

In Charge

The paper road map we'd picked up from one of the multiple rest areas was spread in front of me, propped against the steering wheel and staring me in the face. I'd been looking at it for over five minutes, while my wife of thirty years drummed her fingernails on the glove box and stared through her sunglasses at the deserted parking lot of the service station and beyond that to the even more deserted road. I felt tiny beads of sweat trickle down my temples and onto my cheeks. Any second now she would ask one of two questions, "are we lost" or "do you want me to go in and ask for directions?" I was almost concentrating more on the digital clock above the radio, than the multiple roads twisting all over the map in front of me, trying to time when my wife would open her mouth and cause me to open mine and thus start the first argument of the return trip home.

The little green numbers flashed to eight-fifteen and my eyes instinctively darted over to my wife, anticipating that now was the time. Her fingers were still drumming on the glove box, but I heard her sigh and I knew it was coming. With three to eleven words she was going to openly question my manhood and my control over the situation and subsequently send me into a feeding frenzy of retorts and excuses in an attempt to salvage my pride and retain my right to hold my man card. Voices would get raised, doors would get slammed and feelings would get hurt. Three to four hours of silence would ensue, broken only by the occasional pothole or rumble strips on the highway. All because my manhood wouldn't allow me to admit that I didn't have a clue where we were and I didn't have a clue how to get where we were going.

It was our first vacation since I retired and we'd decided to drive, all the way to Monterey, California. Our oldest daughter had just given birth to our first grandchild and we weren't going to let the two thousand miles between Davenport and Canterbury Row stop us. My wife hated flying and I hated driving... so it was decided that we would drive to California, see the sights along the way and take our time. It wasn't exactly that I hated driving; it's just that I'd spent thirty years as a state police officer in Iowa, driving eight hours a day, five days a week. The calluses on my butt had just started to wear away after six months of living off a pension and now I was expected to sit in a car for thirty plus hours with a million other lunatics on the road pulling boats and campers, semi-trucks taking up two lanes and soccer moms yelling at a dozen kids. All this without the legal ability to arrest someone.

I-eighty proved to be less scenic than we'd thought and we wound up pushing through to Monterey in two and half days, the sights and leisure be damned. And what do you know, Miss I-don't-like-to-fly drove approximately two hours. In thirty years nothing much had changed.

Being a grandparent was amazing. I got puked on, peed on and somehow in the ten days we were out there, my daughter and son-in-law never had to get up in the middle of the night. It was amazing... The little guy was cute and his middle name was James after me, so I couldn't complain too much, at least out loud. We didn't get to see the kids very much anymore and they didn't have any other family within six states, so the new parents were glad for our help. But at the end of ten days, I was ready to shove off and make the journey home to my recliner and my wet bar in the basement. My wife cried the first hundred miles and sniffled the next hundred after that.

I suppose it is my fault that we got lost. Before we were through the Sierra Nevada Mountains, I made the innocent suggestion that maybe we should take a different route home, take a few extra days and do what we'd intended to do on the trip out there, see the west. I was newly retired, my wife was a school teacher on summer vacation and our three daughters were out of the house (although our youngest was threatening to come back). We had no obligations and no reason to be back. Through the sniffles my wife agreed. I turned off of I-eighty and my wife pulled out the map.

We got part way through Nevada then decided to go to Idaho on a whim from my wife. While I drove, she googled bed and breakfasts and off the beaten path tourist traps on her new smart phone. On the same whim she picked an old fashioned bed and breakfast south of Boise in some little town that I can't even remember the name of. We could see mountains out both windows in our room, snowcapped peaks and clouds that seemed to be resting on them. The moon had been nearly full and we'd stayed in bed watching the stars touch the mountains. We made love for the first time in several weeks. It was a good whim.

Back on the road we went cutting through northern Wyoming and headed for South Dakota. We didn't make it. My wife was humming along to the radio and searching for our next stop, while I tried to estimate our gas mileage in my mind before hitting the information button on the display screen to confirm or usually deny my estimation.

"I've found it!"

My mind had been wondering and I was suddenly jerked back into reality. I swerved onto the rumble strip on the right side of the lane and then quickly corrected. I shook my head and then grinned sheepishly at my wife who was shaking her head at me.

“We’re getting twenty-eight point two miles per gallon.”

“Uh huh, well congratulations. I’ve found our next stop, *Mama Smith’s Old Time Bed n’ Breakfast.*”

Sounds miserable... “Sounds fantastic honey, I’ll pull over and we can plot it out.”

We’d only seen sagebrush and cows for the last thirty miles and I debated just stopping in the middle of the road. As I slowed to a stop my former career kicked in and I went ahead and pulled onto the thin gravel shoulder and put the car in park. My wife was already pouring over the road map and plotting a course in her head.

After two hundred miles, two detours, and a two hundred dollar cell phone with no service, I was really wishing the course she’d plotted had been written down somewhere besides on her smart phone or in her head. We were somewhere north of Casper, Wyoming, at a tiny service station with two pumps and a bucket of greasy looking water that I presumed was for washing the windshield. I had no idea how to get where we were going and daylight was fading fast.

I’d been able to stall for a few minutes while I filled the car up with gas, the old fashioned pump motors humming louder than any gas pump I’d ever heard before. When the handle on the pump clicked and the pump motor stopped humming, it was time to face reality. I went inside the station long enough to pay the grizzled old owner his forty-two dollars and then walked back toward my impending doom. I stepped inside the car, grabbed the map and spread it in front of me, acting like I was an expert cartographer and up for the challenge.

The numbers on the digital clock flashed to eight-sixteen and she finally broke the silence. “I’m going to use the bathroom, or most likely the outhouse. Do you want anything from inside?” I kept staring at the map and shook my head, dumbfounded that the two inevitable questions had been ignored and the formula for the rest of our trip had been shattered.

She pushed her door open and stepped out, I braced myself for the slam, but it didn’t come. The door shut quietly and she walked away adjusting her purse on her shoulder. I watched her in amazement as she walked away, seeing her for perhaps the first time in many years. She was still tall and slender, the gray in her hair was dyed away monthly and she had tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Three kids and thirty years of marriage to me were visible in her shoulders and hips, but she never looked more beautiful. I wondered how I looked in her eyes, my hair was thinning, my six pack was twenty-five years removed and if I didn’t trim it regularly, then the hair grew out my ears and nose. I watched until she disappeared inside the tiny service station, berating myself for judging her too quickly and supposing that she would dare do something so sinister as to question my manhood and relinquish my control by asking for directions.

I looked back at the map for a few more seconds and then slowly folded it back into a tiny rectangle. Without thinking twice, I tossed it into the backseat and then started the car. In thirty years of marriage I’d been through all the ups and downs imaginable. There were times when I wanted to pull my hair out and times when I knew my wife wanted to pull my hair out. I wanted to laugh at how something as trivial as not wanting my wife to ask for directions had caused so much inner tension in me. I could remember her leaving me countless lists of step by step directions for a hundred projects over the years and somehow still screwing them all up. If I

couldn't manage something that simple, how could I expect her not to question my map reading abilities?

As a man I wanted to be in control, I wanted to be in charge. As a retired police officer it was that much worse. I'd spent nearly my entire adult life living with four hormonal women, going through puberty, college, two expensive marriages, hot flashes and now a new grandson. That ancient inner voice that was passed on through a thousand generations that whispered and sometimes shouted for me to hunt, kill, make fire, and be a man, was quite often suppressed. Through it all I somehow avoided a midlife crisis.

My wife stepped into the car with an armload of snacks and beverages and I watched her with a smile, while she organized her hoard carefully and methodically. "I got you a Diet Coke and a bag of peanuts, unsalted and also a snickers bar. If you have to use the bathroom I suggest you wait until we get into the country, if the men's bathroom is in any way as disgusting as the pit I just walked out of." When I didn't answer she looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "You ok?"

"You bet."

"Do you know where we're going?"

I shook my head and smiled. "Nope. I'm lost, but as long as you don't care, then neither do I. Let's find the first motel that doesn't have cockroaches sneaking out the door and then let's stay up all night making love."

She blushed and then smiled, shaking her head. "James, you are something else."

I buckled my seatbelt and put the car in drive and then pulled away, leaving the dingy service station behind. “Yeah, but you love me.”

She leaned her head on my shoulder and put her left hand on my leg. “Well, somebody has to.”

I guess I never really wanted to be in charge, I just forgot that I didn’t have to be. I had a wonderful partner and a blessed life. As we drove down the road with the moon ahead of us and the setting sun at our backs, I realized that my manhood had never been in danger and that the only one who had ever questioned it, had been me.