

350 Miles of Bad Road

by H. W. Moss

We were on Highway 1 leaving Ventura, heading north to San Francisco, when I lost my pencil.

The first place I looked was behind my ear, but even though I thought I had absentmindedly stuck it there a few seconds ago, the search proved fruitless. First I pinched the tufts of hair surrounding the left lobe, definitely non-regulation length, then the hair of the right just to be certain. My ears have always been large. I fingered each thin piece of pink cartilage as if it were capable of deception, gave that up as a bad beginning. I dropped my hand to my lap where I thought the pencil might have fallen and disappeared into a crevasse or wrinkle created by my posture. No such luck.

I flattened the palm of each hand on either side of my butt and began burrowing in among the papers and books, magazines and tissues used and the spilled contents of my Aunt's purse, an empty soda can and two wrappers from a candy bar I'd just finished eating. Why do they put so much paper around a lousy piece of chocolate anyway? Two when one is enough? Ran my hands through this detritus as through a foamy dishpan seeking silverware.

No pencil.

I touched my breast from throat to stomach and opened the top-most button of my shirt, peered into the cloth covering my chest as if opening a cave to daylight. Not found.

For good measure, I stuck my hand deep into the concealment of my crotch and felt around. No pencil. I removed the hand, held the shirt cuff open with the index finger of my other hand and peeked down the sleeve

Still no pencil.

Shifting from side to side in the red fake leather-like upholstery, I thought perhaps to reveal the lost writing device by a touch other than that of sensitive fingertips. I squirmed my buttocks in the seat. No better luck. My hands fell to either side again, slipped beneath their respective ass-cheeks and knurled around the outside of my jeans in search of the missing utensil.

By this time I was half standing, hair to headliner, in the moving vehicle. My intention was to intensify the search, to cover more ground in and around me, to go beyond the cushion area, to look at my feet, dig into the crack in the back of the car seat. Nothing. As I dropped the full weight of my body down onto the springy-but-comfortable material, I expected to hear the wood snap as the graphite stick broke in half.

However, I did not find it in that manner either.

I became concerned. My anxiety increased as the search widened. I was probably giving more attention than was due such an innocuous item, but the thing had been in my hand only moments, perhaps seconds, before the hunt began. Now it was gone – magically taken from me, disappeared, obliterated, fragmented into molecules, whatever – who knows, perhaps by a feat of prestidigitation, possibly levitated out of this mortal plane when my back was turned.

A frantic left hand went again to the ear and grasped the yellow hexagon where it had been all along, where it belonged, in the right place, hidden by the hair and the natural camouflage of the ear-strap on my dark glasses which allowed the blasted yellow tool to elude my every inquiry.

What's happening to me anyway? Oh, I forgot! I dropped acid today. A little while ago. This must be the first stage of the rush. That has to be it, I warned myself. Calm down, David, be calm. Let the traffic flow, David. Don't get excited about a crummy pencil. Just remember the ride. Enjoy the ride. Forget the notebook and the pencil. You can't take notes anyway when you're high.

And remember, David, this is only the beginning. You have eight hours' worth of trip in front of you, literally and metaphorically.

* * *

The edge is getting harder and harder to find.

Believe me, I've done my share of testing the envelope to know you don't find excitement in ordinary living. Otherwise, we'd all just watch the sports channel every hour of every day.

Finding a thrill (reminds me of the Stones' "Kicks Just Keep Gettin' Harder to Find") is getting more difficult. A safe thrill? Well, yah, that's where you want to be, really. Secure in the knowledge you won't get hurt. But then, that's not a thrill, is it?

You see where I'm going here?

A dangerously safe place, I call it. That's why people ride roller coasters, drive fast on the highway. Mountain climbers -- they think they can pit skill against the force of gravity with impunity. It's like a race car enthusiast who can no longer live vicariously, who can't just sit there and watch as someone else takes the risks That's what I'm talkin' 'bout.

The kind of excitement that only comes when you take chances. Consider, then act, perhaps use your own design. Like the retired lawyer who builds bi-planes. He calculates stress, makes them safe to fly -- only there's that certain small percentage of probability that maybe it'll fall out of the sky today. With him in it.

There you have it: the essence of a safari in Africa, the real life-threatening danger that comes from trusting everyone from your travel agent to your Kenyan guide. Additionally, you are at the mercy of the airline pilot whom you trust to get you safely across 6,000 miles of ocean and arid land at 32,000 feet.

Safe danger. An oxymoron, really. An impossible joining of two concepts that cannot live peacefully side-by-side.

It has long been a test of temerity in my family to ride as a passenger with my Aunt Casey at the wheel. She is in perfect health, never had an auto accident of any consequence and has driven on almost every continent under all sorts of weather conditions.

I've always liked her and am sorry I did not know her as a young woman. She enjoys being in the danger zone. For example, during WW II, she joined the Red Cross and operated a rest and recreation center for American soldiers in occupied Germany. She had to volunteer for that job.

When the Red Cross pulled out, she stayed. As if that wasn't enough, in '46 she moved on to Korea with the Army under her childhood friend, General John Hodge. Again, she volunteered to be in the hot zone.

She was in her 50's when she pioneered the drive to Argentina on the Pan American Highway and drove to Fairbanks, Alaska; the following winter on the Al-Can Highway. At age 67 she crossed Canada by car, left to right, alone. At 80, she was still on the road, but by then the winding California coast was tame compared to her previous adventures.

Anyone who has ever driven in a car with her, however, knows the only reason she never became a traffic statistic is because it just wasn't her time.

She tailgates at high speed. If you point this out to her she says: "But someone might cut in front of me." Her eyesight is such that tunnels are too dark for her to see more than a few feet in front. Lord knows what her night vision really is. When she comes to an intersection, she slows to a crawl. I think that's because she wants anyone else to have a chance to do what they are going to do before she commits herself to something like a left turn. Most of the time she is partially in someone else's lane, but she corrects when the bump-bump-thump of the median reflectors rattle

her steering wheel. Driving at high speed, she accelerates and decelerates every five seconds producing a stomach churning effect on passengers. Her turn signals remain on long after a lane change because she can't hear them clicking. The good part about the hearing problem is I can tune in any radio station I want and she won't comment.

Somehow, Aunt Casey maintains a valid driver's license and has never, to my knowledge, been cited for any violation of the Vehicle Code. Only during the last year has she begun to complain about the parking spaces -- they seem to be getting smaller.

Of course, there are many more diverse ways to find the edge than riding with Aunt Casey. If I could, I would go on safari several times a year, or dive Australia's Barrier Reef monthly. It's just that I'm not so wealthy I can travel to exotic places every weekend. Many nearby escapes pale after one or two trips. How often can you swim in the ocean without losing the fear of shark attack or ride a roller coaster without developing unconcern at being flung from the rails? The thrill is gone, as they say.

Time away from work is also a consideration. I rarely have three consecutive hours, let alone three days, within which to find a suitable excursion. A dangerously safe excursion, of course. My position as Weapons Guidance Chief at Army HQ in the Presidio means an almost eternal terrorist Code Blue operating mode. Unless I take a personal day off, I'm on call 24 hours with adrenalin constantly dripping in my system.

The only way to cool off is to burn some of that juice.

Aunt Casey told a cousin who mentioned to my brother who dropped the information casually in a phone call to me that she would be driving north from Ventura next weekend. It was a perfect opportunity. I booked two vacation-with-pay days off, called her and invited myself along saying I wanted to stop at Hearst Castle and watch the sun set on Big Sur.

Basically, I take a short hop down the coast in a commuter plane that would otherwise be nearly eight full hours of drive time south. I have made the trip both ways in a car in less time than that, but I was sure Aunt Casey did not want to beat my record.

She picked me up at my brother's house Saturday morning. I swallowed 1000 micrograms of pure LSD as soon as I got in the car, washed down with a diet soda. I tossed the empty can on the floorboard, buckled my seatbelt and grinned widely at her. She glared at me, at the can on the floor, back at me.

"I'm really looking forward to spending the day with you, Aunt Casey," I said with genuine sincerity. She started the car.

Casey was in remarkable condition, physically and mentally, although I know it won't last forever. She was married several times and outlived each of her husbands. She collected their estates as one gathers driftwood on a beach. Now she was quite well to do owing not merely to her perspicacious choice of husbands, but also to an uncanny business acumen. She had never worked in the traditional sense, merely traveled the country and the world, dropping in from time-to-time to visit a sibling (her brother was my father) or their offspring.

She had no children of her own.

I think Aunt Casey holds a wry view of each of her family members. She's always smiling. It was the sort of smile that betrays nothing and is impossible to pin down. Was it frivolity or insight? Was it mere good humor or a total and complete understanding of all we are and all we are meant to be?

Casey smiled as she took a highway curve at high speed, not quite twice the posted limit. She continued to smile as she decelerated into the next turn, accelerated out of it with the professional competence of an Indy 500 driver. The banked roadway glided beneath us as she wore that look of

utter complacency behind the steering wheel, displaying the face she has worn since I knew her in my childhood. Her hair was grayer now, bunched in the back and gathered into a bun. But the same smile prevailed.

I gripped the upholstery with fingertips that melted as my hands clenched. Houses. Safe as houses we were, as the Brits say. Why would anyone British or unBritish say anything quite so silly? A house is only as safe as its burglar alarm. It's a smoking alarm. PUT that Cigarette OUT! Have to look that up in Bartlett's pearls as soon as I get back. Safe houses. Uh, oh. Steam of consequences popping up. Hay. David. Will he nil he? Get a grip, boy. The upholstery. Grrrrr. Ip. It.

"Where is that damn pencil now," I hear one side of my brain ask the other. No response.

Wind from the open window roared past as we took another embankment on the highway that runs along the edge of the Western World. Our vehicle gathered speed. We were traveling so fast I could no longer pick out specific articles of roadside shrubbery. Individual plants and trees became one blurred green streak.

I look over my shoulder and am suddenly staring into the eyes of a driver passing us on the right. Casey occupies the fast lane and is not about to give it up. The driver and I are parallel for an interminable moment. It is a chubby young woman with wild brown hair. I can see every red pimple and blackened pore on her face we are so close. A dog sits in the passenger seat next to her. The dog's fur is exactly the same color as the woman's hair. The animal's snout and eyes so much resemble the woman's nose and eyes the creature could be the woman's canine twin. Their vehicle moves ahead of us and I catch the license: TV WIZ. The wonderful.

I hear the buzz of jets. Must be in the Pacific flight path.

The left side of the road is a stream of blue. I realize it's the Pacific Ocean but it does not appear watery enough. Flat blue glass. Bells have replaced the jet engine sound and I wonder where the wind's roar. The sound of the colors are astounding, blending, blaring, and the jet roar returns, intensifies until it drowns out the bells.

Distance and perspective bend. I am in the open mouth of a huge airplane hangar. The bays were originally built for dirigibles. Rafters rise toward the sun in one of the largest open spaced rooms built by man. The yawning maw facing the airfield is ringed by a pair of hangar doors prepared to swallow anything up to and including Moby Dick. A whale of sound, the rear doors of this monstrous building are slowly cranking open as some unseen force operates a hidden mechanism and the wind tunnel effect surges in my ears. Bell-chimes in the background chirp and tingle, a tintinnabulation on my inner ear blends with the hangar doors grinding open. I reach for the roof, the distant height of which is completely out of my grasp. Rubber arms extend toward the headliner, lengthen as needed, reach ever further but never quite touch the material in an absurd Occam's Razor that baffles my ability to make real what is already real.

Aunt Casey glances in my direction, never taking her eyes from the road for more than an instant. She develops a lizard like quickness of movement. I believe her eyes are starting to change shape.

"You comfortable there, David?" she asked innocently. "Stretching is good exercise. Don't poke out my headliner."

Why did she call me that? My name's not David. It's . . . I have no name! I am Legend. I am Legion. I am everywhere but I am not David!

I cannot speak. I test my tongue, lick the inside of my teeth and feel the fur. I try to talk but vocal chords fail. I lick my lips. My voice is somewhere deep in my throat and I go looking for it. I

search the other side of my brain, the side that didn't answer earlier when I questioned it about the pencil. There is an appropriate set of words to give in response, but I must find those words. Word drawers spring open, but all come up empty and my voice plays hide and seek. I attempt to hum in order to begin the speech process thinking to goad words into the air, but I am overly successful and a wall of sound emerges from my lips. The sing-song tune is annoying. I turn it off. A word-plow cuts furrows in the barren field of my vocabulary and I realize I am responsible for existence which is not preceded by essence, flavor or meaning. My hearing tastes like butterscotch. My mouth is a paper train.

“Just getting comfortable in my seat is all,” I replied with what sounded to me like my normal voice. Now where had that gone off to when I needed it? And how did it get back?

“Did you find what you were looking for,” she inquired genially.

I sat thunderstruck. How did she know I was searching for words? Has she been inside my mind, watching from the jump seat behind my eyes this whole time without me even knowing she was there? Had my rummaging about for terms been that obvious? Why would she care anyway? Is there hidden meaning in this gambit of hers or am I looking too deeply at the surface meaning when I should be fishing the shoals? Where was my mind between thoughts and could I follow it down the rabbit hole?

“Yep,” I said with a certainty I hardly knew I possessed. “Lost my pencil. But I found it where I thought I'd left it, right behind my ear.” I listened dispassionately to this speech and heard myself speak with perfect elocution. Yet I had no control over the formation of language, the words artistically strung together like clef notes in a measure. It was as if another human inhabited my skin and I was allowed to watch but not contribute nor interfere with what was being said. Am I dead?

“David, would you mind,” Casey said with a voice that could chill ice cubes. “You are staring with your mouth open like some kind of moron. And I do believe you are drooling.”

A road sign passed too quickly to make sense to me.

“Well, we’re finally on our way,” Aunt Casey said with satisfaction. She was responding to the highway sign that told us how far we were from the city by enumerating the miles remaining. At the same time she was turning into a cabbage, growing leafy fronds with which to aim the car. Her voice became a slowly pounding orange kettle drum stretched into the deep hollow echo of Carlsbad Cavern. “We’re ten miles out of town. San Francisco is now only 340 miles away. I’ll let you take over driving when we get to Cambria, in about an hour.”

That part of me that was still me thought that was fine with me. The home stretch. I can handle that. What a concept.

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