The Memphis Odyssey

It all started during the mid-term exams of my sophomore year. My cousin Owen and I were on the phone taking a study break from the exams when one of us first pitched the idea. What if we skipped a day of school and went to Memphis to see Graceland, the grand home of Elvis Presley? Granted, it didn’t make much sense, but at the time it was pretty much just a joke. Yet week after week the idea kept popping up, and each time it became less of a joke and more of a reality. A date was set: February 21st. The plan was for Owen to pick me up Friday morning. We’d go eat breakfast, and then hit the road. But our parents thought we were just going to Waffle House to eat breakfast with some friends before school. The Waffle House part was true at least.

This had to be one of the most idiotic ideas Owen and I have ever had. Now don’t get me wrong; in our 16 years of knowing each other, we’d done some pretty stupid stuff together. One time at a party we placed an intercom in my great aunt’s chair and told her that God was speaking to her through it. Years earlier, before either of us had a drivers license, we took Beau’s (my cousin, his brother) car for a little joyride, claiming that we only needed his keys to listen to the radio. Then there was the time when we were kids that I permanently scarred my heel on the back of the refrigerator door while running around my house with sheets over our heads. But cutting school, lying to our parents, and driving to Memphis? We had never done anything that stupid. Stupid in that I jeopardized my parents’ trust in me, particularly my mom’s. As un-passe as it may be to say, I’m a relatively good kid. I don’t drink, I don’t smoke, I don’t do drugs, and I haven’t really done anything wrong in my short life. Because of that my mom had a deep trust in me, knowing she could always count on me to do the right thing. That’s a bond
that is hard to come by these days. The trust meant a lot to me; I took a certain pride in it. That trust, however, was the last thing on my mind that Friday morning in Waffle House.

A few days before the trip I’d taken the liberty of compiling a tape of good car music, so Owen and I took off down the interstate with the theme from Star Wars blaring in our ears, having no idea of what the ill-fated day would bring.

First we stopped at a rest station to change into some more comfortable clothes that we had packed in our backpacks. Now we were ready to ride. Owen had his metal, thin sunglasses on (even though it wasn’t all that sunny – the sky was rather foreboding with dark clouds actually) and I had on my favorite blue flannel shirt. Boy were we cool.

We were going to go to Memphis, drive around for a while, go to Graceland and get our picture taken there. Then we would go back home as if we had gone to school. To be honest, I don’t know how we thought we could get past Mrs. Bradshaw (our school’s secretary) and her attendance sheets, but I guess we had it all figured out. The Graceland pictures would remain secret until Owen put them in his senior year book entry where seniors could publish a few pictures. By that time everyone would just be surprised and laugh at the prank we had done two years ago. But then God threw a monkey wrench into our day, or more specifically, a police car.

Owen has a history of speeding. Currently he has six speeding tickets (the last one his mother doesn’t know about yet.) Just the other day he received a letter in the mail notifying him that if he gets one more ticket, his license will be revoked. To his credit, Owen’s actually a good driver. He has a remarkable sense of direction and he’s never once had a wreck, unless you count the time he hit a mailbox. I had the pleasure of being at his house the day the full truth about the mailbox incident finally dawned on his
mother. She was looking at the scrapes the mailbox made on the side of his car when she realized that in order for the scrapes to be on the left side of the car, Owen would have had to be driving on the other side of the road. . . . Oh it’s not a good thing to be around my Aunt Margo when she’s angry. I see some of that fury on a regular basis because I live with her sister, but my mom’s temper is nothing compared to my aunt’s. When my aunt yells, she yells. The octaves of her voice go from the high pitched “I can’t believe you’d even think of doing such a thing!” to the base “Don’t you talk back to me!” Amidst all the cursing and yelling, it’s odd to realize where it is all coming from; the mouth of a 5’2” woman who doesn’t look like she could hurt a fly. And it’s worse when she’s arguing with her other son, Beau, because he’s exactly like her in the temper department. He lets it fly as much as she does. They enflame each others’ tempers; it’s like spraying bug repellent on a lit match. I can’t describe the almost palpable sense of passion and fury that emulates from them when they argue. But that’s Beau. Owen doesn’t argue with his mom when she yells at him (which I think is smart - gets it over with much quicker.) And aside from the headache they get, she doesn’t usually punish them for whatever they’ve done - which explains why Owen still drives when he has six speeding tickets (though technically six, but she doesn’t know about the sixth one yet, remember?)

To paraphrase the band Steppenwolf, there we were, heading down the interstate, looking for adventure, and whatever came our way. “Whatever” came from behind us though. We must have been really cocky not to have kept a lookout for cops, because all of the sudden one was right behind us with his lights flashing. That five seconds it took us to pull over seemed to last forever, like we were frozen in time. Something cold and big gripped my stomach and at first I didn’t know what it was: fear. A thousand thoughts
flew through my mind, from "Oh god, we’re caught!" to "What’ll Mom say?" "What’ll Dad do?" “Maybe we can escape him!” “Maybe we can plead with him. . . .” That cold heavy feeling was all over me now. The cop actually had a nice demeanor, which made it difficult for Owen and I to be angry with him for giving us the ticket. He was just doing his job after all. It turns out Owen had been going 84 in a 75 zone. For a while it seemed like the officer wasn’t even going to give us the ticket - hope raised its head briefly - but disappeared just as quickly. Luckily the officer didn’t ask us what we were doing out of school, so we were safe on that front. But we still had gotten a speeding ticket.

It was like some bad 80's teen movie. All we needed was Molly Ringwald in the back seat and Boy George playing on the radio. Owen and I had broken free of the system, acting as rebellious teenagers should, but then the fuzz busted us. So since we wouldn’t be making it to Graceland, we decided to take pictures of ourselves with the ticket instead. That’s when a second cop pulled up behind us, but this time to only see if we were okay because we were over on the side of the road. It was like Fate had sent a messenger telling us to get our butts back to Nashville. Now most people would probably have listened to Fate and turned around. And we thought about turning around. Really, we did. But we were so close! And we had already been caught, so why not finish what we had started? Once we got there, nothing much happened in Memphis actually. We drove around the city and ate lunch at a Subway. Then we got back on the interstate. The dark cloud that was above us on the way down was gone now, replaced by a sunny sky, but it sure felt like it was over us on the long way back.

So what did I learn from this whole experience? The day became infamous at school and for a while Owen and I were in the spotlight for our journey. It makes for a
great story and to top it off, the trip was actually pretty fun, speeding ticket and all. There was punishment all right. Owen and I had gone back and told our mothers together at the same time. Safety in numbers and all that. Neither of us got to go to a big party that weekend, and I was grounded until school ended. Worst of all, my present for my sixteenth birthday, a car, got severely delayed. None of the punishments really had long lasting consequences though, nor did they affect me that much. But something else did affect me. In one of the several lectures I received from my parents, my mother told me that she couldn’t trust me anymore. I never realized the importance of that trust she had in me until then. From now on, there would always be a part of her wondering if I really was going to a friend’s house or whatever. She couldn’t take my word for it anymore. I had never done anything to corrupt myself in my mother’s eyes, but now I had lied to her. I wasn’t her “Spud” anymore. I do regret that. That’s what I took away from this trip, the realization that once a trust is broken, it can never be fully restored. It happens to everyone at some point I suppose, but that doesn’t make it any less bittersweet.