Chapter : Sharon/South Royalton

Subject : Being in Control.

Date :August, 1944. Date written January, 1997

Locale :South Royalton, fork in the road.

People :Harvard Professor, Betty Jefferson, Robert Frost, Blind Lady of South Royalton, Barbara Jane Jefferson (BJ)

*Theme : Focus on solutions, not problems.*

**Hitch-hiking.**

I am not a writer. Mathematics, physics and chemistry were always my cup of tea. In solving a calculus problem, one came up with an answer which was either the right answer or was wrong. No superior Being intervened and said, *“You didn’t phrase the answer correctly.”* Not until I was at Harvard did the English language hold the least bit of enchantment for me. One needed English credits to graduate. When I got around to addressing this awful fact, the only open course was Shakespearean Comedy 101. Day one of 101, there I was with 200 others needing an English credit. In swooshed the professor, en costume et al. This was total immersion Shakespeare. I loved it. Once one learns the foreign language of Shakespeare, one is hooked. Shakespearean Comedy 102 by the same man was every bit as good. It was too late though to sign up for creative writing 101. While being told once in awhile that something I’ve written is a bit humorous, putting down serious thoughts and feelings is foreign to me.

Approaching this hitch-hiking episode I’m not certain I can convey my feelings, but I’ll give it a try. On the other hand, not to try would rob the incident of its stated impact.

In the summer of ‘44, I was attending Naval Officers Training School at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. On summer weekends, when duties and studies allowed, it was my wont to travel to Northfield, Vermont, and visit the family farm, Windway, about 60 miles as the road goes. Road goes or roads go,.... continue on.

Travel meant hitch-hiking. This was not the 80’s or 90’s. Almost everyone going any significant distance stopped for a serviceman in uniform. That part was wonderful! The bad part was hardly anyone went anywhere. No gas. Our ‘Windway’ truck, the 1936 green Dodge beauty, was entitled to a special gas sticker, of what color I forget, but I still had to get somewhere in the vicinity before it could come and rescue the sailor protecting the family by studying at Dartmouth College. Tough duty. Sailors with very little money were dependent on civilians with very little gas. Somehow it all seemed to work out. Would I pick up a hitch-hiking anything today? No.

Life at Dartmouth centered on 3 towns: Hanover where we lived, Lebanon where all the girls seemed to be and White River Junction which was the window to the great beyond. Lebanon had already achieved public notoriety of sorts. Mother, God bless her, had written me early in my naval career that a footnote in the Readers Digest said Lebanon, New Hampshire, had the highest syphilis rate in the USA for the preceding year. This, from a mother who never mentioned sex, to a son who wasn’t quite sure just what syphilis was. The Navy, in its infinite wisdom, took care of the ignorance with graphic indoctrination movies. I spared Mother my new found knowledge and promised I’d be careful. Anyway, on hitch-hiking weekends, White River Junction, not Lebanon, was the town of choice and first leg of the trip to Northfield.

Traveling west of White River Junction up the White River itself, one comes upon two comparable towns, Sharon and South Royalton. These are always intertwined in my mind, in that I have a hard time remembering which is east and which is west of the other. They are intertwined in history also. The original Dartmouth Indians were hard at work scalping the inhabitants of one, when settlers in the other, hearing the commotion, came running to the rescue. There have been wonderful re-enactments of this massacre and marathon, but then again, who saved who? Let’s say South Royalton is northwest of Sharon, and Sharon southeast of South Royalton. Thus, at South Royalton, my story starts.

Just outside of South Royalton, there is a fork in the road. The right hand fork, Rt. 14, leads to Barre/Montpelier. The left hand fork, Rt 107, leads to Rt 12 and Bethel, Randolph and Northfield. Montpelier and Randolph were both within range of the ‘Windway’ truck. Approaching this intersection in what was usually my second ride, I would have already ascertained how far past this decision point my current benefactor was going. If not a goodly distance I would ask to be let out at the fork, where I figured I had double the chance to catch a through ride to a rendezvous with the green beauty. There I would stand, right in the fork and try to thumb a ride in either direction. Once, two cars came along together. The first took the Barre turn, the second peeled off toward Bethel. Quickly adapting to the situation, I put up each thumb. Didn’t work. Two confused drivers looked right at me and kept on driving. Bummer! To this day, I can not read Frost’s *“The Road not Taken”,* without thinking of my special fork outside of South Royalton.

One hot August day, traffic was almost nil. After standing in the sun for an hour, thirst was becoming paramount. Set back from the fork was a small farmhouse, pleasant looking with a porch across the front. Decisions, decisions. I could see it in my mind,..... knocking on the door of the farmhouse just as the ‘ride du jour’ zooms by my abandoned hiker’s post. Thirst won out. The need for water lead to an experience I still vividly recall. Remember, at this time I was young, struggling to keep abreast of a double load of college level courses, naive, inexperienced and just about overwhelmed by my situation. I had just turned 18, looked 14 and had the worldly experience of a 10- year old. Everyone else was bigger, stronger and better prepared, or so it seemed. I was just 5 months from a very sheltered upbringing.

I approached the house, mounted the stairs, crossed the porch and knocked on the door. A pleasant female voice replied, *“Come in,.... the door is open.”* This took a youngster from New York City by surprise. Hesitant to enter, I called, *“ I would like to have a glass of water please.” “That’s fine,..... just come in*.” Still feeling there was something about all this I didn’t understand, I thought, well here goes. Entering, one immediately sensed something different about the house. The floors were bare, spotless, but bare. Furniture was at a minimum. There was no clutter. All non-furniture items I could see from my position at the door would have fit in a GI duffel bag. It resembled a house that a family is about to vacate after the first of two moving vans has already left. And where was the owner of the pleasant voice?

*“I’m in the back room, just walk straight ahead.”*

I did. Through the wide arch at the end of the hall I saw the lady. She sat upright in a straight chair in the middle of an otherwise almost empty room in, I believe, an otherwise empty house. Cane in one hand, relaxed and calm, she seemed to sense more than observe my approach.. As I repeated my request, her eyes seemed to focus six inches from my left ear.

The cane was white. The woman was blind.

*“ The kitchen is on your right, the glasses are in the upper right cabinet next to the sink. Help yourself. When you’re finished, please set the glass in the middle of the sink.”*

I followed her instructions, thinking all the time,

*“I can’t believe this. She’s so alone, but so calm,..... so serene....and... so... so blind.”*

Returning to the arch I said,

*”That was wonderful, drank 3 glasses. Thank you.”*

*“Quite all right. Come anytime.”*

*“I may do that. Thanks again. Good by.”*

Walking back down the hall, I let myself out. Perhaps 5 minutes had elapsed. I was transferred to Boston 2 months later and never went back. Only in spirit.

I have done a lot of things in life since then, but know I’ll never achieve the level of peace, contentment and control shown by the blind lady at the fork of the road. Whenever I’ve been fearful of some challenge or situation, I could always summon up the picture of the woman in the almost empty house just outside of South Royalton, Vermont. If she was able to be in control of her situation, there was no mess I couldn’t work my way out of as long as I kept focused on the problem. Her problem was blindness. Her response was inspiring. My resolve to keep head above water had stiffened noticeably.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. Finally made the farm and, in the course of conversation that evening, mentioned the episode of the lady in the farmhouse.

My mother said, “*Well, why wouldn’t she feel safe, you look so nice in your sailor suit.”*

Sailor suit was a sore point between us. She knew the term annoyed me, but couldn’t refrain from using it. In the Navy, a sailor suit was a uniform, and a boat was something you put on a ship. In Mother’s world, there were no uniforms or ships, only boats and sailor suits. I can remember only one other instance of Mother saying something she really meant to leave unsaid. Anticipating visits by her mother-in-law, BJ, Betty would say, *“If she says George looks thin, I’m going to scream.”* BJ would arrive, say right off, *“Goodness George, you look thin,”* and steam would come out of Betty’s ears. Shortly after Velma and I had set up housekeeping, my mother paid a visit. I met her at the door. Her first words? You guessed it, *“Goodness Kenneth, you’ve lost weight!”* There was a short silence. Then, *“I can’t believe I said that.” “Neither can I Mom.”*

Incidentally, my father was thin when he was born and thin when he died.

But I digress. I don’t know if she hadn’t been listening or was just pulling my leg, but I declined to point out I could have been naked as a jaybird as far as my South Royalton Gunga Din was concerned.

*“Right Mom, but it’s not a ‘sailor suit’, it’s a uniform. Little boys wear sailor suits. Big boys catch syphilis.”*

I guess I was growing up.

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