

Road Trip

By Mark Lawton

I walk in front of Chris on the hike up because my ankles will be killing me on the way down. I'll stop often and distract him with random references to philosophy, meaning, truth, and beauty. He's my new outdoor adventure partner because all the other grad students are too old, or too serious, or too smart, or too busy to spend time with me. Chris is twenty-two and wears high-top sneakers. He's got a brand new blue Jansen backpack that he carries everywhere. His dad paid for it because Chris is still on the parental dole. It isn't a bad gig when you consider I spent over thirty thousand for my scrolled up diploma. It came with a mug with Latin words inscribed. I left the mug in my sister's shed and the scroll got a dent in it at the graduation reception when my niece left it near the scalloped potatoes.

"Hey Mark," Chris says. "It's going to be a bummer when you go back. Who am I going to hike and bike with?" I stop. Put my hands on my hips. "It's, with whom will I hike and bike?"

Chris laughs and his perfect set of large white teeth line up as if they've never been anywhere rough. But, to be fair, Chris is damn worldly for twenty-two years old. He's been to China, Japan, Thailand, and grew up in Hawaii. Graduated from high school on the big island while I was in the second decade of my ongoing mid-life crisis.

"You're forty-four. Right?" He asks. I just nod my head because I'm drinking some of the warm water in my warm water bottle that the other grad students aren't using because they're smart enough not to hike on the warmest day of the summer in Santa Fe. But it doesn't matter to Chris and me, or is it Chris and I, because it's the last day before I drive to Portland via Salt Lake City. Shitty.

"Damn," Chris says, "I hope I'm still active when I'm forty-four."

That's the thing about Chris – he makes me feel old and young at the same time. He didn't know, for example, that smoking used to be allowed on airplanes.

He looks to me for wisdom which the other grad students certainly are wise enough not to do. "Is it hard to stay faithful when you're married?" He asks. "Not too hard," I say. "At least not for me. I became invisible to women and gay men as soon as I slipped that ring on. The last woman that noticed me was wearing a tie-dye shirt and accidentally blew out my protest candle during the first Gulf war." Chris grabs the waist-belt on his backpack, cocks his head sideways and says "First Gulf War??"

Jack meets me in Santa Fe and travels with me as far as Salt Lake City. Shitty. Jack likes to drive. He's old too. Forty three. We do these road trips hoping to relive the coming of age stories that never happened to us. It's like a bachelor party with sex and wild women – you say goodbye to the life that you never had.

Jack's very short and going bald but he's much more of a man's man than me. He knows about engines and downshifting and hauling stuff. He's the kind of man you want around if you need man's man stuff done on the car. But Ann and I just bought the burnt orange Honda Element and it isn't likely that his skills will be called into action.

The Element is a dinky economy car boxed up to look like a Hummer. It comes with sixty-four seating options and Satellite Radio which is why this story doesn't include diatribes about AM radio, right wing talk shows, or the going rate on wheat and corn futures.

Jack and I pull into a small truck stop outside Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Park at the pump right behind an eighteen wheeler carrying machinery on a flatbed. Jack takes off his canvas baseball cap and says, "Looks like he's hauling turbo-props for a T-130." Slaps the cap on his knees. I'm not sure what a turbo-prop or T-130 is but I do know I'm hungry. Jack stands on the

bumper of the Element for a better look. "I'm going in for a sandwich," I say.

The woman behind the counter is about fifty and she's one of those short stout types dressed in overalls and a cap that says 'Mack.' The fingernail on her index finger is completely black. "Excuse me," I say. "Do you have any other sandwiches?" She tugs at her overalls. Tilts her Mack cap back, "Like what?"

The sandwiches in their little plastic wrappers behind the glass doors look forlorn. "I don't know," I say. "Maybe something vegetarian." She pulls her cap down and starts ringing up the next customer. "The roast beef's got lettuce on it," she says. "And they put some of them caper things in with the salami."

I step away from the counter and look between the girly posters taped on the window at Jack outside. He's having a grand old time chatting it up with the driver of the truck with the T-130 engines. The driver's green flannel shirt has a hole at the elbow. Even though Jack has to crane his neck up just to make eye contact they're slapping they're knees and get a good chuckle every time they point at the Element.

I walk toward the end of the counter where there's a sign that says 'All fruit sold as is. No refunds.' The bananas are out of the question because they got covered with soot during the first gulf war. There's hope for the oranges. One's got a sticker that says fifty cents. But the second one has the fifty crossed out with a sharpie and the new price written right on the peel with a ball point. Sharpies must not work on the epidural layer. Seventy-five cents includes the ink-stained hole under the exclamation point.

Then, the woman yells something about moving his truck to one of the customers. I move over to the aisle with a sign that has the word 'Snack' printed on it professionally and an 's' handwritten on the end with a sharpie. All the shelves are bare except some Hostess Twinkies - two yellow, two blue.

“Hey bud,” she yells all the way down the snack-s aisle. I turn and from forty feet away she’s pointing her black fingernail right at me. The truckers rotate their heads with their Mack hats right down the snack-s aisle at me. “Hey bud,” she says. “Isn’t that red rig yours. You got move that damn thing – you’re blocking the fuel lines.”

I consider using the blue Hostess Twinkies as a defense but then just say, “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were talking to me.”

She shakes her head back and forth, bangs her fist with the black fingernail still sticking out like a gun. “You’re driving that red rig. Ain’t you?”

As I hurry out the door, I mutter “It’s burnt orange and it isn’t a rig.”

Now the Element’s sandwiched in between the flatbed carrying the T-130 engines and another eighteen wheeler with two Hummers on the back. One’s brand new and shiny black. The other’s brown camouflage. Probably on it’s way back from Baghdad. Jack’s going back and forth trying to placate his former buddy, the driver of the truck with T-130 engines, and the newly arrived General Schwartzcroft. His face is all red and he’s got mild amounts of smoke coming out of his ears. When he sees me he points his finger at me and jabs it into the air like he’s trying to puncture me from afar. By the time I get up to them, I’m holding the keys with two hands like a peace offering.

“I’m really sorry,” I say. “I was just trying to find a vegetarian sandwich.”

Then all of them, including Jack, my former buddy, take their caps off at the same time. Jack’s so short that he only comes up to their chests. Between the three of them their heads are all red and make a formidable V. General Schwartzcroft looks down at the license plate on the Element which still has the dealer plates and says “Where you out of?” I hold up my keys even higher for more peace. “What?” Shuffle my feet back and forth. The T-130 driver says “The man’s asking where you based out of?”

Then the general says, “What the hell you haulin in that little rig anyway?”

Jack tries to patch everything up. “He was going to some damn school down in Santa Fe and I had to go help him haul his sorry ass in this little shit-box of a rig all the way back to Portland.”

The two drivers are looking right at each other now with Jack submerged below their chests and their flannel shirts. “Portland,” Schwartzcroft says. “All they’s got in Portland is steers and queers and I ain’t seen no horns on these two.”

At nine the next morning, I drop Jack off at the airport in Salt Lake City. Shitty. Then, I park the Element in the lot to wait for Ann to arrive from Portland at noon. The lot is full with BMW’s – big mormon wagons. Grey ones, red ones, blue ones, They all have bumper stickers that say God Loves Orin Hatch and George W.

I spend most of the time cleaning the inside and outside of the car to make it nice for Ann. I find her outside the baggage claim reading her third book since leaving Portland. This one is one of those yellow and black idiot’s guides. It’s called “The Idiot’s guide to Mormonism.” We do just a little kiss because the Mormons put a boot on your car if you kiss too long.

After she finishes the chapter on underwear, Ann notices the one and only scratch on the brand new Element. “What happened?” Says it so loud that the pages on the Idiots guide ruffle. “Look,” I say. “I been based outta Santa Fe all summer. When a man’s gotta haul this amount of gear in a rig this small it ain’t gonna happen without some collateral damage.” I bang both my fists on the rig’s back panel. “Like Jack says, a woman should remember who wears the pants in the family operation.”

It’s great to be back in Portland with another expensive piece of paper in hand.