

## The Trip

“The greatest discovery of all time is that a person can change his future by merely changing his attitude” - Oprah.

“Christ, I’m tellin’ ya, he’s an accident waiting to happen. If I didn’t see it coming ... we get t-boned. Bigtime! Listen ... Babe ... if I didn’t see the old guff we’re toast. That’s the long and short of it. You know, once upon a time, it was all ‘bout them drunks and druggies scaring the hell out of us. Well ... wallah ... now they got backup: Old Folks in Escalades.”

She looked up from her device. “Who ... what Escalade? How do you know he’s old?”

Tom repeatedly stabbed his finger in the Escalade’s direction. “Right there. That ol’ boy would’ve nailed us good. You listening? If I was still copping, running that red would have been the least of his worries. I don’t care if he’s ... deaf ... dumb ... and ... ancient. I’d write him for careless.”

“What’s the statute for seatbelts?” She pivoted to face him while raising one eye brow. “Look at you, Tom, operating a motor vehicle without being buckled up. Click it or ticket. Come on, Holmes ... Isn’t that how it works?”

Amazing. He couldn’t believe it. Her sense of timing was impeccable. She did it again: She steered the whole thing in a new direction, from the righteous cop to the law violating citizen. “Look Babe. If they designed belts that didn’t hide under seats may be, just maybe, I’d buckle up.”

“Well listen up, Mister Sergeant. If you don’t buckle up, I shall be forced to make a citizen’s arrest.”

He took a deep breath and whistled while pulling the belt across his chest. Bridget was right again. He had to hand it to her. A quick glance confirmed her device was sparing him from additional wifey instructions. It was irritating. She could stare at her thing-a-ma-jig and bust him at the same time. Her finger was all over the thing but would slow if something caught her attention: something like Norwegian goulash sprinkled with fish scales, he imagined. He looked out over the stubble of a harvested corn field while a hawk parked on a tree limb. Ah yes, his inner voice screamed—‘*Free, free ... social media ain’t got meee.*’

He pulled into the passing lane to get around the Escalade. Typical. The eighty-year-old doofus was doing twenty. That’s how it works: eighty-year-olds doing twenty and the twenty-year-old’s doing eighty. “There you go. He’s old enough to have moss growing behind his ears. Told ya so.” It was good to be right. She had busted him, but he was back on top of things. He did say the Escalade was being driven by an old duffer. Years of police work could do that: produce perfection.

“You just got to see this.” She held up her device and smiled bigtime. “Not now, you’re driving. When we stop. Oh, we do have a *special* family. I love ‘em to pieces, don’t you?”

He gave her the ‘I-heard-you-and-agree’ smile.

As the morning sun rose in the sky, it lost its deep orange color and got brighter and smaller. He drove toward it, listening to the thump-thumping of the tires on the road surface. Joints in the cement causing a perfect cadence. He thought he could make it to the next rest stop before he pulled the visor down. He was bored and “visor challenge” gave him something to occupy his mind.

He was also forcing himself to only sip his coffee. He had stopped for gas and asked her if she wanted a cup. She'd told him no and reminded him to only get a small cup. He knew why; they'd be stopping for pee breaks. He was a dutiful husband and only got a small cup. But he was smug in the knowledge he'd scored the high-octane super caffeinated libation. It was good to not be completely whipped. Thirty-four years of marriage did that to some fellas. He had to hand it to her again though. They both could remember when he was a couple years outta college his bladder could hold an entire pot of mud, no problemo. Now he had to hit the bathroom, sometimes if he just got a whiff of the stuff.

He smiled. It was funny now, the time he scooted into a Walmart racing to the restroom. He made it in a nick of time but realized they had torn out the urinals. He figured it had to do with political correctness. Then a young girl stepped out of a stall and froze. He had spun and hot stepped it to the men's room and urinal relief.

"I told you about that time I went in the wrong bathroom."

"Million times."

He started to reach for the visor without thinking but caught himself. Were all marriages marinated in irritation?

"Tell me again if it'd make you feel better." She dropped her device into her purse.

"Nah ... I'm good. But ya know—"

"Here we go." She crossed her arms and stared straight ahead, her way of challenging him to pick-up his game. Perhaps that's what thirty-four years of marriage did to a fella: made it imperative that he pick-up his game, keep it interesting, whatever.

“I was thinkin’, ya know. Like is this what the getting old deal is all about? Bladders that don’t bladder no more. Walking into a room and forgetting what in the hell ya walked in the room for in the first place? Setting glasses down and not finding them for a week? Not using names but saying something like ‘old what’s-his-name?’ I mean my warranty expired. I was at that funeral when that old guy was putting on a show in his walker. He was like older than a hundred-foot oak. It took him forever to get to the front pew in that bigass place. I’m lookin’ at him *and* the urn trying to figure out which one is for me. Is it better to be dead or almost dead?”

“Okay, Lamacker, get to the point. Bladders ... now oak trees. Wow.”

Lamacker was a wind-bag of a cop he’d worked with in a prior life. He’d never finish a story but just drone on and on. Tom and Bridget had managed to be married long enough to compile words or glances only they knew the meanings of; being referred to as a Lamacker wasn’t good.

“Come on. Out with it. Tired bladders. Funerals. Oak trees—” she made a “come here” motion with her left hand.

“All righty then.” They both burst out laughing. “I was just thinking is all. You know we’re getting *kinda* old here. Never thought I’d be a grandpa. I remember looking at old people thinking it must suck to be you. Now I’m getting the feeling I’m old. Am I soon gonna start smelling like mothballs? Remember them little shits calling me ‘Grandpa Pabst’ at Oktoberfest? Just because I did a beer bong. Now it’s like if I can’t remember the name of the Twins pitcher, it’s time to get scared. Alzheimer’s sucks.”

“Both hands on the wheel please.”

They continued driving into the blinding sun. “I can drive with just one hand on the wheel, ya know.”

“Look, big guy, we’re still young at heart. You’re more than a little grey though.”

He knew without looking that she was smiling. She always smiled when she pointed out he was committing the mortal sin of getting grey. Hard to deny it when his grandson called a bald eagle a ‘grandpappa bird’ because it had a white head too.

“Look. I’m being serious here. I’m blonde is how I see it.”

“Well, sure then. You’re not grey. You’re as blonde as Farrah Fawcett in her heyday.”

“Whatever. But that’s the point: kids now-a-days wouldn’t even know who she was. And you know what? There are more and more kids running around with torn up pants and purple hair than there are people our age. The obits are scary. Christ, sometimes three or four of them are younger than me. Man, it’s like Diane said ... may as well not put off anything for tomorrow, because, well ... you know why.”

“People still think we’re in our fifties.”

He looked over at her. “Really, we’re like a car that doesn’t have any rust or dents. We’re cheerful and spry, but look under the hood and what are you gonna see: an engine on its last leg. No doubt about it. Like that old boy at the funeral. I mean we’re all going to be as old as that guy if we live long enough.”

“Look ... it’s the weekend. Can we talk about something else?”

When they made it to a new part of the interstate, the thump-thumping stopped and he'd also won his secret 'visor' mind game. The sun was high enough in the sky to not be a problem any longer and he didn't resort to using the visor.

"Let's see then. What should we talk about?" he said.

"Camping, how about that?" she reached in her purse for her device. "I've bookmarked some places out in Maine we should stay at."

"How about closer to home?"

"Why?"

He couldn't help the smirk that worked itself onto his face. "So ... we can be good grandparents."

"We can do both: Maine and the grand kids."

"You know that was something we didn't screw up." He pursed his lips and slowed down his words. "Our kids turned out good, didn't they?"

"Well, yeah, they did." She dropped her device back in her purse.

"Guess we got lucky is all there is to it. I was a cop and should've known better. I just didn't see it. Jesus-H-Christ."

"What do you mean I should have known what? I'm not following you."

"Oh, you know. Respect your elders. Blah-blah-blah. All that crap. Funny we didn't end up raising a Ted Bundy." He said it while staring straight ahead.

"Teaching your kids to be good citizens is a good thing. *Right?*"

“Think about it Babe. Priests. Scout leaders. Cops. You know. Authority figures are all elders.” He rubbed his eyebrows. “About like tossing a hamster in a cobra pit: Sooner or later something bad happens if you’re the hamster; ya can’t just hope snakes are nice.”

“So okay, this kinda talk irritates me! What are you saying?”

They zipped by several mile markers before he spoke. “Self-preservation, that’s what I’m saying here. We should have told our kids to call for a ride if they were drunk. Nope. We pretended they weren’t drinkers. They never called but I bet they downed their share. I mean wine coolers aren’t sold to wine snobs.”

Her voice slowed. “Still not following you.”

“Our son, Babe. He served mass. Hell, our daughter served mass but I guess she was safe.”

Bridget sat up straight. “What are you saying?”

“No not that. I mean he was not assaulted as far as I know.”

“I think I’m getting what you’re saying. But we did the best we could. The world was different back then. We didn’t know.”

He raised his voice. “Honesty is the best policy.” He swung his head from side to side while digging at his collar. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead. “Honest ... honesty is nothing but BS.”

“What do you mean, Honey?” she asked in an even tone.

“Cop stops a car full of kids on ’na Friday night. Cop acts all friendly. Can I look in your car for bombs or guns? He laughs at his joke while being plenty friendly. Driver doesn’t know one of the passengers in the back ditched weed under the front seat. Bingo, the driver’s busted, the cops happy and life goes on. All the driver had to do was just say no. I mean a cop is not your friend when he stops you. That, my dear, is a fact.”

“There was that ‘just-say-no-to-drugs’ thing back then. Remember that?” She smiled hoping to lighten the mood. “Guess it should’ve said just say no to cops!”

“Look, we lucked out. We dropped Jane off at Brownies. Christ, talk about hamsters and snakes. Bill’s doing time for fondling them little girls. I mean Vicky was a happening Troop Leader. How was she supposed to know she married a molester? She didn’t.”

“You aren’t saying our Jane—”

“No. No. NO.” He squeezed the steering wheel. “It could’ve been our Jane, but we got lucky.” He cleared his throat. “Don’t make it right ... we got lucky and others have to suffer.”

He offered her what amounted to coffee grounds in the bottom of his cup. “Oops. Sorry about that. I can hit the next station. Gas is cheaper once we get out of town. You ever notice that? I wonder why that is. Why gas prices are so different.”

Bridget ignored the gas question and spoke up. “You were a cop. Cops get cynical. Is that what this is about?”

“You know what it is? Disgust. I’m just not happy with myself. I coulda did better. I coulda been a better dad. I could’ve stopped playing the game. You know, I just think I could’ve



done a whole lot better. I could have been the change instead of just playin' the game, just getting by."

She looked over at him and didn't say a word.

"I'm not saying some cops aren't messed up in the Think Tank. I mean who wouldn't be a little bonkers watching lawyers defend shit like we dragged into the courtroom. It's bad, Babe, and I don't miss it at all. Man, it'd be a hard one to swallow if one of our daughters was date raped and we had to watch some shit head lawyer prance around in all his legal glory. They all think they *are* something special. They make the laws and defend shitheads that break their holy rules and laws. And we all know about money and what *it* does to truth and justice."

"Well ... is it lawyers or bad guys you hate the most?"

"Babe, it's like I hate 'em both. Equal opportunity. You know attorney's prance around and defend prostitutes for cash. I mean it gets confusing here. An attorney will take cash to save your ass and a prostitute will take cash to play with your ass. What's the difference?"

"How'd we get on this subject anyways?" she looked straight ahead. "I'd rather talk about getting old and listen to you bitch about Escalades."

"Well, you can't always get what you want, now can you?" He slowed and pulled into the rest stop.

They sat in the car lost in thoughts. He was proud of himself for not having to hot step it to the urinal. Bridget was hoping law enforcement work didn't do her man in. What he said made her fist ball up tightly. She would have wanted to kill anyone who would do something to one of her kids. And to think ... some horrible lawyer would have been only too happy to get the bad

guy out of jail so he could do his nasty deeds all over again. The slamming of the car door snapped her from the grip of conflicted thoughts. She got out of the car and caught up to Tom, almost bumping into kids headed toward the lot.

“You see that kid?”

“Quiet. You don’t know how loud you get when you’re worked up.” She shot a glance back at the kids they’d just passed.

“I mean he’s got a ring in his nose: that used to be for bulls and hogs. You know if you put a ring in a hog’s snoot they can’t root around and wreck fences and stuff? Now we got people wearing them. Christ, go figure. Where’s a little peer pressure when you need it? You’re a teacher; what do you say to that?”

“They do it for other reasons than to bug you. I mean: green hair, torn up pants, studs in the cheek—it’s just how it’s done now-a-days. If you were their age, I bet you’d have a ring in your nose.”

“If I was their age, I’d want the girl to be prettier than me. I mean these guys are getting their hair streaked and wearing jeans that are going to get ‘em in trouble. If they get aroused in them tight jeans something has to give.” He started shaking his head back and forth. “I might have ended up with a ring in my nose but it’d been after the fight. What do you do if you have to blow your nose and end up with Kleenex hanging from your shnozz? Good way to put the run on any dates.” He pushed the door open and they headed into the building. “I mean come on, Babe. You’d have never went out with me if I had a ring in my nose and three yards of tattoos on two yards of skin.”

“Shush now.” She put her finger up towards her mouth. “Wait for me here.” She broke from his side and headed towards the ladies’ room.

Tom felt like it was good to get things off his chest. He sometimes got more worked up than he wished though. It wasn’t fair to dredge up every little thing that bugged him. She was the best thing going for him and he knew it. He watched her vanish into the ladies’ room and he pushed his door open. He read some scrolling on the wall in front of the urinal. Hard not to; it was only inches from his face. “For goodtime call Lucious Lucia 414-1909.” It was actually scratched into the cement board. Determined fella wanted to make sure the message was going to last a spell.

He watched the dribbling effort his body was putting on and recalled those younger days when he could write his name in the snow. Wouldn’t be long before his missus would be beating him out to the lobby. Who would’ve guessed pumps give up the ghost? His dad failed to relate that tiny bit of info.

He stepped out into the sunlight in the lobby and approached the windowed wall. Nice rest stop. The old volunteers, if that’s what they were, always lingered around in the closet that doubled as there hide-away office. This one even had music playing. He didn’t see the fellow in the office but did notice a large poster behind plexiglass next to the door. It had a very stern-faced black kid, in a sharp Marine uniform, on it. He read the slogan while recalling the one back in his day. It had said something about being one of the few and the proud. Yeah right, he thought. They didn’t mention getting blown to bits or being gut shot. Man, it would’ve been tough sending one of his kids overseas. Just another load of crap he and Bridget had dodged without knowing it.

Someone walked out of the ladies' room but it wasn't Bridget. He spun from the poster to get a drink of water but changed his mind. When he turned back to face the poster, he noticed some words scratched on the plexiglass. Then he thought of Carl and his kid, Jamal. Good kid. Could hurt a catcher's hand with his fastball and good with numbers. Figured to be an engineer if Tom remembered it right. He joined the Marines and almost missed his ride into hostilities because he was answering nature's call. He had ridden into Iraq with his ass hanging out the back of a Humvee; nerves and diarrhea apparently go together. Tom remembered how Carl's voice lowered when he told this story. Because the rest of the story wasn't funny. It was bad and it only got worse.

Bridget put a hand on his shoulder causing him to flinch. "Jesus, ya just as well kill a man than scar him to death."

"Sorry. Are you ready?" She turned towards the door.

Tom, still thinking about Carl and his boy, didn't follow her. He stepped closer to the poster and cocked his head to decipher the scribbling. After rereading it, "blk is beautiful-sO is tan-but WHT is the kolor of the big BOSS man" it came to him. Son-of-a-bitch. Some dolt stood where he was now standing. Whoever it was couldn't even spell. Carl and Jamal had suffered too long to have to put up with this. His mind was on overdrive and he was pissed. He wanted to do something but he didn't know what so he kept his mouth shut. He turned and caught up to Bridget who was headed to the car.

"You slammed that door hard enough," she said while he dug for his keys.

They rode in silence for several miles. She asked him if everything was all right and it spilled out of him. Everything about Jamal and the war and how Carl thinks he lost his son in Iraq. Then he explained the poster and the message.

Bridget listened then said, “Jamal is one of my former students. Bags groceries down at Cecile’s. He’s changed. He was a good kid. Never a problem you know. Now I wonder what his mom thinks when police are in the news beating blacks. Does she worry about Jamal getting in one of his moods with the police?”

“Well, you don’t think a cop scratched that into the poster. Do you?”

“No, jeez Honey. I know it’s the hate thing going on. Qanon and Proud Boys always in the news. I suppose it’s some kid wants to be a big badass white supremacist or something.”

“Carl kinda worries some about cops being around Jamal. He’s kinda hard to get along with, ya know, when he’s chugging the hard stuff. Carl asked me when they gonna get around to legalizing pot. I don’t get it, but I guess it mellows Jamal down or something. They told him at the V.A. he could get some for medical reasons, I guess, but they can’t afford to be running up to the Cities all the time. Jamal don’t like the idea of breaking the law either. Can ya imagine that? He won’t score any weed on the street. Not even if it helps him get a good night’s sleep.”

Bridget was back on her device. “I told you he was a good kid. No, don’t get off here, keep going.” She pointed down the interstate.

Tom was a bit miffed with the device being out but didn’t bring it up. “Aren’t we going to Sam’s Club?”

“No ... I got an idea. We’re going to Houghton.” She pointed at her device.

They drove in silence until an idea popped up in his mind. “I should’ve torn that poster down. I could’ve told the janitor dude or whatever they’re called why I was doing it.”

“Wow. You went from not wearing your seat belt to crim-damage to property.”

“Well Christ, think about it. We’ve been talking about how we got lucky with our kids. They didn’t go to any war and play the killing game: you know, shoot before you’re shot. Least I could do is turn around and deal with that poster. I’d feel damn good about it too.”

Bridget thought a bit before responding. “Remember when we were in Colorado? Remember when they legalized marijuana there? They had all them sheriffs going on and on about how pot is a slippery slope to heroin. How sex crimes were going to soar. Jails were going to fill up bigtime. Remember?”

“Yeah. Then crime rates went down. I remember. Really chaffed my ass how Wyoming had that check point on I-76 looking for dopers heading out of Colorado.”

“Well, Jamal really looks up to you. You coached him on the department’s baseball team. He listened to you. Right?”

Tom snapped out of thoughts. “Wait a tick here. Where are we going? What’d you call that place? Haunted?”

“No. Houghton. Houghton Michigan.”

“Why would we do that. Are you serious? No tooth brushes. Nothing, and you just want to drive off to Houghton?”

“Remember last fall? We were at Copper Harbor camping. We drove by this ... she pointed at her device and smiled. Dispensary. It’s called Northern Specialty Health.”

“What are you getting at Babe?”

“Don’t you get it? It’s a cannabis dispensary. They sell weed. We can do this for Jamal. Pick him up weed. Our kids didn’t get screwed like he did but we can help. He’ll listen to you. About bullshit laws and lyin’ lawyers and everything else we talked about. Jamal needs help. You can tell him to take care of himself. He trusts you.”

A smile crept across Tom’s face. His chest ached with love for the woman he’d married so many sunrises ago. He didn’t trust his voice; it could crack. He didn’t blink; tears could happen. A certainty presented itself. He had to do it. They had to do it. One act of kindness for the tired, used up, discarded souls lingering on the fringe. One tear worked its way down his cheek before his hand found it.