.*

*Warm yourself by the fire, like old times.*

*BUD*

“What did he say?” Marge asked.

“It said he always thought of me as his son and all that and I could have all of his fishing gear.” John swallowed. His throat was dry and to swallow was difficult. It had always been difficult to lie to Marge.

“Can I see it?” Came out of her mouth too late. John had wadded it up the message and threw it into the fire. It flamed up and lit up the room briefly and was gone. The front door of the house burst open. The bulk of Herford bound in unannounced. Marge turned quickly.

“I got here as fast as I could.” Herford said with a big blow of air as he tried to catch his breath. He walked forward toward Marge. Marge stared at him a moment. Herford spread his arms as he got closer. He was offering a hug for comfort. Marge turned toward him. Marge had one hand behind her back. She stepped back toward John. She waved the tickets. John took them from her and quickly hid them behind his back. Maybe he wanted to squeeze her hand it was so close. Maybe he thought better of it at the moment. She knew anyway. She could always read his mind. He stuffed the tickets into his rear pants pocket.

“John this is my husband Herford. Herford,” She turned toward John. She winked at John. She held back a grin. “This is John.” Now John, read my mind.

THE END