

Family Vacation

An excerpt from Being Ready

by Ready Ward

Mom worked out of the house once we were all in school. At first, it was just one day per week cleaning house for some well-to-do family. Later, she went to work at the high-school full time. The reason she worked was to raise money for family vacation. Wanderlust is not just a word to my mother; it's truly a lust. She's in her eighties now and I just learned she's heading to Romania this month with my daughter. No real reason, they just wanted to see another part of the world. My daughter sold her blood at a blood bank for weeks to finance their side-trip to Transylvania. "Irony not so subtle," she wrote on her Facebook page.

I was nineteen before I ever got in an airplane. Before that, there were only car trips. Dad grew up in central Illinois, so we had an annual pilgrimage to see Grandma, but that wasn't enough to satiate Mom's appetite. She wanted quality time with the kidlets, she wanted to see people and places, and she wasn't too proud to wash other people's toilets to get the money to do it.

One of the first long car trips I remember was when we visited Mom's sister, Janine, and her husband Okie in Colorado Springs. They weren't around at family gatherings much because Uncle Okie was an Air Force Major who was always being transferred to another part of the world. They had two kids, one of whom was just a bit older than Mark and me; we liked seeing them when we could. On the way, we stopped at a gas station an hour or two outside of Colorado Springs; Mom bought her two young boys novelty arrows that had a wire loop in the middle. You put them on your head, wore a cap, and it looked as though the arrow was going straight through your head. We arrived at breakfast; Uncle Okie played along.

"My God! You were attacked by Indians? Thank God you're alive. You are alive, right?" he asked, looking at us closely. We giggled.

"Janine, better get some aspirin! The boys look like they have bad headaches."

We were grinning; he was buying it!

"It's just a fake arrow, Uncle Okie," Mark said, removing his hat. I couldn't believe he was already spilling the beans. The kid had no sense of drama; we had Uncle Okie going.

"Oh, thank God," Okie said, patting him on the head.

Their living room window, which was at the back of their house, framed a fabulous view of Pike's Peak. In the foreground was an undeveloped foothill, perhaps a thousand feet high, covered with sagebrush, juniper, pine, and assorted rocks and boulders. Looking at it, I was certain I could find rattlesnakes there.

"Dad, are there rattlesnakes on that hill?" I asked, pointing.

"I'm sure there are, Ready," Okie answered as Dad turned towards the window to see what I might have been pointing towards. "Why, are you hungry for rattlesnakes?"

I thought about it before answering. Mark thought he knew something about it. "Tastes like chicken, I've heard." He pulled himself into a huge chair. I looked at him with disbelief.

"Snakes don't taste like chicken," I replied, knowing my logic was unstoppable.

"Actually, Ready, they DO taste like chicken," Okie said, looking at me. Dang it, why does Mark always have to be right?

"I like chicken," I said, picturing a drumstick. "Can we have rattlesnake for dinner?"

"I think we're fresh out," Okie said, frowning. I caught the wink he gave my dad, though. "Maybe you could catch us some fresh ones this afternoon. After your dad has a chance to sleep."

"Can we Dad?" Mark asked. He was holding Dad's shirt, jumping up and down. I started jumping, too.

"We'll see," he said, yawning. "I have to sleep."

"Let's get you set up with a bed, Jerry," Okie said as they walked from the room.

"How do you know they taste like chickens, Mark? Did you ever eat one?"

"No, I just read it someplace," he said. We were looking around for something to do when cousin Jean, who was a year older than Mark, entered the room.

"Jean!" I ran to her and slipped as I tried to stop, knocking her down.

"Hi Ready," she said, pulling herself up. "Happy to see me?"

"No, that's just a banana in his pocket," Mark said, laughing as he climbed down from the chair.

“What?” Jean and I both said, turning towards Mark. “What do you mean by that?”

Mark looked up as he thought about it. “I guess I don’t know what it means,” he said as he stepped in to hug Jean. “I heard Mom reading it to Dad, and they both laughed. I thought it must be funny.”

“Oh,” I said. I understood that completely. Mom and Dad were always laughing at stuff that didn’t make any sense to me.

After some semi-shy time, we started getting into good mischief with Jean. Joan, her older sister, was staying with a girlfriend to free up a bedroom. That was okay; she was much older than us; we didn’t play together. Mom and Dad were sleeping, Uncle Okie had gone to work, and Aunt Janine was shopping. We decided to go outside and play.

The yard in front of their house, which was in a new development, didn’t have established grass yet; the sod had just been laid. We didn’t want to play in the dirt. Mark had read someplace that scorpions and black widow spiders lived in Colorado Springs. I suppose they lived in grass, too, but in our little minds, they were dirt dwellers.

The driveway, made of concrete, sloped gently down to the street, a distance of twenty-five feet. The street, which climbed the hill on which they lived, continued to climb for another half block to the south. On the north, it began gently down the hill, but a hundred yards from the house, it was steep. I wouldn’t want to climb that hill on a bike.

You’d think, since the house was on the top of a hill, and since he was going to go to sleep, and since the kids liked to play in the car, that my dad would have locked the car this one time. He hadn’t; nobody locked their cars in 1958.

The three of us climbed inside to make a fort because it was sprinkling outside. Eventually, and as usual, Mark got on my nerves. We had words; we wrestled in the back seat. As he climbed from the back seat to the front seat, I hit him in the back as hard as my five-year-old fist would hit. He finished getting in the front seat, then turned around to hit me back. I shrunk into the corner; he couldn’t reach me. He leaned further over the seat to exact his revenge. Finally, he managed to hit me back. As he allowed his weight to shift back to the front seat, his leg came down on the shifter, which was attached to the steering wheel. As luck would have it, he managed to put the little marker on the ‘N,’ instead of the ‘P,’ where it usually resided when we played in the car.

By now the windows were completely fogged over by the three urchins playing inside. We didn't notice right away that the car was moving.

"STOP!" Jean screamed.

"What?" Mark and I said in unison.

"Do you feel that?" she said, holding her hands up like a policeman directing traffic.

I noticed my feelings, to feel what I could feel. We were moving. We all started rubbing on the foggy windows. The car was just starting to turn the corner onto the street heading down the hill, matching the position the tires had been in when Dad pulled into the driveway. The thought of going down that hill backwards in a car was terrifying. Then it got worse. The car didn't stop turning; it was heading towards the ditch. Only it wasn't a ditch, it was a five hundred foot tall hill, with boulders and trees.

"Start the car!" I yelled at Mark.

"I don't have the keys!" he yelled back.

"Push on the brakes!" Jean yelled at Mark.

He got behind the wheel and tried to reach the brakes. "I can't reach! I can't reach!" he screamed, tears running down his face.

We picked up speed. The car was turning in a tighter radius now, heading downhill. There was real danger of becoming sideways on the steep part of the hill and rolling the rest of the way down with the tires sharing time on the ground with the roof and sides; each taking their turn once per revolution.

Mark noticed the stick shift on the side. He slapped it upwards with his hand; the little red arrow stopped on the 'P.' There was a loud 'thunk' sound from under the car. The wheels stopped immediately, the car stopped shortly thereafter. The three of us, tears streaming down our faces, got out of the car. We were about fifteen feet from the steep part of the hill, in sandy clay that was getting slippery as the sprinkling continued. It wasn't that long of a walk back to the house, but I knew Dad was going to be angry, and I didn't like to be around Dad when he was angry. I felt like I was walking to the gallows as I entered the front door.

Dad was still sleeping, Mom was still sleeping, Uncle Okie was still at work, and Aunt Janine was still shopping. This was a bit unexpected: there was always a grown-up nearby when you were screwing up.

The three of us discussed our options. If we didn't say anything and it continued to rain, the hill would become even more slippery; time may be essential. If we didn't say anything and it stopped raining, then everybody could finish their sleep before having to deal with the car on the side of the mountain. (That was my idea.) Whether or not it stopped raining, wouldn't the grown-ups want to know that the car was in danger of rolling sideways down a mountain? (That was Mark's take.) Janine would be home before too long, we could tell her when she arrived; she'd know what to do. (That was Jean's suggestion.)

We decided Jean had the best idea. Aunt Janine returned within ten or fifteen minutes. We could hear the garage door being opened and the car doors opening and closing as she retrieved the groceries. We met her at the door.

"Where's everybody?" she said from the backside of a paper bag.

"Sleeping," Jean said, taking a bag of apples from her mother's hand.

"Sleeping?" Janine set her bags on the kitchen counter. "Where's the car?"

Another option occurred to me at once. We could just play dumb, and see if they figured out the truth from the evidence at hand. I looked at the ceiling, putting on my best 'I didn't do it' look.

"Ready made me hit the shifter with my foot and it rolled down the hill," Mark said, ruining my idea to play dumb while making sure I'd be in trouble.

"I didn't make you do anything!" I yelled at him, slugging his arm.

"Did too!" Mark countered, moving towards me with a look of pending revenge in his eyes.

I moved behind Janine. "You're a lying booger brain!" I yelled. I hadn't learned 'fuck you' yet.

"STOP!" Janine had raised her voice—which she hardly ever did. "Where's the car?"

"It's on the side of the hill," Jean answered, pointing towards the hill on the side of the garage. Janine's attention was looking towards the windowless wall as Mark punched my arm back for punching his arm. Her eyes were big—her brow was furrowed.

"Show me," she said, heading out the door into the garage. The garage door was still open. We walked to the edge of the lawn; Jean pointed down the hill at the car sitting precariously close to the steep part of the hill. It was still sprinkling. "Oh, God," she said, running into the house.

"Jerry!" she said, knocking on the bedroom door. "Jerry! Wake up!"

"What?" Mom's voice said from the other side of the door.

"Your car is on the side of the hill, and it's raining. Tell Jerry to wake up right away."

"I'm up." Dad's not-so-sleepy-anymore voice said from behind the door. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Janine said, looking at the three of us standing in the hallway. She scowled. It was a good time for us to play downstairs for a while, I thought. Mark, oblivious as always, waited for Dad to emerge, then followed him outside to look at the car. Janine pointed. Little streams of water had started to form on the side of the hill.

"Oh Jesus!" he said, looking in his pants pocket for the keys. They weren't there. "Mark! Where are my keys?"

"I don't know, Daddy," Mark said, starting to cry.

Dad looked at me. I shrugged, tears welling. He disappeared into the garage, and reemerged from the front door, keys in hand.

It took a few tries, but he successfully got the car back on the street in front of the house. He drove it into the driveway and put it in park, shuddering as he sat behind the wheel. At last he got out, closing the door behind him. He began to walk towards the house, stopped, turned around, and locked the car doors. Who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks?

"What happened?" he said to Mark.

Mark was crying loudly. "It was his fault," he said, pointing at me. What a lying prick.

"I didn't do anything," I objected. I was unfairly accused, by my reckoning.

Dad rolled his eyes and looked at Jean. "Jeanie? Can you tell me what happened?" His voice was soft and unthreatening to her. Lucky stiff.

"Well, see, we were playing in the car, and Ready was in the back seat, and Mark was in the front seat, and..." Dad had looked up at the ceiling.

"How many times have I told you kids not to play in the car?" he asked with a hard and threatening voice. He looked from me to Mark, back to me. As far as I knew he'd never said anything about playing in the car to me, ever, but it didn't seem prudent to say that at this exact moment. Probably he'd said it to Mark. I just stood motionless, waiting for the tornado to materialize from the rising storm and knock me into next week (as Dad liked to

put it). Mark and I were standing in the dining room, looking towards the kitchen, crying and very frightened. Something about the scene must have touched Dad, because he stopped. He put his hands on our heads, got on one knee and held us close.

“Stay out of the car,” he said, just above a whisper. “You’ve learned why, haven’t you?”

I nodded enthusiastically, hoping upon hope that the storm was fizzling. Mark nodded. He hugged us once more, then stood up.

“I’ve had enough sleep, Janine,” he said, turning towards the kitchen. “But could I have a Bloody Mary? I’m not used to adrenaline for breakfast.”