

## Pit Stop

Driving up Interstate 81 north toward the Canadian border on snowy roads in Northern New York could be scary enough at times. We lived in Syracuse twice and once down near Binghamton. Over a period of years we often drove up to Watertown to visit family through the four seasons, winter being by far the most memorable. I can't count the number of times 81 would close and we'd be re-routed to a parallel road, Route 11. When that highway closed, we might spend a few hours on a school gym floor or huddled on vegetable crates in a grocery store or lying under tables on carpeted floors with a good book in a library while we waited for the road crews to get a plow through and a wrecker to pull a jack-knifed tractor trailer from under a bridge.

With the road clear, but more snow still dumping from a leaden sky, New York State Troopers would take caravans of ten or fifteen cars each over the deeply ice-rutted roads. Or if they were impassable, we might be led to a rural firehouse and allowed to sleep on rolled up hoses in a corner of the engine room. We always made sure we had food and soda in the car in the winter in case we had to picnic in a school bus garage or a town hall boiler room. It was a lot of fun before we had kids. It could go either way after we became parents. Try changing a diaper on a truck tire.

One Sunday afternoon early in our marriage ... which I ordinarily think of as a

journey of two children growing up together, one a little slower than the other ... the two of us hadn't gotten very far south on our return trip from Watertown before snow and traffic accidents forced everyone off the road. But my wife and I were welcomed into the living room of a very nice older couple who fed us cookies and coffee for over two hours. People were more pleasant back then as well as trusting.

When the siren wailed on the New York State Police cruiser, it signaled the highway was now open again. We promised the couple to stop back in the future and in fact exchanged Christmas cards for two years. The Interstate was still closed, but traffic began to move again on the two-lane Route 11. We were soon headed south from the little village of Mannsville.

We crept along at a snail's pace in a long line of slipping and sliding cars and were a couple of miles south of town when Mrs. Dave made her announcement.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

I should not have been surprised, after the coffee from our visit. Women were not made to hold a lot of coffee, I think. When God finished up installing all the equipment needed for carrying, delivering and nurturing babies, plus a temporary amount of space for constantly gaining and losing weight, there wasn't a lot of room left over.

God's assistant, the Angel Anatomie, probably told him, "You're about 0.14 cubits short of the space you'll need for a decent size bladder."

"Give her a smaller bladder," said God, "and build in the need to fix her makeup all the time with the other girls. At least that'll keep her near a bathroom."

"You knew you were going to come up short of space," said Anatomie. "You should have made her as large as him."

"No, he will need to carry her

sometimes," said God. "And she will need to be short enough to listen to his heart beneath his bluster."

My wife suggested I take her back to Mannsville and find a bathroom.

"Hell," I said, "we're in the middle of a blizzard and I don't know if I can do a 3 point turn in this line of cars. And when we go back we'll be at the end of the line and that will add hours to the trip."

I was exaggerating, as usual, to impress the lady with the importance of my point. It didn't work then and it doesn't now.

You'd think I would have quickly learned that, but fifty odd years later I still haven't.

Spotting a Greyhound bus up ahead, I suggested she just walk up the line of cars, bang on the bus door and ask to use their rest room. You can imagine her response.

"No problem," I said. "I'll personally go handle the negotiation with the bus driver if you'll take the wheel while I walk up ahead."

She said she had no intention of getting on a bus full of strangers just to use their toilet. I pointed out strangers were probably the best kind of people to do that among.

"You'll never see them again," I said.

"This is crazy," she said.

"No, no, this is perfect. The people on the bus won't even know why you boarded."

"Until I head for the rest room."

"Tell them you're a fireman," I said, "stopping to check the inspection date on the fire extinguishers."

"In the middle of a blizzard?"

"Overtime! You needed the overtime!"

"Are you for—"

"Or ... here, take this," I said, pulling the ash tray from beneath the dash. "Tell them you're collecting for UNICEF."

At this point she said a bad word.

"It's for the children," I said.

I should have long ago learned when to pull the reins up short on a horse that wasn't going anywhere. Fifty odd years later I still haven't mastered the trick.

"I'll empty the ash tray," I said.

I didn't need to turn toward her to see the glaring look on her face. I could feel it.

"OK then, the lady fireman," I said. "If you pull your coat collar up —"

She said another bad word.

Executing a 3 point turn in a raging blizzard is not easy, but twenty minutes later we were back in Mannsville. Our friendly older couple lived on the other side of the village, so we stopped at the General Store and Mrs. Dave ran quickly to the rest room. Ten minutes later we were back on the road. The sun had come out, the plows had achieved some success and traffic was moving along at an almost brisk pace.

We followed the Greyhound all the way to Syracuse, slowing to a stop two or three times, only three cars behind the bus. Each time I was tempted to get out and run up and ask the bus driver if I could use the bathroom, because now all the coffee from our visit was beginning to work on me. It would have been a dramatic statement to my wife on the efficacy of my original thinking. But alas, I was too embarrassed to bang on the bus door and ask to use their bathroom.

Some of my greatest ideas over the years have appeared to me even better when I asked someone else to try them first. But in my long years of marriage I've at least learned who not to ask.

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