

## Road Story

I had left home early in the morning for the ten or twelve hour trek, from Eugene to San Francisco down highway 5. The kids were in the back, sprawled across the rolled up sleeping bags, playing a game in which sudden shrieks alternated with hysterical laughter, and I hadn't even had coffee yet. I got off the highway on the Oregon side to look for a place to eat breakfast, hoping to pacify my passengers and get some caffeine into the driver.

The country kitchen place was crowded and loud on a Saturday morning, filled with families with kids, which is what I thought we were. But we still managed to draw a few stares, as we often did when we traveled. Aside from our tie dyed, free-box inspired wardrobe, there was something about the group of us, a dark, hirsute man with three little kids in tow, two of them blond and blue eyed little Aryans, that seemed to make people notice us. The kids were being good, though, not even arguing as they divided the bacon. In the middle of the restaurant din I sat back to sip my mug of coffee and relax.

After breakfast, however, when I'd rounded up my little gang, wiped the syrup from their sleeves, and helped them arrange themselves in the back of the car, my relaxed mood quickly disappeared when I discovered that turning the ignition key produced only a faint stuttering sound somewhere under the hood.

“God damn it!” I fumed, giving the steering wheel a whack with my palms. “What a perfect time for this to happen!”

## Road Story

I got out and opened the hood. Nothing was obviously amiss; no wires or hoses hanging unconnected. The lights and horn worked all right, but turning the key again did nothing but cause the stuttering noise.

As I stared futilely into the engine compartment a couple of bearded young men in overalls crossed the street and hailed me.

“Hey, brother, need some help?” one of them asked.

They had recognized me right away as kin in the extended family of Long Hair Nation. In that part of southern Oregon in 1972, with my own beard and long hair, I might as well have been wearing a nametag.

I clasped hands with him in the fashion of the era, the hip alternative to the traditional handshake, ignoring the use of our opposable thumbs in favor of hooking our curled fingers the way apes might do it. I nodded to his companion, and then at the car. “Starter, I guess.” Three little faces were lined up at the window peering back out at us.

“Got a bunch of kids in there, too.” He sounded impressed. “Do you want us to try giving you a push, see if you can get it going?”

It seemed like a good idea to me. The hippie AAA.

The two guys in overalls were joined by a young woman wearing a long purple velvet dress and work boots. They gathered behind the car, counted “one...two...three...,” and, as they pushed, the station wagon began rolling down the street. I jumped in, turned on the ignition, and popped the clutch. The car lurched as the motor started up right away, idling steadily and reassuringly when I took it out of gear. I heard my benefactors whooping and hollering behind me, and I rolled down the window to wave my thanks as I drove down the street toward the highway, watching them wave back in the mirror.

## Road Story

Of course, there was now the question of what would happen the next time the engine was shut off. We would be on the highway all the way down to San Francisco, and could leave the motor running while we stopped for gas and used the service station rest room. Once in the city we'd definitely have to go through the pushing routine again if the engine stalled in traffic. But we had friends in San Francisco whose car we could use while ours was being repaired. It seemed like driving on made sense, rather than exploring this unfamiliar rural area, hoping to find a place open on a Saturday that could fix the car while we waited. The more I thought about it, it really didn't seem like there was much choice in the matter. I decided to just press on and get the starter problem fixed once I got down to the big city.

Back on the highway the miles rolled by until we came to the outskirts of Ukiah, one of the larger towns along that stretch of Northern California highway. As I looked out at the passing evidence of civilization I noticed a large white sign with red lettering identifying a local auto dealership

I wish I could say I heard trumpets blowing in my ears just then. I've thought a lot about seeing that sign, trying to recall each nanomoment of my awareness and identify what I was thinking. All I can recall is an overwhelming impulse that surprised me with its total certainty. Without more than a second of consideration I repealed my decision to drive on to San Francisco, and instead darted over to the exit ramp, braking through the long curve. Once off the highway I rolled into the parking lot of the Ukiah Motors Toyota dealership.

It was a little after 11 AM that Saturday when we piled out of the car in front of the service department entrance. A tall man with graying hair opened the door and took a few steps out to see what was going on. He wore clean, crisply starched blue overalls with a red Toyota logo over the left breast, and a nametag that said Joe.

## Road Story

Joe looked over the ragged group in front of him. Little Maren, my four year old daughter, with her big dark eyes and a streak of grape jam on her chin, Peter and Nicole, my beautiful blond step kids, and me, a skinny 28 year old in a plaid wool shirt, with a big black beard and long hair gathered in the back, random, frizzy strands leaping out over his ears. Then he looked beyond us at the worn blue station wagon, piled high with toys, guitar, and camping gear. Joe shook his head and seemed amused as he looked from the car back to us.

I explained what had happened after breakfast, giving the ignition key a turn that, once again, only produced a clicking noise somewhere inside the engine. I pulled the key out of the ignition and offered it to Joe. “Any chance you could fix it today? While we waited?” I gestured at the kids.

He looked back at us and laughed. “Well, what I *can* do is take a look for you and see what the problem is.” He took the key, winking and nodding to the children as if to let them know he was humoring me. “But you understand, if we have to order any parts you’re going to be here until Monday, maybe Tuesday.”

I looked at the kids standing behind me in a semi circle, thinking about us staying there three more days. I briefly pictured setting up our tent on the grass under the white sign with red letters saying Toyota. Then I thought about asking Joe instead to help me just push start the car again, and we’d head on to San Francisco the way I had first planned. But Joe was already giving the key I’d handed him to another guy in overalls whose name tag said Clyde. Clyde jumped in the front to steer, and Joe waved over another employee to help him push the car into the repair area.

## Road Story

We went to hang out on the grass under the Toyota sign and await the verdict. The kids started playing tag, shrieking again, and I could see it wouldn't be long before someone was going to cry. It was clearly time to organize a game to keep everybody occupied.

I had a sudden inspiration and retrieved my old Martin guitar from the back of the station wagon. On the grass under the sign I got the kids to stand in a circle with me as I strummed and told them "You put your right leg in, you put your right leg out...." They giggled and groaned, but they couldn't resist the familiar game. For a while we did the hokey pokey right there in front of the auto dealer, turning ourselves about. Every time we came to the last line the kids shrieked "That's what it's all about!" Before too long we wound up in a heap on the grass, but just as things were about to get wild again Joe called out to me from the doorway.

"Turned out it's just the starter solenoid," he announced with a big smile. "And today's your lucky day 'cause we do have one in stock. We should have you back on the road in less than an hour."

He was true to his word, and before too long we were cruising down the highway somewhere around Mount Shasta as if nothing had happened. Nap time had come and gone, and we had already begun the "are we there yet" phase of the trip. Above us, the sky had been steadily darkening through the afternoon, with angry clouds gathering low overhead, and now the rain began with huge, discrete drops, each one making an alarming plunk as it hit the windshield. Then a rat tat tat of little white balls of hail, scattering off the hood in front of me. Finally, the heavens opened and the car began moving through a curtain of falling water. I slowed as the visibility deteriorated, entering a long right hand curve that seemed to continue curving forever, on and on with no end in sight. And suddenly I realized that we were

## Road Story

hydroplaning; all control of the car's direction had been lost in a frictionless water world that began to slowly rotate around us. Turning the steering wheel and pressing the pedals had no effect on the motion of the car as we went spinning down the highway completely out of control.

The station wagon came to rest across both lanes, and for a moment the world was still except for the drumming sound of the rain beating on the metal roof. The engine had stalled, and a faint gasoline smell hung in the air. I was aware of the scratchy wool shirt collar at my neck. I looked around but the windows were fogged and the sheets of water running down the windshield made it impossible to see out into the late afternoon gloom.

Fear began tickling my nape and gripping my gut. In only a moment another car was sure to round the curve behind us, and there could be no avoiding our stalled station wagon straddling the highway.

There would be no time to gather the kids and get them out of the car to huddle in the rain at the side of the road. We had to move! I reached down to turn the ignition key, fully aware that in this single moment either the engine would come to life, or our lives, mine and the children's, were likely to be changed forever. The motor caught immediately with a roar that I felt with my whole body. I slammed the car into gear and quickly drove across the highway to the inside of the curve, where a steep dirt slope came down to meet the road. One second later several cars and a semi truck came roaring around the curve, spraying rooster tails of water over us as they whooshed by, a few feet from where we sat.

There was a profound stillness around us even as the rain beat on the roof and the engine idled and cars continued to go whooshing by.

“Are we OK?” Maren finally asked in a quavering voice.

## Road Story

“We’re OK,” I answered. I turned to look back at the kids, their eyes wide and glistening in the headlights of the passing vehicles. “We’re OK. We are.” I looked from one to another. “We’re OK” I repeated. “We’re just going to sit her for a minute, all right? We’re going to wait for the rain to slow down before we drive any more.”

But I couldn’t have driven just then, anyway. My own tears, hot and surprising, had come suddenly, making me turn back toward the windshield so the children wouldn’t see me. I felt the weight of the entire world hanging on my sudden decision that morning to turn off the highway in Ukiah. I realized that if we hadn’t stopped for the repair, there would have been no way to re-start the car in the brief, defenseless moment when we sat stalled across both lanes of the highway. That moment had turned out to be the hook holding our lives above the abyss.

I sat there struggling to find the echo in my ear of some voice that had whispered cosmic guidance to exit the freeway and fix the car before it was too late. But there was no echo to be heard. No voice had spoken, no instructions had been whispered or sung. Instead, as a sob welled up from a place that might actually have been my heart chakra, it seemed for a moment as if the delicate gear work of the universe had been briefly and miraculously exposed to view. It was just enough of a glimpse to register, and appreciate for the rest of my days, the mysterious hokey pokey dance going on between mortals and angels in overalls. Your whole self in, your whole self out. That’s what it’s all about.