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**A WASTED HOUR**

Kelley always thumbed a ride back to college, but never told her parents. She knew they wouldn't approve.

Her father would drive her to the station on the first day of term, when she would hang around on the platform until she was certain he was on his way back home. She would then walk the  
5 couple of miles to the freeway.

There were two good reasons why Kelley preferred to thumb a ride back to Stanford rather than take a bus or train. Twelve round trips a year meant she could save over a hundred dollars, which her father could ill afford after being laid off by the water company. In any case he and Ma had already made quite enough sacrifices to ensure she could attend college, without causing  
10 them any further expense.

But Kelley's second reason for preferring to thumb rides was that when she graduated she wanted to be a writer, and during the past three years she'd met some fascinating people on the short journey from Salinas to Palo Alto, who were often willing to share their experiences with a stranger they were unlikely to meet again.

15 One fellow had worked as a messenger on Wall Street during the Depression, while another had won the Silver Star at Monte Cassino, but her favourite was the man who'd spent a day fishing with President Roosevelt.

Kelley also had golden rules about who she wouldn't accept a ride from. Truck drivers were top of the list as they only ever had one thing on their mind. The next were vehicles with two or three  
20 young men on board. In fact she avoided most drivers under the age of sixty, especially those behind the wheel of a sports car.

The first car to slow down had two young fellows in it, and if that wasn't warning enough, the empty beer cans on the back seat certainly were. They looked disappointed when she firmly shook her head, and after a few raucous catcalls continued on their way.

25 The next vehicle to pull over was a truck, but she didn't even look up at the driver, just continued walking. He eventually drove off, honking his horn in disgust.

The third was a pick-up truck, with a couple in the front who looked promising, until she saw a German shepherd lounging across the back seat that looked as if he hadn't been fed in a while. Kelley politely told them she was allergic to dogs - well, except for Daisy, her cocker spaniel back  
30 home, whom she adored.

And then she spotted a pre-war Studebaker slowly ambling along towards her. Kelley faced the oncoming car, smiled, and raised her thumb. The car slowed, and pulled off the road. She walked quickly up to the passenger door to see an elderly gentleman leaning across and winding down the window.

35 'Where are you headed, young lady?' he asked.

'Stanford, sir,' she replied.

'I'll be driving past the front gates, so jump in.'

40 Kelley didn't hesitate, because he met all of her most stringent requirements: over sixty, wearing a wedding ring, well-spoken and polite. When she got in, Kelley sank back into the leather seat, her only worry being whether either the car or the old man would make it.

While he looked to his left and concentrated on getting back onto the road, she took a closer look at him. He had mousy grey hair, a sallow, lined complexion, like well-worn leather, and the only thing she didn't like was the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He wore an open-neck checked shirt, and a corduroy jacket with leather patches on the elbows.

45 Her supervisor had told her on numerous occasions that if she wanted to be a writer she would have to get some experience of life, especially other people's lives, and although her driver didn't look an obvious candidate to expand her horizons, there was only one way she was going to find out.

'Thanks for stopping,' she said. 'My name's Kelley.'

50 'John,' he replied, taking one hand off the wheel to shake hands with her. The rough hands of a farm labourer, was her first thought. What are you majoring in, Kelley?' he asked.

'Modern American literature.'

'There hasn't been much of that lately,' he suggested.

55 'But then times are a changin'. When I was at Stanford, there were no women on the campus, even at night.'

Kelley was surprised that John had been to Stanford. 'What degree did you take, sir?'

60 'John,' he insisted. 'It's bad enough being old, without being reminded of the fact by a young woman.' She laughed. 'I studied English literature, like you. Mark Twain, Herman Melville, James Thurber, Longfellow, but I'm afraid I flunked out. Never took my degree, which I still bitterly regret.'

Kelley gave him another look and wondered if the car would ever move out of third gear. She was just about to ask why he flunked out, when he said, 'And who are now considered to be the modern giants of American literature, dare I ask?'

'Hemingway, Steinbeck, Bellow and Faulkner,' she replied.

65 'Do you have a favourite?' he asked, his eyes never leaving the road ahead.

'Yes I do. I read *The Grapes of Wrath* when I was twelve years old, and I consider it to be one of the great novels of the twentieth century. "*And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed.*"'

'I'm impressed,' he said. 'Although my favourite will always be *Of Mice and Men*.'

70 "'Guy don't need no sense to be a nice fella,'" said Kelley. "'Seems to me sometimes it jus' works the other way around. Take a real smart guy and he ain't hardly ever a nice fella.'"

'I don't think you'll be flunking your exams,' said John with a chuckle, which gave Kelley the opportunity to begin her interrogation.

'So what did you do after you left Stanford?'

75 'My father wanted me to work on his farm back in Monterey, which I managed for a couple of years, but it just wasn't me, so I rebelled and got a job as a tour guide at Lake Tahoe.'

'That must have been fun.'

80 'Sure was. Lots of dames, but the pay was lousy. So my friend Ed and I decided to travel up and down the California coast collecting biological specimens, but that didn't turn out to be very lucrative either.'

'Did you try and look for something more permanent after that?' asked Kelley.

'No, can't pretend I did. Well, at least not until war broke out, when I got a job as a war correspondent on the *Herald Tribune*.'

'Wow, that must have been exciting,' said Kelley.

85 'Right there among the action, and then reporting everything you'd seen to the folks back home.'

'That was the problem. I got too close to the action and ended up with a whole barrel of shotgun up my backside, and had to be shipped back to the States. So I lost my job at the *Trib*, along with my first wife.'

'Your first wife?'

90 'Did I forget to mention Carol?' he said. 'She lasted thirteen years before she was replaced by Gwyn, who only managed five. But to do her justice, which is quite difficult, she gave me two great sons.'

'So what happened once you'd fully recovered from your wounds?'

95 'I began working with some of the immigrants who were flooding into California after the war. I'm from German stock myself, so I knew what they were going through, and felt a lot of sympathy for them.'

'Is that what you've been doing ever since?'

100 'No, no. When Johnson decided to invade Vietnam, the *Trib* offered me my old job back. Seems they couldn't find too many people who considered being shipped off to 'Nam a good career move.'

Kelley laughed. 'But at least this time you survived.'

'Well, I would have done if the CIA hadn't asked me to work for them at the same time.'

'Am I allowed to ask what you did for them?' she said, looking more closely at the old man.

105 'Wrote one version of what was going on in 'Nam for the *Trib*, while letting the CIA know what was really happening. But then I had an advantage over my colleagues that only the CIA knew about.'

Kelley would have asked how come, but John answered her question before she could speak.

'Both my sons, John Jr and Thomas, were serving in the front line, so I was getting information my fellow hacks weren't.'

110 'The *Trib* must have loved that.'

'I'm afraid not,' said John. 'The editor sacked me the minute he found out I was workin' for the CIA. Said I'd forfeited my journalistic integrity and gone native, not to mention the fact I was being paid by two masters.'

Kelley was spellbound.

115 'And to be fair,' he continued, 'I couldn't disagree with them. And in any case, I was gettin'  
more and more disillusioned by what was happening in 'Nam, and even began to question  
whether we still occupied the moral high ground.'

'So what did you do when you got back home this time?' asked Kelly, who was beginning to  
consider the trip was every bit as exciting as the journey she'd experienced with the fellow who'd  
120 spent a day fishing with President Roosevelt.

'When I got home,' John continued, 'I discovered my second wife had shacked up with some  
other fella. Can't say I blame her. Not that I was single for too long, because soon after I married  
Elaine. I can only tell you one thing I know for sure, Kelley, three wives is more than enough for  
any man.'

125 'So what did you do next?' asked Kelley, aware it wouldn't be too long before they reached the  
university campus.

'Elaine and I went down South, where I wrote about the Civil Rights movement for any rag that  
was willing to print my views. But unfortunately I got myself into trouble again when I locked  
horns with J. Edgar Hoover and refused to cooperate with the FBI, and tell them what I'd found  
130 out following my meetings with Martin Luther King Jr and Ralph Abernathy. In fact Hoover got so  
angry, he tried to label me a communist. But this time he couldn't make it stick, so he amused  
himself by having the IRS audit me every year.'

'You met Martin Luther King Jr and Ralph Abernathy?'

'Sure did. And John Kennedy come to that, God rest his soul.'

135 On hearing that he'd actually met JFK, Kelley suddenly had so many more questions she wanted  
to ask, but she could now see the university's Hoover Tower becoming larger by the minute.

'What an amazing life you've led,' said Kelley, who was disappointed the journey was coming to  
an end.

140 'I fear I may have made it sound more exciting than it really was,' said John. 'But then an old  
man's reminiscences cannot always be relied on. So, Kelley, what are you going to do with your  
life?'

'I want to be a writer,' she told him. 'My dream is that in fifty years' time, students studying  
modern American literature at Stanford will include the name of Kelley Ragland.'

145 'Nothing wrong with that,' said John. 'But if you'll allow an old man to give you a piece of  
advice, don't be in too much of a hurry to write the Great American Novel. Get as much  
experience of the world and people as you can before you sit down and put pen to paper,' he  
added as he brought the car to a stuttering halt outside the college gates. 'I can promise you,  
Kelley, you won't regret it.'

150 'Thank you for the lift, John,' said Kelley, as she got out of the car. She walked quickly round to  
the driver's side to say goodbye to the old man as he wound down the window. 'It's been  
fascinating to hear all about your life.'

'I enjoyed talking to you too,' said John, 'and can only hope I live long enough to read your first  
novel, especially as you were kind enough to say how much you'd enjoyed my work, which, if I  
remember, you first read when you were only twelve years old.'