

The Journey and the Destination

Short Story

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It wasn't a dark and stormy night. Dark, yes, but conditions were far more brutal than to be described as merely stormy.

As I drove along Interstate 94 between Kenosha and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on New Year's Day of 1977, I knew I ordinarily would not have been on the road in such circumstances. Sadly, I was traveling to attend the funeral of my best friend the next day. Leukemia had claimed Mike at age 21, during our senior year of college—there was no way I would miss the services I deeply wished were not necessary.

So, I drove on late into the evening, crawling along at 30 miles per hour and understandably passing very few other drivers. A severe cold snap had the temperature at 25 degrees below zero. The wind chill was at least 40 below, and gusts blew fallen snow across the freeway almost constantly. Only a crazy person or one on a mission would be traveling that night.

So, I was shocked when I saw him. At first, I thought the blowing snow and my headlights were playing tricks on me, but as I neared an exit ramp, I realized he was not an illusion. A tall man with a bulky overcoat and a backpack, his head covered in a black hood, was hitchhiking. Talk about your WTF moments.

"That guy must be a lunatic," I thought. "Where could he be going that he has to be thumbing his way there on a night like this?"

I had to pull over and get him as close as I could to wherever he was headed. Hitchhiking was more common nearly 50 years ago, and sometimes I picked

someone up just to have company on a long drive. In this case, my conscience would not have allowed me to deny anyone a ride. With so little traffic there was a chance the man could die of exposure before he reached shelter.

“Oh my god! Thanks so much for stopping!” the traveler said even before his pack hit the floor in front of his seat. “I’ve been out there three hours, and I can hardly feel my feet. I didn’t see more than four or five cars an hour, and nobody even stopped to ask where I’m going.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied. “I couldn’t leave you out there. And as soon as you tell me your name, I’ll ask you where you’re going.”

He told me his name was Charles Abrams, but everyone called him Chuck. I told him mine, and then I asked the question.

“So, where are you going, Chuck?”

“Don’t really know. Wherever I end up and any place that isn’t here.”

“What’s so bad about here? You don’t have to stay out here in the country if you don’t like it. You could move to Madison or Milwaukee or a number of other places that would be a little more exciting.”

I noticed Chuck was still shivering, even though I had the heater on full blast. It was time for a rest stop anyway, so I told him to put a hold on his answer as I pulled off at the next exit. Chuck’s story sounded like it could take a while, and I figured we might as well be in a warm place while he told it. The 365 Diner and Truck Stop (“Always Open”) would do just fine.

The place was nearly filled with people likely just happy to be inside—a number of truckers and a few families I suspected had decided to get a room at the hotel next door and hope for less hostile weather in the morning. Chuck and I grabbed two seats at the red Formica counter, and after we'd ordered coffee and sandwiches, I brought our conversation back on track.

“Okay, Chuck, I’m guessing we’re about the same age,” I said. “I’ve got a bit of wanderlust myself, but what’s got you out on a night like this with no particular destination in mind?”

“Fair question,” he began, “and I’m 22. I just don’t have any reason to stay here, and I’ll tell you why I couldn’t wait for the weather to improve.”

Chuck explained that he had lost his parents in a car accident three years earlier. He had graduated midyear from a nearby branch of the University of Wisconsin and was living with his grandmother while he looked for a job and applied to business schools.

Then Grandma passed away only two weeks ago. The lease on her apartment just expired the previous day, and the owners had already rented it to someone ready to move in immediately. So, Chuck had to decide where he’d go and how to get there with minimal funds in his pocket.

“I don’t have anyone else here,” he said. “All that’s left is memories. I don’t want to forget my parents or Grandma, but I don’t see any point in wallowing here and being constantly reminded of the loss.”

I could see the sense in that. As I was telling Chuck so, the manager approached and asked how we liked our meals. He said he was especially curious, since he was filling in for the short-order cook who couldn't get through the weather to work.

"I can't cook as well as Ed and manage at the same time," he said. "I'd give anything if a cook could magically appear here and take over in the kitchen. I'm willing to pay well, and I'd put such an angel up at the hotel until Ed can make it back—even give a \$300 bonus."

What happened next struck me as an unusual coincidence, but it would be years before I knew how much more it was to become.

"Sir," Chuck said to the manager, "I worked as a cook to make extra money while I was in college. I'm not on a schedule, and I don't even know where I'm going. If you'd like, I could try to help you in the kitchen for a while."

So, a deal was struck, and I would be driving on without Chuck. We said our goodbyes, and I wished him well before continuing toward Milwaukee.

I've thought about that night occasionally, but over the years the lonely hitchhiker's name and face faded from memory. I regarded our brief time together as just another of the many quirky experiences I've had in my life, and I wondered about him without ever expecting to get an answer.

Then, just last week, I was flipping through the business section of the Sunday newspaper, and I saw the article that brought the story full circle. Chuck Abrams was retiring as chief executive officer of 365, Inc., the parent company with

holdings including 365 Diners and Truck Stops. The name was vaguely familiar to me, so I had to read the story to see if I could learn why.

The reporter traced Chuck's history with the company, beginning with his temporary job as a short-order cook. With a recommendation from the manager in his pocket, Chuck hitchhiked around the country for a year. Sometimes he would chance upon a 365 that needed a cook, and he'd fill in until a new hire was brought on board and he had cash to finance his ongoing adventure.

Chuck explained that his time on the front lines of 365 provided a real-life education on the company, its strategy and its mission—and hitchhiking around the country taught him a lot about its customers. After his time on the road, he took that knowledge with him to business school, where he earned his M.B.A. on an accelerated program.

From there it was a management job at 365, followed by a move to the executive suite at corporate headquarters in Philadelphia. He moved steadily up the ladder until becoming CEO 12 years ago.

My connection to Chuck was less than tenuous, but I was fascinated by the story. I read every word, and at the end my efforts brought a reward in a quote from Chuck.

"Sometimes I'm still amazed by how it all began," he said. "More than 40 years ago, I was hitchhiking in the most godawful winter weather I ever experienced, trying to figure out what to do with my life. A compassionate soul picked me up, and we stopped at a 365 Diner and Truck Stop to warm up. The

ride he gave me put my life on a course I never could have imagined, but I have no idea who or where he is—so I can't thank him as I would like.”

Maybe you can, Chuck. Maybe you can. I'll be giving you a call because we've got a great story to share.

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