

Wildfire

3100 words

Pete took a look at the listings on the website someone told him about and there *were* people wanting you to drive their vehicles all over the place, including Mexico City in one case, and some of them had conditions attached, like you had to bring their dog or you had to detour on the way and pick something up.

Finally one jumped out, nice and clean:

Need pedal to the metal. Valley of the Sun to Bakersfield. Will fork over burger money.

You couldn't tell, but screw it, he called the number.

A guy answered and he was pleasant enough, and he confirmed the basics in the listing, the one weak point being you'd be driving a Ford Focus, a 2004, which Pete had a hunch was the first generation of the thing, but the guy said it *ran* great and the only issue was the

compressor was shot so you didn't have air conditioning.

Pete could deal with that, even in hot weather he liked to open the windows, and this was still mild for down here, low 80's during the day.

The Bakersfield ending wasn't perfect, that angled you a couple hours north of Manhattan Beach, but you'd worry about it then.

The guy seemed eager, and told Pete to come on down, that he'd make sure he was trustworthy and hand over the key--and Pete liked his attitude.

On down meant a Walmart parking lot in southeastern Phoenix, and Pete sprung for an Uber and the guy showed up on time, he had his wife drive a second car, the meeting was short and sweet, the guy said he'd appreciate it if the vehicle got to Bakersfield by Tuesday, and that was that.

No mention of the **will fork over burger money** part, but Pete figured why push it.

So . . . the next morning Pete was all set bright and early, and he checked the map, no surprises, 17 to 303 to 124 to 10, and then the straight shot and you had it.

He stopped for his first bite at a Pilot on I-10, and it was good to be on the open road and in control, and you could hopefully relax and enjoy the scenery and stop obsessing over the bunch of *what if's* that had been keeping him awake lately.

Except the Ford Focus started making a funny noise . . . not a constant one, but increasingly often when Pete got it up to 65 and then eased up on the gas, you'd get a *rattling*.

And that was never good.

First he thought it might be the muffler dangling loose. He had that happen once driving in New York, the winter salt on the roads causing trouble with rust. He'd had to get out and stop traffic for a minute and yank the thing off and put it in the trunk.

But that wasn't it, and the rattling became more frequent, and louder, and the Focus lost power eight miles east of Wilma, Arizona, and it took another 50 yards to come to a complete and final stop, and by that time Pete at least had the piece of junk on the shoulder.

Hmm . . .

He got out and stood there and looked around. It was Friday, very little traffic, and of course you were in the middle of the desert.

Probably the Sonoran. Though maybe the Mojave. Whoopee.

The other thought that crossed his mind . . . the doofus assuring him that even though the Focus had a few *years* on her, she ran great.

Pete made a mental note--whenever anyone, in the history of the rest of your life, uses that expression . . . run the other way.

But fine, that was later. Right now, even the darn cell service didn't work.

So Pete handled it the old-fashioned way and waited for a cop.

Which took over an hour, finally a guy pulling up behind him, lights going like he's responding to the World Trade Center attacks.

Then of course the guy sits in his vehicle for 5 minutes first, and Pete is thinking, do I really seem that dangerous here?

The trooper got out and said hello and made a joke that it looks like something won the battle and it wasn't your car, and he jiggled as he laughed.

He was a big guy, and the Arizona version of the state trooper hat had a cowboy shape with a gold badge and high wings and a roped tassel staring at you above the brim as the guy got closer.

“See your license and registration please?” the trooper was saying now.

This wasn't great, and Pete was getting a little ticked off, that you can't just help me a *teeny* bit by calling a tow truck?

But the issue--do you give him your *real* license, the Peter E. McGirk . . . and take the risk, in the (hopefully) unlikely event your name previously found its way into the system.

Or . . . you fork over your current fake ID, *George Worthy* . . . but that didn't sit great if the guy takes it back to the squad car and scans the sucker through something . . . trouble *that* way too.

The judgment call being--is this guy just busting chops, since he knows you only have car trouble . . . and he's not going to run anything . . .

Meanwhile Pete was digging around the glove compartment trying to *find* the registration. You had an old Ford Focus manual, a half thing of tic-tacs, a couple pens, a receipt for an oil change, someone's hair clip . . . and that was about it.

"Not looking great," Pete said to the trooper, "on the registration deal. I gotta be honest, I'm driving it for *another* guy, and it's my fault, I didn't check any of that stuff first."

"Oh yeah?" the cop said. "Where's the other guy at then?"

"I have no idea. Not behind me if that's what you mean. All's I know, I'm dropping it in Bakersfield. It beats taking a bus." Might as well lay it out.

"*Were* headed to Bakersfield," the trooper said, "*past* tense," and he gave it a solid laugh.

"I have to be honest," Pete said, "I can appreciate a sense of humor on a public official--I mean yeah we need *more* of that--but joking about someone when

they're *fucked*, like I am at the moment . . . I don't know."

"I got you Bud. Just trying to keep it inner-esting. No harm intended."

"No offense taken. Sorry."

"Gonna let you slide on the registration. Since we're towing it. Technically it's not a moving violation."

"Oh boy, thanks."

"So just give me your John Hancock here, and we'll get the show on the road. You got Triple-A, any of that shit?"

Pete said he wasn't sure, but the bad part either way, the guy was asking for a signature. One of those you give with your finger on an I-Pad, which apparently authorized him to call the tow truck.

You could scratch something illegible, but the fear was it would have to match up to the driver's license the guy may *not* have forgotten about.

A car came barreling by, over the speed limit for sure, a red Chevy Blazer with big tires. His brake-lights were on as he passed Pete and the trooper.

“Hold that thought,” the trooper said, and he hustled into his car and peeled out of there after the guy with a major squeal of rubber and a cloud of dust.

Unbelievable, Pete thought. Now I got *another* hour.

You did have to wonder how the driver didn't see the cop in advance and slow down. Highway 10 was straight as string at this point, bright day, huge domed sky, and you'd be able to spot the flashing lights from about two miles back.

The conclusion would have to be, the guy was on the phone or texting or otherwise so preoccupied that even though he no doubt *saw* the trooper, the brain receptors didn't react until it was too late.

The other observation was, it was surprising how agile the heavy cop was, he really went flying into his vehicle when the chase was on.

Whatever. Pete looked around in the back seats, Jeez, even an old newspaper or something would help, and on the floor under a rolled up piece of canvas were two books, both out of the 1960's and kind of radical,

not what you'd expect from the Focus guy, based on their brief--and now ill-advised--interaction.

One was *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, and Pete had heard of it, it was a memoir from a controversial black guy. The other book was a series of stories, or more like essays, by Tom Wolfe.

Pete had read one of his novels, it was about a girl from the backwoods of North Carolina who ends up at a fancy basketball college like Duke, and dates one of the stars of the team. It wasn't bad. You got a feel for fraternities and sororities and it made you mad but you couldn't stop reading.

Pete liked how Wolfe didn't try to conclude anything or throw his opinion around, he just let it roll like a camera.

This book now from under the seat was a mixed bag, but one of the chapters was a profile of Carol Doda.

And Jeez, Wolfe did have a nice style, you had to admit:

She blew up her breasts with emulsified silicone, the main ingredient of Silly Putty, and

became the greatest resource of the San Francisco tourist industry.

Pete remembered Carol Doda, the Condor on Broadway and Columbus, and the finale involved her dancing on a piano that got raised to the ceiling by invisible wires . . . and the author was doing a good job putting a human spin on her. . . though even better, the trooper was back.

“Sorry about that,” the cop said. “Guy pissed me *off*. Right in my face. Some infractions you tolerate, some you can't.”

“Well thanks for keeping us safe,” Pete said, and everything else aside, he meant it.

“So . . . where were we?”

“Uh, I think you needed me to . . . okay the tow.”

“Oh yeah . . . Listen, I called it in as I was circling back. Shouldn't be long. I gotta get a move on.”

Wow. Pete was tempted to ask what the rush *was* all of a sudden, but of course you may have just dodged a bullet so you left it alone.

But the guy volunteered it anyway, “I'm on lunch.”

So Pete couldn't resist asking if there was a specific place, since he was always up for a food recommendation, despite the circumstance.

"They'll be towing you to Wilma," the trooper said, "which should work out perfect. Right across from the Arco? You have *Evelyn's*. Best chicken-fried steak in three counties. So long now."

And he was gone again, not setting a record like chasing the speeder, but not fooling around either . . . and Pete knew the feeling, when your blood sugar's dropping you take care of it.

The tow truck driver opened the hood and mumbled something about it smelling like a head gasket, and Pete figured if the guy was a real mechanic he wouldn't be doing roadside duty--but then again, he'd had experiences with these guys being right on the money, quicker with the correct diagnosis than the shop guy.

Either way, what difference did it make, the thing was caput, but the state trooper had been right, *Evelyn's* was something else, jumbo portions and various gravies dripping off the plates as the good-natured servers brought people's food out. The entrees--and the desserts

too--had the messy quality of everything being homemade.

If Pete had to guess, that was Evelyn herself orchestrating the proceedings back in the kitchen, and when it slowed down she came out and said hello all around, and you had the impression a lot of these folks stopped in here every day.

Pete was at the counter and she gave him a “How are *you* today?” and then spoke a minute with the guy next to him, and refilled both their coffees before getting back to work.

Pete said to the guy, “You got the better treatment there. Not the local one, but close.”

“I’m in a big rig,” the guy said. “Stop here whenever I can time it.”

“So where are you headed?” Pete said.

“Where are you?”

“It was LA. I have to wait now. Auto trouble.”

“Ah,” the guy said. “Well at least you got this place to keep you company. You at the Set-Tee?” That was the motel in town, up the block from the car repair place.

“Should be, yeah. Haven’t quite committed myself.”

“I was gonna say, I could offer you a ride, except you’re waiting on your repair.”

Dang.

“I don’t *have* to be waiting . . . no,” Pete said.

“Okay then,” the guy said, finishing up. “Let’s get *to* it.”

And just like that . . . Pete was back on I-10 heading west, this time resting comfortably about 15 feet up, his head positioned just right against a passenger seat that might have out-comforted anything he’d ever sat in, except maybe his Costco recliner.

He liked this guy’s style, whose name was Abe. No screwing around, no asking things twice or making sure.

Though a half hour in Abe did say, “You return-tripping it, or what?” Which Pete assumed meant, would he be going back to Wilma to retrieve the vehicle when it was fixed.

“Not the top of my To Do list, no,” Pete said, and Abe seemed satisfied and left it at that.

Pete had found the registration after all, and he gave it to the repair shop as a placeholder . . . and now he called them and said to please junk the car and send the

guy on the registration the bill, and they were okay with that.

“More definitive now,” the trucker said, “that you’re not coming back.”

“That was an error, yeah. I’ve made of a few of them lately.”

“Like what?”

Pete didn’t feel like diving into anything, and it felt wonderful to just watch the road. And what a view from up here.

He particularly didn’t want to get into anything off-beat, such as offering a political opinion without meaning to, and risk having *this* guy throw him out.

But a direct question, *like what?*, was reasonable.

“Well . . . for starters, I think I ran away from something I didn’t have to. That led to other deficiencies.”

“You been acting out of character, you mean?”

“Yeah. I seem to be overdoing stuff. Not letting it flow natural.”

“You ever speak to anyone on that?”

“Hunh? You mean, psychologically?”

“Yeah. Like a counselor, a therapist.”

Pete had actually, but he said no.

“*I did,*” Abe said. “On account of my brother’s teeth.”

Uh-oh.

Pete tentatively asked, “What about your brother’s teeth?”

“Only that he was visited by a alien. Not personally, but the shit got into the dental mix, and he ended up fucked.”

“Ah,” Pete said, but Abe was on a roll, and he bit off a hunk of beef jerky and continued.

“See my *brother*, he had a girlfriend in Las Cruces . . . For the geography-challenged, that’s in New Mexico. 46 miles from El Paso. Which is one of your border towns.”

“Hmm.”

“They’re in a pizza joint--and that’s kind of curious already, with about 10,000 Mexican restaurants there, why would you choose Italian? At any rate, they order a house special, the works, and there’s an olive buried in

the cheese that didn't get pitted, and Earl breaks part of a tooth, a lower rear molar that has a filling in it."

"Ah."

"He's gonna wait until he gets home, which back then was Lafayette."

"Indiana," Pete said.

"Exactly. But it starts bugging him, and the girlfriend convinces him to take care of it. So the upshot is, he gets a replacement filling, local, and then all hell broke loose."

Pete would have been fine with the story stopping here, but you had four hours to LA still, probably more, once you hit traffic . . . and this Abe was a bit of a lunatic now, but at least thank God he was handling the big rig fine.

So Pete said, "What kind of hell broke loose?"

"Two departments. One, he developed a super strength. You wouldn't believe it unless you saw it, at least I didn't. But he could lift up cars, the front ends."

"And there's a *two*?" Pete said.

“Yep. He could time travel. He didn’t intend to. But he did it once by accident. Scared the bejeezus out of him.”

Pete was thinking about that Carol Doda profile, he’d have to finish it at some point.

Abe was saying, “So I did my own investigation. You remember Roswell?”

“I’ve heard of it,” Pete said. “What about it?”

“You had your famous crash. But another incident around that time, they released a discharge above a silver mine . . . outside Capitan. That’s Lincoln County.”

Abe let that hang and Pete realized he was being tested.

“You’re not gonna tell me,” Pete said, “silver, from the particular mine, ended up in your brother’s *tooth*.”

Abe smiled, pretty much for the first time. “You’re not bad . . . Rough start, didn’t know if you were all *there*, frankly, but you righted the ship.”

No one spoke for about 20 miles.

Then Abe mentioned that when they get to the warehouse in Imperial Beach he wouldn’t have to fingerprint it, which was always good.

Pete guessed that might be trucker slang for not having to unload anything yourself, that there'd be a guy showing up with a forklift.

Abe started whistling, and Pete recognized the tune. It was the old Michael Martin Murphey song *Wildfire*. He remembered Murphey performing it once on the David Letterman show, after Letterman gave it a big build-up. Pete was sleepy now, and he closed his eyes and listened to Abe's version.