

MINERAL AREA COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

2020 CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST
WINNER

Theme: The Journey

Adult Short Story

Dan Weiss



Pop Quiz

Thirty miles into Ohio from the Indiana border, life decided to give me a pop quiz. It was past 3AM on a cold spring night, technically morning. Bambi (probably not her real name) and six of her friends leapt across the highway from the embankment to the median. I missed Bambi's friends but not Bambi. At 75 miles per hour, the hind quarters of a deer connected with the front of the car and started the test.

We had traveled to Waukegan Illinois from Feasterville Pennsylvania to see our friend graduate from the Navy equivalent of basic training at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center. Our traveling band consisted of my friend Rob's younger sister Kathy, our friend Tom and myself. The car we were traveling in was a pristine example of early sixties solid steel construction that had only been driven by a little old, namely my aunt. Bench seats, solid steel dashboard and no unneeded options like seat belts or back up lights. The car was born in the age of the interstate and was at home cruising on road trips like this. As a manual with only three gears it was not meant for city traffic. It was also not meant to coax deer into crossing a highway with more caution.

I pulled the car to the side of the highway and despite the accident the car was still running. Kathy who had her feet on the dashboard was startled but nothing more. She was in a braced position a teenaged girl would normally assume while watching TV, or these days playing on her phone. Her yelp of surprise and I am sure the "thump" signaling Bambi's poor road crossing skills had woken Tom who was sleeping on the bench seat in the back.

I turned off the car and got out to inspect the damage. I had hoped it was simply matter of pulling a crumpled fender away from a tire or some such. I noticed that the driver's side fender was decorated with contents of Bambi's bowels. Clearly, she had been less than happy about our encounter. The frigid air muted all the smells and much of the sounds. The bad news came when I reached the front of the car. The glow from the headlights reflected off the neon green of the cars cooling life blood. We were not going anywhere.

As the owner of the car (more or less) I felt like the leader of our intrepid band. I had successfully gotten us to Waukegan without incident. We had seen our friend graduate, had some wonderful dinners, and heard tales of Navy life in a land that we were told got much colder than the Delaware Valley where we had all grown up. The return trip seemed anticlimactic. We had been there and done that on the way out. The first question on my life skills pop quiz was “What could go wrong?”

The next question was “How do we get off the interstate?” While armed with AAA, this was a pre-cell phone era. Running through my head was that we should have had a CB Radio. If that is a meaningless reference to you, don’t worry, it wouldn’t have made any difference. The highway police I had been happy to not encounter so far while driving 75 in an age of 55 mile per hour speed limits, become the answer to this question.

When the trooper arrived, he was blasé. While the moment was new to us, I am sure it was not new to him. He asked me to get in his cruiser and fill out an accident report. I carefully noted that we were traveling at the legal speed of 55 miles per hour as he backed up along the shoulder. He needed to know at what mile marker I had been introduced to the indigenous fauna of Indiana. As we backed up, I finally saw where the carcass had landed and in a reverse trajectory how it had slid across the highway from the far right lane to the median. It was a damning display of physics in action. Equal actions and opposite reactions and all of that. I had visions of having to explain how that was even possible for anything short of a rocket powered tank to create havoc like that. The officer told me what mile marker to write on the report and we drove back to the car to pick up the rest of our adrenaline woken band.

The wrecker came for the car and the officer took us to a restaurant at the closest exit. That did not get us measurably closer to home, but it got us to a pay phone and the next question on the test. “Who needs to know?” Each of us took a turn contacting home with the news of our adventure. My mother clearly remembered that my call started off “Mother, everyone is okay.” Of the three of us, Kathy had the best luck as she was able to reach her mother as well as her grandparents who offered to send us money by Western Union to get home. Not surprisingly the restaurant did not feature a Western Union office. But

still it was a step in the right direction. It was clear we needed to get somewhere that would enable us to get closer to home. Despite the tempting possibilities offered by the smells of the restaurant, none of us felt like eating.

The highway patrol officer had said we could catch a Greyhound bus to Toledo from the restaurant. We had the resources to pay for the bus ride and figured that Toledo offered more options than the restaurant, but it would be a while before the bus showed up. We were told to pay the bus driver for our tickets, but it was a little unclear when and if the bus would arrive. But it did. Toledo was not near the restaurant by any means and bus transportation never involves straight lines and paths of most direct travel. The bus trip turned into an uncomfortable, cramped, but much needed nap.

Arriving in Toledo we found that the bus station did not feature a Western Union office either. However, it did feature the high-tech communications center of the day, a payphone with an intact Yellow Pages. The next question on the quiz was: “How do we get from Toledo to Philadelphia?” We all lived in the burbs of Philly but figured if we got that far, one or more parents would pick us up. Calling airlines and Amtrak as well as checking with Greyhound revealed that the sad reality was however we went it was going to cost a lot. Surprisingly, Amtrak was more than the airline, but we would need to get to the airport. Even a bus was not cheap, and it would take a VERY long time to get home.

In sheer desperation I decided to call a rental car company. I chose Budget based solely on the name and our situation. The person on the other side was very helpful and explained that a one way rental was very doable, and much cheaper than any other option. They could even pick us up at the bus station and stop by a Western Union on the way to the rental office. Yes! I had passed the Pop Quiz of life. But there was one more question on the back of the test that I had missed. “Do you have a credit card?”

I was in college as was my friend Tom and Kathy was in high School. Unlike today, plastic was much less common. I had however signed up for a Sears card as part of some promotion at the local Sears store in the Neshaminy Mall near my home. I don't think I had even used it for a single purchase yet. A “Sears

Card” was distinct from what we know as a credit card today in that it was only honored at Sears stores. It wasn’t even shaped like a regular credit card, being narrower and did not feature a magnetic strip or chip (still many years in the future). I was screwed; we were screwed. Nonetheless I mentioned my limited credit worthiness in hopes of convincing Budget Rental I was a viable customer.

“That works” was the reply. What? “We are owned by Sears.” With that I exhaled realizing I had passed my pop quiz of life. I let Tom handle the extra credit question of driving with a car with a manual transmission (they were more common then) while I napped in the back of the car. He had only driven an automatic up until that point. I got him to the highway, and he assured me that once he was in third it was just like an automatic. The rest of the trip was uneventful, the test was completed, and I had passed.