

# To Grandmother's House We Go

By

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In July of 1952, my family drove from our home in Brookhaven, Mississippi, to my maternal grandmother's home in the wilds of Northwestern, Louisiana. I was six years old; my Brother was thirteen months my senior. My Grandmother, whom we grandkids called Tolley, would not be home, because just the day before she had been committed to an asylum for the insane in Pineville, Louisiana. We would use her house as a base camp, and trek over to the nut house to see her between electroshock treatments.

Tolley was a widow and lived alone on a large tract of land in a very rural area between Robeline and Many on Route 6, which is a section of the old Camino Real. Tolley often caught the bus to Many to shop at Kelly Webber's for supplies needed to sustain her herself and her nursery -- she had developed a dazzling network of gardens and made a little money selling plants and bulbs. She'd place an order at Kelly Webber's and then live intensely for the moment of the order's arrival.

The sound of the Kelly Webber delivery truck crossing the cattle gap from the highway onto her property made a distinct clanging sound, as the iron pipes strained under its weight. Large oaks lined her dirt circle drive and their big roots made driving in an ordeal for our heap, but the Kelly Webber truck moaned and strained and thrashed over the roots like a determined monster. The sound of the Kelly Webber truck's arrival was like a trumpet call from Heaven. Upon hearing it, Tolley would shriek and run from where ever she was working, shouting "Glory! Glory!"

Tolley always wore rubber goulashes when working outside -- her "rubbers," and she always wore long skirts, layers of them, and she'd pull her dyed red hair back with a scarf. Tolley loved scarves -- often she wore more than one. She was a sight to behold running in her gardening attire, her skirts and scarves flying, and her goulashes pounding the earth making hollow squashing sounds.

More than once I'd seen Tobley lift her layers of skirts, thrust her hips forward, and pee like a man. There was, of course, little use in going inside to pee, as she had no plumbing, just a chamber pot which we called a "slop jar." If she used the slop jar, she'd just have to empty it. So, she only used the slop jar at night. She was driven when she worked -- she didn't seem to hear us when she was focused on her tasks, nor did she seem notice her grandsons watching her pee.

When we boys stayed with Tobley, it was our job to empty the slop jar every morning. This entailed taking the pot out in the woods and digging a hole in which to empty the putrid contents. Furthermore, we boys and Daddy did not use the slop jar -- it was for the women only. If we needed to take a "dump" as it was called in our family, we boys took a few pages of the Sears and Roebuck Catalog along with a shovel into the woods. Nighttime dumps were frightening and best avoided.

Tobley had fallen in love with a rural route bus driver. It was a decidedly one-sided romance, fueled by her imagination during long hours of silence as she toiled in her gardens. Tobley always hailed the bus down by the black topped route 6, near the cattle gap. When she went to town, Tobley held a clutch of flowers from her garden, an obvious marketing ploy, and wore a ton of makeup, a scarf on her head, sunglasses, too much perfume, and a heavy fur coat. I believe the fur was fox, because I remember it's having a collar with two fox's heads -- the foxes appeared to be kissing when the coat was buttoned. I was frightened of their tiny sharp teeth. Anyway, a month earlier, a hot June afternoon, the driver stopped for Tobley and as she boarded, he said something about the weather being "too hot for all those clothes." A month later, Tobley waited for the bus stark naked, except for the perfume, scarf, sunglasses, shoes, a purse and of course the clutch of blooms. The bus passed without stopping, and my poor crazy Grandmother ran down the bubbling tar covered road in hot pursuit of the man she loved.

So, Tobley was in the loony bin at Pineville, and Mother, Daddy, my Brother and I rushed to Louisiana, to do I don't know what. We usually left in the wee hours of the morning when we made a trip to Tobley's to avoid the heat. I think the early departure also assured that we boys would sleep through much of the trip. Unfortunately, my parents didn't get a call about Tobley's adventure until mid-afternoon, and we were off. It was usually an eight hour drive at best.

There were no interstate highways in the area back then. Our migration to Tolley's required expert navigation over twisting two-lane blacktop roads and numerous hills. More than once we'd seen the aftermath of horrific accidents on our trips to Tolley's involving logging trucks. It was always a tense drive for Daddy, especially at night, as there were no lights along the highway then.

The car was hot; the heat blowing in through the open windows was a constant irritating assault. As was usual, my Brother devised a demarcation separating his side of the backseat from mine; he used our shoes. I was a wiggle-worm, and I kept him busy reconstructing his "Berlin" wall. Sick of his reaction to every move I made, I willfully knocked the entire line of shoes to the floor. A kicking war broke out, which Daddy ended with his fist: Bop, bop. We boys quietly stared out our assigned windows with throbbing heads, allowing the rush of hot air to dry the tears which formed as hurt feelings inevitably pushed to the surface.

Driving West meant the afternoon sun all but blinded Daddy whenever we crested a hill. It was a relief to all of us as the sunset softened in the distance. The air was cooler and driving conditions ideal for a while, but soon darkness choked out the remaining light of day. There were no white or yellow lines painted on the outside edge of Louisiana roads, and only infrequently were there pass/do not pass lines separating the two lanes.

Daddy pressed on; he stopped only for gas and for Mother to use a filling station bathroom, which were few and far between. If we boys needed to pee between stops, Mother would hand over an empty coke bottle. On a winding often bumpy road, peeing in a coke bottle is all but impossible, but my Brother and I learned that if you missed the bottle, the price to be paid was just too high. Once a bottle was used, Mother would artfully hold it out the window and empty it. It was no wonder we tried to hold it until we stopped for gas or for Mother to pee.

On this occasion, needing to pee began a chain of events which would culminate into a defining moment in our lives. We had held it for as long as we could. My Brother broke the silence in the dark car:

"I need the bottle."

Daddy fumbled for a flashlight, and upon finding it, tossed it back to me,

"Hold the light, Michael."

Mother handed over an empty coke bottle. I held the light in order for my Brother to see what he was doing. He executed the task perfectly.

"I need to go, too." I said with little confidence I could pee in a bottle as well as my Brother.

Mother handed the emptied bottle to me. There was a little pee on the bottle neck -- probably backlash from being drained. I complained.

"Shut up and pee" said Daddy.

"Mama, don't you have a clean bottle," I asked. Bop.

My Brother held the light for me, but as I started to pee, he moved the light out of sheer meanness.

"Don't do that!" I yelled.

As he returned the light to my business we could see I was missing the bottle.

"He's peein' on my shoe!"

"I can't help it, stupid, ya' moved the light!"

I didn't get to finish peeing. Mother snatched the bottle back with the precision of a surgeon using a thumb and middle finger. Daddy pulled over and threw on the brakes.

"Out! Get out!"

Mother actually attempted to reason with him.

"But Charlie --"

"OUT!"

My Brother asked if we could put on our shoes, but his question was squashed by a single fist swing which caught both of us across the forehead. The next thing we knew, we were standing alone and shoeless in the dark alongside a country blacktop road in the middle of nowhere.

We stood there silently for a long time. We listened for the sound of our car's return. There was hope that Daddy was bluffing, that he'd come back once his point was made, whatever that point was. Instead we heard the sound of our heap drift further and further away. When the sound of it was gone, it was as though that mystical connection between parent and child simply dissolved; there was no snap – just a letting go. We heard only night sounds about us: crickets, frogs and the howl of either a dog or coyote in the distance. The sky was overcast; there was no moon to light the way.

We eventually found words, most of them describing how much we hated each other and Daddy and what we would like to do to him. Finally, it was clear to us that we could either stand there all night or try to walk to Topley's. It was maybe ten o'clock and we'd been traveling for hours, so we couldn't be too far from Topley's, we thought.

"I still need to pee" I said.

"Well, PEE MORON."

I stepped away to pee and stepped on a broken bottle. The glass pierced the arch of my left foot. The pain was awful – I needed to sit and pull the glass out, but I was afraid to sit or step for fear of finding more glass. I managed to balance on one foot while I bent to pat the ground around me lightly with my hands until I was satisfied that I could sit safely. Once seated, I could feel the large piece of glass embedded in my foot.

"I got a big piece a'glass in my foot!"

"Well, pull it out stupid moron! Did you get it?"

"YES! BUTT HOLE! Now I'm bleedin' a lot, I think--"

"Don't call me a butt hole! If you could pee in a damned bottle we wouldn't be here! I don't care if you bleed t'death!"

My Brother's last retort was further away than the first. I realized he was walking down the road.

"You moved the light, you turd! Don't leave me, I can't walk!"

"Good!"

"You go t'hell -- I hate you more than Daddy!!!"

We were silent again. Neither of us moved. After a while my Brother spoke with a sadness and vulnerability I seldom heard from him,

"Maybe we won't have to go back to them . . . ever. Maybe we can find somewhere new. "

He sat with a plop. I began to cry.

"Shut up. Shut up! SHUT UP!"

Now he was crying, too. My big Brother didn't cry often, and it broke my heart to hear him cry. I scooted over to him. I patted his back. He let me. We sat there huddled together in the dark. I don't know how much time passed, but we had grown silent and had drifted off to sleep when the sound of a car stirred us.

Daddy had come back. No one spoke for the remainder of the drive to Tobley's house. I remember sitting in the backseat wishing Daddy had not come back. Nothing would ever be the same.