

Dancing Round in a Ring

A bump in the road jerks my son out of a light slumber and he shifts in his seat, blinking. He'll be 19 this year, a thought that makes me shift in my seat too. As the sun sets, the smell of feet begins to fade, and the overstuffed Febreze scented Hefty bags jammed into every inch of this ride are coming on strong. I expect this battle will rage on and leave its scars in the little Toyota for months to come.

The interstate is crowded with trucks. Important cargo being transported to meaningful places. Like this big eighteen-wheeler with a giant arrow on the side that points to "our most important cargo," who comes into view as we pass, perched in the cab and steering the rig from beneath the nod of a yellow cap. There are lots of trucks in this area. Big-pick-up-trucks and small-pick-up-trucks. Some with hard rubber reproductive glands hanging from the bottom hitch. All of them have decals competing for space in the back window, 23, or 88, or 3 versus Chevy and Ford Calvins pissing on Dodges. Occasionally a solemn Calvin is on one knee paying homage to the cross. Does my son even know what Calvin and Hobbs is? I can't remember when that stopped being published. Would he remember the Far Side? I'm pretty sure I showed that to him. Some things you can only pass along while their little hard drives are still open to parental input. A time that seems to have passed by years ago.

The boy's head perks up, fully alert, as we come upon a careless motorist who must have been speeding. The trooper's piercing blues, reds, and whites make little imprints

in my brain that show up long after we pass each time I blink. We slide back into the right lane after passing them safely into the rear view mirror.

“Have you ever been to prison?” he asks, looking out the windshield.

Have I ever been to prison? Why would he ask that? Was it the state trooper? Was I talking in my sleep at the hotel? You know, it’s a good question, have I ever been to prison. I’ve been *in* a prison. Twice that I can remember just in grade school. Concrete and steel and shatterproof windows with little criss-crossed wire veins in doors with obscenities scratched into the veneer. I can almost hear the rough voices and detect the industrial smells. Like a hospital and garage mixed. A thick, reinforced elevator where someone whispered, *did you see that bullet hole?* when we walked out. That prison looked just like it did on television but was much more claustrophobic in real life. It’s interesting that claustrophobia is so hard to get right in film. I remember a submarine movie that got it right, *Das Boot*, I think it was. I remember that being a good one for imagining a tight space. Movies miss that sense of smell though. I wonder what that submarine smelled like? Probably more feet than febreze. I can’t remember how that movie ends. *Prison*. So I can say I’ve never been to prison as a prisoner but I’ve been in a prison. Is that the answer he’s looking for? When he was a little boy, I gave careful consideration to all of his questions, and tried to answer them as he wanted, but never seemed to get on the same wavelength. Is this one of those times? Is he probing or just making small talk?

“Never been a prisoner, but I’ve been in a prison,” I say.

He continues to look out the window over the dark, rolling landscape. I assume he's considering my answer. The white earbud that he popped out of his ear as we passed the person getting justice, gets popped back in.

I remember reading a study somewhere that a man-to-man conversation has a particular format it needs to follow in order for it work. Like we won't sit and face to face talk - something about it turning into confrontation. It's so strong that even when men sit across the table from one another, they are usually pointed off to the side. Eye contact is a weird male thing too, so the study went. If you want your man to open up - you know what? Maybe it wasn't a study, maybe it was just one of those loose *Cosmos* that she used to leave around - anyway - to get your man to open up, you need to do something active with him. Walking is an easy way to get him to open his yap and let some stuff out. So do something active - like playing catch. The folklore around having a catch runs deep in the Americana. The *Field of Dreams* scene always makes me tear up. *You wanna have a catch?* Get out. Just thinking about it, I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks and my palms getting a little sweaty. Another one of the tricks is a car ride. Something about driving. Sitting side by side and looking out over the horizon. Let the man drive so he has something to do and then over time you can pry out those inner-most deep thoughts. I used to joke with my wife that outside of thoughts on food and sex there isn't much else going on up there, but pry away. Since I'm driving with the boy maybe this is a good time. Maybe this is where he opens up a bit and tells me some stuff. I'm dying to know what his days are like. I remember my college days. Let me qualify that, I don't remember much about the actuals days, just the big events. Like

bailing friends out of prison. *Don't talk back to cops* I can say. But I'm a friendly, whitish, non-racially identified guy. No one thinks I'll talk back anyway. My son looks just like me so he's probably figured that out already. Being non-descript has advantages. The two friends I bailed out of prison were whitish too, but they had one thing in common. A propensity for the drink and being hot tempered. Hot blooded. Especially for non-descript people. One was a redheaded Irishman. So he had an excuse. The other was a tow-headed Italian. I guess he had that excuse too. O'Leary and Bertolini. Those two were trouble.

"Have you ever been to prison?" I ask him.

He senses that I've turned his way and he pops the earbud out again. "What was the question?"

"Have you ever been to prison?"

He rolls his eyes so far back into his head that he's looking back out the window. Gives me a semi-smile and pops the earbud back in.

I laugh to myself. Crack myself up mostly. Sometimes I could get my wife to laugh. And I used to bat 1.000 with the kids when they were little. Now I just seem to annoy them.

As a matter of fact, from the sounds of it, I've become predictable. *I knew you were going to say that*, is the refrain most of the time. They smile or chuckle but I'm pretty sure they're just laughing at my predictability. I can't help it. I'm getting old. Older at least. Based on the average life expectancy I'm over half-way done here, but I don't remember my first eight to nine years very well, so I think I'm well over half-way. And if this truck up to the right loses a tire and comes crashing into my windshield, I may be on

my last few moments. Or not. Maybe I'll just get really, really old and really, really alone at the end. Sitting on the side of the interstate, plugged into my device, and watching cars fly overhead, or whatever life will be like.

"Have you ever been arrested?"

The earbud is out again. I have to come back from future-lonely-me marveling at wondrous flying machines.

"What?" I heard him but I'm stalling.

"Have you ever been arrested?" He's semi-smiling and holding that earbud, looking at me.

Have I ever been arrested? Now that's a tougher question. Fully booked? Or just cuffed and stuffed? Campus police or the actual city po-po? Does a paddy wagon line with zip ties count? Of course not. That was a peaceful protest. I was just a number and they never sent me downtown. He has to mean, *did I ever get arrested for something real.* And I have. Kind of. I was apprehended but they ended up letting me go. Unlike today's trooper, those cop cars had mostly red flashing lights. Because that's about all I remember. Red, and flashing, and lots of people milling about. The police shining lights up to the roof of our old rental house because *that keg must have come from there, right?* That could have hurt someone. We used to sit on that roof and watch the sunrise after particularly long nights. But that night there was just my roommate hanging off the back of the roof by his fingertips, safely staying out of the spotlights. Why he threw the keg no one knows. He's Italian. Bertolini again. Pain in the ass. He was so scared I was going to say something stupid at his wedding but I honestly couldn't think of anything.

There was so much. The deer piss, the Nuh, the late nights playing the riff from 99 *Teardrops* for hours on end. I wouldn't be able to tie it all together into a coherent thought so I wished him well and sat down. *Have I ever been arrested?* It's going to be followed by a, *what for? What led to that?* He's in a social fraternity so he might understand. Rush events are hard. The Actives want to take these guys out to see if they like drinking with them and enjoying their company. The school administration hates that kind of fraternizing. The thing is, guys don't sit and look at each other and talk. They need something to do. Something to keep their minds and hands busy so they can get to know one another. So, if you can't drink on campus or in the rental houses, you have to get creative. I had to get them off campus but there weren't any bars to go to - we already did bowling - so, I thought . . . scavenger hunt. It was a good idea. You can break into teams - the Pledges and the Actives and a list of goods to keep everyone busy. The scavenger list started innocently enough because I love eggs and Spam. Since my house was going to be command central, I would get to keep whatever showed up. So I started with a small, safe grocery list. Spam, cereal, eggs all worth ten points (broken eggs got a ten point deduction) and then what? The yard. When we moved in, we accidentally broke the homeowner's bird bath, so if you bring one of those I'll give you thirty points. Then we got silly. Bring a sorority girl (of her own will) and get fifty points. Things are better with girls. Bring a stewardess? A hundred points, heck, a pilot gets you another hundred. A flight crew, five hundred. All those people will need something to drink, so a 12-pack gets you fifty points. I've always liked those high chairs from McDonalds, two hundred points; that hot waitress from Julie's

gets you three hundred points; the women's soccer team, (at least eleven of them) is five hundred points; man, I can't even remember the other things. I think deer piss made it in there, a blues band, a divorcé from the Crystal Lounge, wall hangings from the old Hyatt, and the coup de grace, get that ginormous flag from Rory's Ford that flew over Main street. As a matter of fact, get that flag and you win. Everyone laughed when they received their sheets, which came with one explicit instruction: if you get busted, you get busted. Don't let the list fall into the wrong hands. I stayed at the house to keep score. Sat alone at a table in the basement. Sat down there with some music and a few beers. I only remember being alone for a few minutes before people started coming in with their booty. Lots of Spam to start. Lots of other canned meats too. Deviled ham, meat sticks, and other things. I'd tally the points and watch their boots scramble upstairs, feet banging overhead as they exited the door. Feet entering then coming down the stairs. Everyone laughing. Good times. Soon I saw some non-male feet entering. The sorority girls that would help me keep score. Their beers expertly hidden from view in red Solo cups. Lots of judgment calls. *How many points for a pony keg? A hundred! How many for your sister? A hundred! How many for your girlfriend? Two hundred! Sorry sis.* On an on it went. And like most semi-spontaneous parties, at some point it just got out of hand. It was probably when those sensible navy blue heels with the stockings descended into the basement, followed by military grade black patent leather shoes and another set of blue heels and stockings attached to legs that went up to there. O'Leary did it. He got a pilot and two stewardesses. By that time there were hundreds of people in the little house. The basement was full of Spam, eggs, highchairs, and birdbaths. The beer could

no longer stay hidden and people were demanding that their points be counted. People like to win. So it wasn't like they sat around. They demanded that new items get added to the list. So I kept adding and adding and scoring and scoring. More pilots, more stewardesses. Divorcés in gold lamé tops. A couple of guys in leather coats that looked like they wanted to break someone's legs. The stereo was making the floor bounce and windows shake. The normal house smell of stale beer was overwhelmed by a mix of perfume, hairspray, and body heat. A blur of activity all around. By that time I recognized which team was descending the stairs by their boots, but the next boots I didn't have a take on. Black, almost tennis shoe-like. Held down by navy pants with a yellow stripe down the side. As the stripe climbed the leg, it met the nightstick, the flashlight and the holster. *James Ridgely?* One officer had my scavenger list in his hand. Both he and his partner had stern looks on their faces. *Here sir.* I waved at them and tried to make it over to the corner landing where they stood. The crowd was oblivious to them but as I scrambled to get closer to the cops, a murmur flashed through the crowd and everyone started making their way out of the basement, slowly walking past the officers and up the stairs. *Are you responsible for this?* one of them asked, showing me the list. *Yessir.* As the crowd cleared, the overstuffed basement came into clear view. It looked like a crazed merchandiser's bodega because it was semi-organized, thanks to the sorority girls who couldn't stand the clutter. Birdbaths and lawn ornaments on the left, foodstuffs on the right, flags hanging from wiring in the floorboards, giant potted plants, and in the corner, my table. On it, a chalkboard showing current scores and team names like the Mooseknuckles and Test Eagles. I

hadn't seen it in all its glory until that moment and it must have registered on my face because one of the officers started laughing. *Son, this is like ten thousand dollars worth of stuff. Where did it come from? Not sure sir. Was it purchased legally? Probably not sir, but I have no idea.* From there I remember walking out in handcuffs through a crowd that wasn't dispersing. Why should they? At this point it was as if the desperate singles bar had moved to a college flophouse for the night. One of the pilots asked the officer what I was being hauled in for. A stewardess gave me a sad face look while her friend made out with one of my roommates. The red lights from the cruisers flashed everywhere. They led me to the porch and that's when that pony keg came crashing down from the roof. Luckily it was a small, empty projectile with no one in its path. It came to rest at the chain-link fence that held gawking neighbors at bay. They pointed up and all of the officers trained their lights to the roof, putting their hands on their holsters. I remember seeing my sister. Next to her was my girlfriend. In a year we'd be married, I should have asked her what she was thinking at that moment. And there was the cop car that I was being led to. *Did you have any idea this was going to happen? No sir. What did you expect, son? I was hoping for spam and beer, sir.* They left me in the back of the squad car to ponder the scene. Outside the vehicle, it seemed like everyone I knew was pointing and laughing, and all I could think is, *cuffed and fucking stuffed. Way to go.* I was going to graduate in a few months. I was supposed to get a job or go to grad school or something. *What will my parents say?* Just another thing they wouldn't understand. Another difference between how they grew up and how I grew up. *How are we going to break this thing up?* I heard one officer say. *I can help,* I offered. They

looked at me and huddled. *Son, we talked it over. The school has been notified so you're not off the hook, but if you can clear this out, you're good to go. Get everything back to where it belongs.* And I did. I cleared everyone out. Had them take everything with them. Talked to some McDonalds managers and sternly whispered things like *I don't care where it goes, get it out and don't let them see you ditch it.* It didn't take long. The house was back to its normal state of disrepair and dilapidation in what must have been minutes. Everyone was motivated. I said goodbye to my new officer friends. *You should go to law school* said one. *You should be in management* said another. *Just don't run for office,* said the third one and they fell about in laughter. Then I sat in my living room and fretted. And started thinking about Monday. Went upstairs to bed. About five in the morning I could hear banging and laughing and loud whispering. *No. No. No.* I got to the top of the stairs and saw it. The biggest flag in the city. In my living room. The stars looked as big as I my head.

We win! sang a chorus of hoarse voices. *We win!*

"Dad?"

"Huh?"

"Well, have you?" he asks again.

"Thankfully, no," I reply as the little Toyota registers another bump in the road.