

Road Trip

SUMMER 1972

I abruptly awoke by the insufferable loud screeching of un-turning tires. Snapping to attention, I looked out the driver's side window. There was a full-sized car sliding sideways beside us down the freeway.

"Pull over I'm driving!" I screamed.

Mike and I left El Cajon at noon the previous day for a road trip to Humboldt State University. I had taken a prior semester hiatus from Grossmont College and needed to get back to my education. I thought a transfer to Humboldt State would fit the bill.

I told Mike I was going to Northern California for an informational gathering trip and he immediately informed me he was signing on.

Our first stop was at Universal Studios in Universal City; part of the Los Angeles metroplex. After a few of hours, scouring the park for movie stars, we headed to Ventura for a Denny's dinner; "Denny's is Always Open."

Later that evening we were playing car tag with a couple of cuties and I followed the girls into Santa Barbara. We got the message when they started flipping us off and yelling obstinacies in our direction. I abandoned the pursuit.

On the way back to the highway, we saw a movie theater featuring *The Godfather* flick. It just released and the show houses in San Diego circled with lines of people, standing for hours to see it. There wasn't a soul in front of this theater and I pulled in. The movie was starting in less than five minutes and the auditorium wasn't even half-full. It was a long movie and Mike and I did not get back to our trip until one o'clock in the morning. We stretched our day and it wasn't over yet.

As I was turning right, back onto the two-lane highway north there was a man standing on the side of the road next to a disabled car. I pulled over to offer help. He was as drunk as a skunk. We chatted for a few minutes. I could hardly understand his garbled speech. He asked where we were going. Mike responded, "San Francisco."

No sooner had the words parted Mike's lips than this intoxicated stranger slurred he was going with us. Shocked I asked about his car. He wasn't concerned. It might not have even been his.

He was defiant in the fact that he was joining us. I told him he needed a change of clothes for the trip. He said he only lived a block or two away and would be right back. He left and so did we.

Many miles and hours later, I pulled into the Morro Bay campground. After a couple hours of sleep and breakfast at Denny's, Mike and I went to Hearst Castle in San Simeon and stayed there throughout the morning gasping at all the antique wonders.

Hearst bought a quarter of all the art sold every year worldwide. He had warehouses full of unpacked treasures. William Randolph had so many stored pieces that he didn't know what he owned. He scoured the earth looking for a particular Rodin sculpture only to find it years later buried deep in one of his warehouses.

His opulent castle, located high on a hill overlooking the massive Pacific, was nothing more than a huge museum he called home.

Continuing up Highway 1 our next stop was the Winchester House of Mystery in San Jose. The home opened to public tours for years and yet it was dilapidated and vandalized. At that

time, the home was bare of any furnishing and wallboards were missing throughout the building. Our guide was well versed in Sarah Winchester's mythical life. Her tour turned out to offer great, factual, and fraudulent, insight to Sarah's life and the raw mansion.

The widow of gun magnate William Winchester owned the Queen Anne Style Victorian Manor. She was terrified of demonic possession and sincerely believed her family cursed.

Sarah was anything but ordinary. Her life consisted of following fake advice received from mediums, soothsayers, and fortunetellers. She attended a séance with a Boston con artist in eighteen eighty-one and was informed; she had to build continuously in repent for the sinful deaths caused by the Winchester rifle.

The Winchester widow complied and carpenters started building her edifice; twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, until her death thirty-eight years later. I think the constant non-stop hammering must have greatly contributed to her unstableness.

The nineteen-o-six Great San Francisco Earthquake knocked her, over five hundred room, seven-story mansion down to four stories.

She continued remodeling and was the sole architect, though she knew nothing about it. This explains the stairways and doors to nowhere. It is an extremely haunting place. The great room has twelve pillars, while everything else in the house has groups of thirteen. The guide believed the last pillar was somewhere in the mansion. Since it had been years and no one ever found it, I think it must have been in one of the stories that collapsed during the earthquake.

Mike was sleeping between stops. I hadn't received more than two hours sleep in the previous twenty-seven hours. I wasn't planning on letting him drive my two-week-new Datsun 1200 but badly needed rejuvenation; I asked him to get us to Fisherman's Wharf.

It was late in the afternoon and the freeway into San Francisco packed with rush hour traffic. I had been asleep for only a few minutes when the sliding vehicle jolted awake and I demanded to take back the wheel.

Mike voluminously complained. It hadn't been his fault. Mike was an excellent driver and I hadn't doubted him though I still insisted he relinquishes control. Mike pulled off the next ramp and I slid into the driver's seat.

After perusing the wharf and eating a fresh cracked crab dinner, we left the city and continued north.

Hours later in the middle of the giant Redwood forests we passed an isolated bar. They had a long vertical board redwood fence covered with roadside salvaged hubcaps. My girlfriend's outdated Pontiac Catalina was missing a front hubcap. I whipped a U-turn!

Though we were both underaged we went into the bar and each had a beer.

On the way back to the car, I searched the fence for a matching disk. Thinking I had found it, I ripped a pitted chrome hubcap from its home and headed for my car. I thought the display was a public service program where original owners could retrieve their missing car part. Mike shouldn't have been shocked.

A few miles up the dark, early morning, empty Redwood Highway a California Highway Patrol car passed us driving in the opposite direction. He immediately turned around and followed us for a couple of miles. I think he was bored with nothing better to do than tail the only car on the road. Mike thought otherwise.

As we rounded a sharp curve, Mike Frisbeed my hubcap out the window into the bush. I screamed, "What are you doing? I risked limbs and death for that hubcap."

He informed me he was getting rid of the evidence. It seems he thought we were about to be busted for stealing. My girlfriend was going to be disappointed.

The police officer, satisfied with my driving, made another U-turn and returned heading south without ever stopping us.

We pulled into Denny's around two-thirty that morning. It was graduation night in Eureka. Every high school student in town packed the standing-room-only restaurant. We wouldn't be seated for hours and weren't willing to wait.

As we walked back across their parking lot three fire trucks, including a large hook and ladder screamed up the street past us; lights flashing; sirens blaring. I looked at Mike and he looked at me. "Let's go!"

I swiftly exited the parking lot. Unfortunately, I cut off a trailing squad car. I cut across to the inside lane and made an immediately hard left. Fortunately, the officer had a more pressing commitment. Apparently not!

With no other place to go, we spent a restless night trying to sleep in my small car on the local docks.

The next morning, on our way out of town, I swung by the courthouse and paid the fifty-dollar failure-to-yield-right-away ticket. It seems that in the seventies, "fifty-dollar" was the magic number!

Mike and I headed northward, continuing up Highway 1 eight miles to Arcata; home of Humboldt State.

Just outside Arcata, there was a girl with a large bentwood rocking chair hitchhiking. Never one to pass up an opportunity to help a young woman in distress, I slammed on the brakes.

As we spent fifteen minutes or so trying to squeeze the chair into the back seat of my sub-compact, Mike on one side of the car pulling and me pushing from the other. She stated, "It's not going to fit."

"Yes it will."

"No, I don't think so."

"Sure it will."

"I'll wait for a truck."

"The road's deserted. It could be hours."

"Not a problem," She responded

"I almost got it," I lied.

"No you don't."

Eventually, we squeezed the oversized chair into my tiny back seat. She shoehorned in next to it.

I drove a mile up the road before repeating the process in reverse.

Shortly thereafter, I pulled onto the university grounds and retrieved one of their catalogs from the bookstore. My objective was complete.

Mike and I decided to see what was further up the still forest-lined highway and continue north.

For more than an hour, we passed numerous cars displaying "Trees of Mystery" bumper stickers. I rounded a corner and there it was! I pulled into the tourist trap.

The hook was a huge, at least thirty foot tall, painted sheet-metal Paul Bunyan statue in their dirt parking area. Paul's left hand was holding an ax and his right hand in an upright waving position. A sheet-metal Babe, the Blue Ox, situated beside him.

As we walked towards the gift shop Paul's waving hand started to rock back and forth. "Good morning boys." Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!

"Welcome to Trees of Mystery." Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!

“Please proceed forward to our gift shop.” Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!

I quickly glanced around the dusty lot hoping no one had witnessed this embarrassing display. After all, we were not boys but men of nineteen.

Mike and I each paid an outrageous entrance fee to wander around a short dirt path looking at ocean wind-swept bent trees.

Returning to my car, I noticed someone had wired the obnoxious green and yellow cardboard plaque, advertising “Trees” to my front bumper. Pissed, I pulled a pair of dikes from my trunk toolbox, promptly cut it off, and discarded it into the dirt. I certainly was not prepared to advertise this rip-off.

It was time for Mike to take a crack at driving again. He took us back to Arcata and over the mountains on Highway 299 east to Redding. This backwoods-twisting highway always wrought with hillside slides and cleanup construction. I was exhausted but kept waking up at the numerous flagmen stops.

Finally, almost off the mountain, we stopped at the last detour. I briefly peered out over Whiskeytown Lake before sliding back into slumber. I was sorry I missed this picturesque drive. However, my dreams had also been picturesque.

After our Redding Denny’s dinner, I drove to Sacramento. Mike slept.

Night had fallen by the time we walked California’s beautifully lit Capitol grounds. Suddenly a voice came over a loudspeaker, “Get off the Capitol grounds NOW!”

I looked around trying to see where God was calling from. Mike and I quickly retreated to my vehicle and I drove back to the southbound freeway. Mike went back to sleep.

I woke Mike up, hours later, in Bakersfield and suggested our next stop should be Palm Springs. He stated, “No way!” and promptly returned to dreamland.

The last thing I remember was flying down the Grapevine into Los Angeles with the radio blaring obnoxious country music on the only station I received. All the car windows were down letting the cold early morning air to blast into my cockpit. I was trying to stay alert or at least awake. From Los Angeles to El Cajon, I was on autopilot.

I pulled into Mike’s driveway late that morning, three days and twenty-five hundred miles later.