

The Lad

He was tall and skinny and standing on the curb in Brazil, Indiana. At his feet stood his small, battered black suitcase. A bent metal sign was lashed to its side with brown twine. This sign was a full size color picture of an Indian chief wearing a headdress, the feathers of which were all in different colors. Appropriately enough, the sign was an advertisement for Chief Paints, but that message had been bent under so the sign could fit on the suitcase. The lad had picked up the sign at some point on his travels because, since he was hitchhiking, he realized the value of attracting attention. The sign seemed like a natural. He had gotten rides readily enough, but oddly, no one who had picked him up had ever mentioned it.

The year was 1947 and, although wartime gas rationing was ended, hitchhiking was still an accepted way used by many to travel both short and long distances. The whole country seemed to be in automobiles now, and rides were usually plentiful. So far, in the past several months, he had visited all the state capitols in New England from his small town in New Hampshire. Then he was heading for the west coast, California. The word was that Los Angeles was where the action was now that the war was won. It was the place with all the entertainment a young guy could want.

He hadn't made it. The rides had been great at first, day or night, good ones too. No gas rationing and everyone celebrating the freedom of movement by filling the tank and

moving out. Some rides even came with meals. Of course there were some challenges. There was that time in the desert outside Albuquerque. He and six others were heating some canned supper over a trash fire when the sandstorm hit. They had to hunker down in a couple of abandoned cars through the night and into the following day while the wind driven sand whistled past the broken windows.

It was in Grants, New Mexico that the rides had petered out . . . just like that. No one stopped; no one even looked. After wearing out his welcome at the local restaurants with offers of work for food, he had made the collect call to his mother to telegraph him the ten dollars he had left with her for emergencies. He had reassured her he was OK. He was sixteen, and she wasn't happy he had dropped out of school, but he had worked some jobs and, in another four months, would be old enough to join the army. It was time to head for home. He had gotten rid of the fleas he picked up sleeping in the railroad station, and was now more careful where he slept.

He divided his money with an army vet trying to get back to his home in Toledo, Ohio. Then, in a couple or three days he was here in Brazil, watching the traffic lights change, blinking yellow on the main street and red on the cross street. It was midnight and, in the light rain, the sign on his suitcase glistened under the street light, but there was nobody to see it. There hadn't been a car go by in over an hour according to the jewelry store clock across the street.

Yesterday or the day before, he wasn't quite sure which, he had checked out the back of a grocery store after hours and filled up on bananas which were unfortunately too ripe to be portable. He remembered last night, when in the pouring rain, he had

slept on the gravel bed under a trailer on a Missouri hillside. Somebody was playing the radio but turned it off. He went to sleep listening to the water rushing past under the two inches of stones, while he stayed reasonably dry.

The lights of the car were suddenly there, slowing down through the intersection and coming to a stop where he stood, his thumb raised. The young man leaned over and pushed open the door, motioning him in. The lad slid onto the seat and tucked Chief Paint under his legs in front of the seat. It was standard procedure never to get separated from your stuff.

He waited for the question. They always asked where you were headed, and you always gave them the name of the next big city, unless it was a short distance. If you were traveling a long distance, they might let you off early because they didn't want a long term commitment. The man asked if he had been waiting long. The lad told him a couple of hours. Then the lad told him he was going to Columbus, Ohio. The man said that he was going to New York City. The lad then told him he lived in New Hampshire and was going home. Rules are made to be broken.

The only other thing he could ever recall of that trip was that they stopped soon to eat. Except for that, the time for the twelve hundred mile trip seemed to have vanished. The next thing he remembered was when he woke up in a bed in an apartment in New York City. The man introduced him to a lady he said was his mother and showed him the bathroom where he could take a shower. When he finished, he found his clothes on the bed, all washed, dried and folded. While he dressed, he could hear bacon frying and he went out to the kitchen, where the lady had prepared a heaping breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon and pancakes. When they had finished and cleaned up the dishes,

the lady told him that it just so happened they had planned to go to New Hampshire to visit friends that day and could drop him off on the way. The lad just couldn't believe how well things were turning out.

From New York City to his home in Salem Depot, New Hampshire was over three hundred miles. There were no interstate highways then and many of the roads were two lane. Also there were several cities to traverse. He really didn't remember anything about the trip until they pulled over to the side of the road just after the only traffic light in his town. It seemed that it was early afternoon. He wanted them to come up to the house so he could introduce them to his mother, but they said they had an appointment upstate and had better drive on. He got out of the car with his suitcase and walked a few feet up the street when he decided to try one more time to bring them home, but when he turned around, they were gone, car and all. He had heard no sound, no door closing, no car driving off, nothing. He felt a little disappointment, but the excitement of being back got him moving up the street to the volunteer fire house, then a left turn, and he could see his house. He was home.

He had never thought about angels. Now, on this Mother's Day, 2006, the lad, a man now grown, was reflecting on his life, and in that soft moment before sleep comes, he was given to realize that on that rainy night in Brazil, Indiana, when that young man pulled up to him and opened the car door, a mother's prayer was answered, answered in a very special way.

I was that lad, and this is a true story.

Ken Green
2007