



*It was the summer of 2000. I was driving a Ford Explorer with Firestone tires – a combination that was making headlines and leading the newscasts. Before making that road trip, I had my tires checked, and no, they were not from the Decatur, Illinois plant that had caused all the trouble. But they certainly made for good conversation at —*

## The Last Real Filling Station in the South.

I WAS ON THE ROAD BY 6:12, chasing the sunrise and doing travel math in my head by the time I hit Interstate 85. From Clemson, I'd be in Atlanta in about two hours; another couple of hours to Montgomery. Three more hours to Biloxi and then I-10 all the way home. It's a 14-hour drive from Clemson to Houston. And another three to get home.

I remember wishing I had time to stop and relax on the Biloxi beach before sunset. There was that word again: relax. I had been going non-stop for as long as I could remember. I had to. Too many people counted on me to do too many things. No time for luxuries like relaxing. I didn't even have time to spend a whole week in Clemson, but I had to stay a couple of days longer than I had planned. But I really needed to get back to Texas. And that Biloxi beach was not on my itinerary.

By pushing it, I could drive straight through to Houston by dusk, make a pit stop and grab a bite to eat, then head straight to San Marcos and get there by midnight. That would put me home a day earlier than scheduled.

Atlanta traffic was light in spite of the morning rush hour and I was south of the city by a quarter after eight, and making good time.

At the Alabama state line, the temperature needle began to inch its way up toward the H. A few miles outside of the state capital, the amber Check Engine light came on. I coasted into a gas station on the outskirts of Montgomery.

"George Kelly Chevron - Owner Operated," the sign above the door read.

It wasn't one of those food-mart sort of modern service stations that line the interstates across the country, offering tacos, fried chicken, egg rolls, and an automatic car wash with every self-serve fill-up.

No, this was a real old-fashioned filling station like you don't see much anymore, the kind with a black rubber air hose that rings a loud bell when someone drives over it. It's the kind of filling station that specializes in full service and mechanics-on-duty, offering clean restrooms, and has a Coke machine, a snack machine, and last Sunday's newspaper in the waiting room.

When I pulled in, David, the tire repairman according to the embroidered name on his shirt, came out to greet me. "You got them bad tires, huh?" he pointed out as he walked up to the Explorer.

"No," I explained, as he squatted down for a closer look at the Wil-

derness AF on my front left wheel. “Actually, I had the serial number checked at the dealership before I left home. These aren’t the tires they recalled. The bad ones were from a different plant.”

“Wilderness AF,” he read from the sidewall, shaking his head. “Yep. That’s them bad ones.”

“No. Actually, I stopped because my heat gauge is rising and the ‘check engine’ light came on. Could someone look at it for me?” I glanced at my watch, trying hard not to show tourist impatience. I looked beyond him for a real mechanic.

**I grew up in the South and one thing is for certain. No one is better at passive aggression and slowing down than a Southern man when someone is pressuring him to speed things up. My daddy was a champion at balancing the scale, he liked to say. The faster some tourist or Yankee foreigner talked, the slower he moved. I forced myself to take a deep breath before I joined them out in the parking lot.**

He popped the hood and looked inside for a few minutes. “It doesn’t smell like anything’s cooking,” he offered expertly, before he turned and headed into the mechanic’s bay. “Lady from Texas has them bad tires they been talking about on the news. Says her check engine light came on,” he shrugged back in my direction.

Young George Kelly, Jr. came out wiping his hands on a red shop rag. “I’ve got to wrestle with the fuel pump in this damn Winnebago, and then someone has to take a look at Mr. Smith’s tractor. Give me a minute—or just make yourself at home and wait till Pop gets back. There’s a soda water machine inside.”

“I really need to get back on the road,” I said as calmly as I could. “Do you have any idea if you are going to be able to fix it?”

“Honey, give us a minute here. Just make yourself at home. I guarantee you that if we can’t fix it, it ain’t broke,” he said, as David joined him in a back-slapping laugh. That mechanic bay humor was lost on me, as I looked at my watch for the fourth time in as many minutes. I grabbed my purse and keys and went into the waiting room. It was clean, furnished with two old sofas and a coffee table stacked with back issues of *Field and Stream*, *Progressive Farmer*, and *Stock Car Racing*, and a week’s worth of *Montgomery Herald*s. And the room was large enough for pacing if your stride was not too long.

A quarter-hour later, Mr. Kelly, Sr. came back from his errand and peered into the engine of my Explorer. “We’ll let it cool down a lit-

tle more and then we’ll see what we’ve got,” he called over to me, as I stepped back out into the Alabama heat.

“She’s got some of them bad tires,” David announced.

“No,” I said, trying my best to keep the snippiness out of my voice. “I am sorry. Your ‘tire specialist’ doesn’t seem to hear me. I have tried to tell him this several times. These are not the bad tires. These are from a different plant.”

“Aww,” Mr. Kelly smiled, wiping sweat from his brow. “Don’t let him worry you none. Once that boy gets his mind set on something, he’s not much for changing it. He’s harmless. We got you covered though. We’ll take care of you.”

I paced back and forth in the waiting room, watching through the plate glass window as Mr. Kelly juggled wires and wriggled hoses, cooled the engine, and finally went for the thermostat. By this time, an older man had driven up, wearing khakis and a Pecan Plantation gimme cap. “Whose truck is that with Texas plates?” he asked, walking into the waiting room.

“Hey, Mr. Smith. It’s that gal standing over there in the window. She’s got them bad tires,” David proclaimed.

The man came over and shook my hand, and introduced himself as though we were meeting at a chamber of commerce mixer. I explained to

Mr. Smith that the damned tires were not from the bad tire plant that had set off the recall, according to our Ford dealership at home, but that this David fellow couldn’t seem to get that through his head. I crushed my Diet Coke can, and tossed it into the metal trash can with a clang, as I told this stranger that I had a long road ahead of me and hoped this delay was not going to take too long. I really needed to get back on the road if I was going to make it home before daylight. He just smiled and nodded, situating himself on the vinyl couch.

“Whereabouts in Texas are you from?” he asked, unfazed by my impatience.

“San Marcos. It’s right outside of Austin,” I replied, distracted by a young, coffee-colored boy exploding into the room, tumbling toward the vending machine.

The child was followed by his aunt, a lovely lady who said she had an appointment for an oil change with Mr. Kelly and was running a little early.

“Walter, baby, slow down. No running inside. Hello, Mr. Smith,” she said, nodding a greeting toward me as she sat in one of the vinyl chairs and picked up Sunday’s newspaper.

“Did you see them bad tires out there?” David asked her. “On that Texas Explorer? Wilderness AF,” he explained, knowingly. “That gal over there—she’s here because her check engine light came on.”

She offered a sympathetic smile in my direction as I tried, yet again,

to briefly explain that I didn't actually have the bad tires, just tires with the same name. Her nephew began chanting about snacks from the vending machine. "I want some hot fries, Auntie. I want some hot fries. Please!"

She shushed him with a reminder that they had just eaten lunch and they were going to be home in a little while. "But if you can sit quietly and be good, perhaps we will get some hot fries before we leave," she bargained.

"Please, I want some hot fries, Auntie. I love hot fries," the youngster continued to plead. "I'll be good. I'll sit here and be real quiet if I can have some hot fries. Can I have some hot fries?"

Mr. Smith went out to lean on my Explorer with Mr. Kelly. I stood back up and began to retrace my steps back and forth at the window.

I grew up in the South and one thing is for certain. No one is better at passive aggression and slowing down than a southern man when someone is pressuring him to speed things up. My daddy was a champion at balancing the scale, he liked to say. The faster some tourist or yankee foreigner talked, the slower he moved. I forced myself to take a deep breath before I joined them out in the parking lot.

"Mr. Kelly, I am so sorry if I sound anxious, but have you figured out what's wrong? Are you going to be able to fix it?" I spoke each word as clearly as possible. I was down to my last nerve, but I was not going to let them play that frustrating Southern game with me. More deep breaths. Slow down and be nice. My father's voice rang through my head. There's a lot of truth to that old saying: you'll catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

"I really am sorry to be so impatient," I said, trying to keep the sudden rush of tears from my eyes. "We buried my father in Clemson this week and need to get back to Texas, and now I am stuck here and am about at the end of my rope," I confessed. And I had made it through the last two weeks without shedding a single tear. I was damn sure not going to start bawling in the parking lot of some filling station in Alabama.

"Bless your heart. Now don't fret, you hear?" Mr. Smith said, patting my shoulder with a smile. "Me and George'll get this figured out and get you back in the road in no time."

"Bet you dollars to donuts it's probably the thermostat," Mr. Kelly proclaimed. He went on to explain that he would take it out and look at it, but that seemed to be what it was, and with any luck, we could probably get a new one from the parts house if they had any in stock.

Mr. Smith volunteered to get a head start and call around and find one while Kelly began to dismantle the housing that protected the thermostat. He was back in a flash with the news that the first parts house he called had one in stock.

The men decided to get this one out and check it before running over to get the new one. "Used to be, these thermostats were held in there with two bolts," Kelly told his friend, wiping the mid-afternoon Alabama sweat from his brow. "Now this one is held in there with five bolts, and a couple are near impossible to get to," he smiled. "Those

Ford fellows are sure proud of these thermostats. They fasten them in there mighty good." Mr. Smith joined him in a laugh as I watched for a while.

There is something to be said for having absolutely no control over a schedule. I was virtually held captive by this mechanical failure, and no amount of clock watching was going to change that. As I inhaled another deep breath of Alabama summer heat, I wondered why no one ever gets stuck in Paradise.

In spite of my impatience with this slow-paced process, I saw something unique about the simplicity of these friendships, as I listened to the banter of those two sixty-something-year-old men, heads bent together in the shade of the Explorer hood as the sun radiated up in wriggly lines from the concrete. Country music coughed out of a static-filled radio. For a while, I sat on a stool in the bay and listened to the wit and wisdom, quips and jokes coming from the mechanics as they changed the oil in Auntie's Oldsmobile and fixed the tire on that Buick, wrestled with the fuel pump on that damned Winnebago, and tinkered with Mr. Smith's tractor.

Eventually, I wandered back into the waiting room where little Walter was still singing the praises of hot fries and his auntie was still encouraging his good behavior.

A headache was forming at my temples. I needed to sit down and just try to wait it out. More deep breaths. Being bitchy was not going to do me any good.

But damn it, I needed to get back to Texas. I had work to do. I had already been gone for two weeks. I needed to get home and reclaim my life. That thought nearly made me smile. What life? A crappy job, an inevitable divorce and a pile of bills were waiting to welcome me home. I sunk down into the lumpy tweed couch and picked up a section of the newspaper.

Mr. Smith stepped into the air-conditioned room. "Saw that sticker on the back window of your Ford. There was a fellow from close to here who went down to your little college over there. Name of Buzzard." He



looked at me with raised eyebrows.

“What was his name?” I asked, folding the newspaper back up and setting it aside.

“Buzzard. On account of how he’d hunker down like a buzzard when he’d eat,” Smith explained. “Named Davis, I think, but nobody ever called him that. Everyone just called him Buzzard. Looked just like one. Went to school outside of Austin, sure enough. Nobody ever even heard of that Southwest Texas College before but he said if it was good enough for President Johnson, it’d probably be good enough for him. Just thought you might have known him. He was from here.”

“No.” I had to smile, thinking of the improbability of such a coincidence. “Don’t think so. When’d he go to school?” I asked, dragging out this conversation for no particular reason—except that I do truly enjoy a good Alabama accent.

“Let’s see. He would of graduated here with Emma and that bunch—so he’d of gone there sometime along about in—oh—’69? Yeah. See, he had a deferment on account of his hearing wasn’t so good. Wanted to be an ag teacher. Once he got down there he never came back. Said it was God’s country over there. You ever run across him?” He looked at me for confirmation.

“Guess not,” I shrugged, not wanting to tell him that some time in the last few decades, there was a chance Buzzard had graduated and moved on.

About that time, Mr. Kelly came in holding what was evidently the thermostat with a pair of pliers. “That’s it, all right, Missy. Looky-there. This thing’s shut up tighter than a drum.”

Like blue jays, Mr. Smith and David the tire tech came around to inspect the fist-sized piece of metal.

“Yep.”

“Look at that.”

“Shut up tighter than a drum.”

“There you go.”

Smith and Kelly left for the parts house while I sat down and began to flip through the newspaper.

George Kelly, Jr. came in and handed the Oldsmobile keys to Auntie while her nephew squirmed in his seat. “Do I get hot fries now?”

“Yes,” she dug in her handbag for two quarters and a nickel. “Now, do you know which button to push for the hot fries?”

“Four!” he shouted, bounding from the chair as though on a spring. “I go for number four!”

“No, baby,” she gently explained. “If you want hot fries, you must push seventeen. That is one-seven.”

“No, Auntie! I don’t like seventeen. I am four years old. So I push four.”

Auntie succumbed to the logic, and allowed him to push four. “A honeybun” he exclaimed. “My favorite!” as she led him to the car.

“There comes Yvonne and Granny driving up,” David announced to me. “They ain’t related but everyone calls that old lady Granny on account of she’s so old. And everyone calls the other one Yvonne. I guess ‘cause that’s her name,” he determined. “Her nephew Eric works here but he’s off today.”

Yvonne spotted David. “I have a nail in my tire,” she said, pointing at the left front wheel. “Slow leak. My son told me to go out to the new tire outlet on the highway but I told him, ‘No, I’m just taking it to Kelly’s where I always take it. They’ll fix it right.’ Now can you fix it right, David?”

“Yes, ma’am. That lady over there reading the paper has them bad tires from Firestone.”

“She the one with Texas plates?” Granny asked, as they sat down.

I put the paper down and introduced myself, explaining with a sigh that, according to my Ford dealer, this particular series of Wilderness tires was not among the bad ones. The women nodded, satisfied with my explanation.

“That David there is a little simple. He gets something in his mind and you can’t pry it loose for nothing. But this job is good for him. He really thinks the world would stop turning if he didn’t get here first thing in the morning to open those bays. You can’t get that boy to take a day off to save his life. I reckon this job is the most important thing in his life. You traveling through, baby, or are you staying the night in Montgomery?” Granny asked.

I shrugged, “I am waiting to see what’s wrong with the thermostat or whatever. I don’t know how long it’s going to take. But I really need to get back to Texas tonight. I certainly didn’t plan to stop here at all. I need to get back on the road.”

Granny’s voice was as slow and sweet as molasses on cathead biscuits. I could have listened to her talk all afternoon. She continued, “Well, I’m sure George’ll take care of you out there. He’s a good man. And if you have to be somewhere, this is a good place to be. There’s a lot to see in Montgomery if you aren’t from here. I’ve lived here all my life and I thank my lucky stars that I got planted right here in the center of the universe. Hank Williams is buried here, you know. His wife, too, though I don’t know why they’d lay her next to him after the misery she caused him.”

“Well, he probably caused his share of misery for her too,” said Yvonne, picking at the nail polish on her thumb. “I would of hated to be married to a man that wrote all them cheating songs.”

David came back in with the keys to Yvonne’s car and told her it was all set. “No charge,” he said. “Mr. Kelly said you got the road hazard when you bought that set of tires.”

He glanced over at me. “I bet Wilderness don’t give that road hazard



on them bad tires.”

I picked up the newspaper again. Finally. Mr. Kelly was back with the new thermostat, working on the Explorer. He had come in to tell me that it wasn't going to be much longer when a jovial man strode in through the side door and grabbed David by the shoulders, “Hey, boy! Who's here with Texas plates?”

George, Jr. came out from under the Winnebago and Mr. Kelly came in from the Explorer. “Son-of-a-gun! Looky what the cat drug up.”

Folks were lining up to shake this man's hand.

When the commotion died down, David nodded toward me. “That's her truck. That gal in there looking out the window. You see them bad tires on the front? That's some of them Wilderness AFs.”

“O. C. McAuthur,” the man said as he stepped into the waiting room, tipping his cap and reaching out to shake my hand. “I just got back from Texas myself. Spent nearly three months down there at M.D. Anderson. What part of Texas you from?”

I told him my name, described where San Marcos is, in proximity to Houston, and told him that in spite of what that idiot was saying, there was nothing wrong with my tires, but with my thermostat. And that I really hoped someone could get it fixed so I could be on my way. I walked over to the window again to check on the men working on my Explorer.

“Over at Montgomery Memorial, they told me I had the cancer of the pancreas,” he explained. “I told them to just hang on a cottonpicking minute. I went on down to M. D. Anderson in Houston and they set me straight. They told me ‘Mr. McAuthur, you don't have cancer of the pancreas. You just have the bile duct cancer.’ And they gave me that chemotherapy and radium and fixed me up good as new.”

He stood up and pointed to his groin area. “I'd have never even known I had cancer at all but for this little pain that started right here at the top of my leg and then started to spread out toward my belly. Always had a good appetite but I got to where I couldn't eat more than a little saucer of food at a time. But now, after the treatments, I got my appetite back good as new. I can even eat Mexican food now. Well. Maybe I better go check on your thermostat. You just sit back and take it easy. Kelly is going to take care of that truck for you.”

He walked back out to lean under the hood to see what Mr. Kelly was doing to my Explorer.

I continued to skim through the paper until Mr. McAuthur came back in and started up where he had left off. “They've got some of the smartest doctors from all over the world down there at M. D. Anderson. I had a doctor from Switzerland and one from France. Like some kind of United Nations. My sister and I went down there and stayed

in an apartment near the hospital so I could have the treatments right there. The day I finished my chemo treatments we went out riding in her car and we drove past a Chrysler dealership over in River Oaks. I saw a line of brand new PT Cruisers on the lot and said, ‘Sister, pull in there.’ I got out and looked at them, and before we left that day I had bought me that fire engine red PT Cruiser parked right out there. Drove it all the way back from Houston.”

He sat back down. “Let me tell you the best thing about this old cancer mess. It'll sure teach you something about living. Sometimes it takes something like life or death to slap you right upside the head and get you thinking straight again. I sure learned that the time to live is right here and now. There's no use in waiting for a better time. There may not be a better time on down the road. Something could happen tomorrow and there you'd be, stuck wishing you would have done some of those things when you had the chance. You ever have that feeling.

**He sat back down. “Let me tell you the best thing about this old cancer mess. It'll sure teach you something about living. Sometimes it takes something like life or death to slap you right upside the head and get you thinking straight again. I sure learned that the time to live is right here and now. There's no use in waiting for a better time. There may not be a better time on down the road. . . . I spent half a lifetime chasing my tail. From here on out, when I lay my head on my pillow at night I don't want any regrets about what I wished I would of done or ought to be doing. I ask you, what are we waiting for?”**

Wishing you would have done something but missed the chance? Got so doggoned tied up with every day stuff that you missed out on what's really important? I spent half a lifetime chasing my tail. From here on out, when I lay my head on my pillow at night I don't want any regrets about what I wished I would of done or ought to be doing. I ask you, what are we waiting for?”

He sounded so much like my father that I found myself nodding my head in agreement. And he was right. It would be nice. But it's not that easy. Some of us have too much to do, treading water, juggling balls, and just trying to stay afloat. As he talked, my mind continued to spin, closing doors on his idealistic perfect world. I half-listened, knowing I didn't have time to waste or money to spend on stopping and smelling

roses at this point in my life, however appealing that may be. But it was useless to try to explain that to someone. Easier to just nod and agree.

David had been sitting there listening. “Yep. Somebody could just drive out of here and have a blow out and roll over and get themselves killed,” he said. “Like... if they had ....uh...” The air hose bell rang over his head and interrupted his thought.

Mr. McArthur looked at my Explorer and shook his head, “I went ahead and just got them to put Michelins on my Expedition. There’s not a thing in the world wrong with a good set of Michelins. You ought to get you some Michelins. Or just get David here to switch out that bad tire for your spare.”

I opened my mouth to try to explain about my tire but about that time, Mr. Kelly came in with my keys. “There you go, Missy,” he said. “That ought to fix you up.”

He sat down to figure the bill as Mr. McArthur stood up to leave. “Well, George. It’s about supper time,” he said. “Guess I’d better head for the house.”

As he turned to leave, Mr. McArthur looked back at me. “Remember what’s important. No regrets, now. You hear?” He tipped his cap and stepped out into the Alabama sunshine.

Mr. Kelly handed me my bill. The thermostat was \$18. Labor was figured at 1.5 hours / \$65 per hour. At the bottom of the page, a thick line was drawn through the labor line - \$97.50.

“I’m not going to charge you for that labor. Bless your heart, what with your daddy and all, you’ve been through enough this week. Just do me a favor and spend that money doing something nice for yourself, you hear?”

Sometimes it seemed like the hardest thing for me to deal with was someone being nice to me. I fought back tears, got Mr. Kelly to top off my gas tank, settled up with him and shook his hand. He gave me a quick side hug, the same kind Daddy always offered and said, “Take care now, Missy. Drive careful, you hear?”

I had spent almost three hours in that filling station. I pulled out onto the road, and headed toward Biloxi and points beyond. If I made good time, I could still get to Houston by midnight. A large cup of coffee would give me a second wind and take me all the way home. I could catch a little sleep and be in the office by nine.

Just north of Mobile, my mind started to wander back to those folks at the filling station. Maybe I was a little like David, the tire guy. I was heading hell-bent for leather back to a dead-end job, knowing that it would wait another day. I wish I could be a little more like Walter. It would be nice to be able to change my mind once in a while, even if I was dead-set on hot fries. I tried to imagine a long-ago Alabama teen breaking the mold and heading for that college that President Johnson went to off in Texas, chasing a dream and catching it.

Granny’s comment about Montgomery being right in the center of the universe made me wish I could feel comfortable about where I was instead of stressed about where I thought I needed to be. And Mr. McArthur. No regrets. What’s important. Nice platitudes. Easier said

than done. What kind of pressure did that old man have coming at him from all directions? Who was waiting on him to meet a deadline? What stack of bills stuffed his mailbox? Who was pressuring him to make any great decisions?

About thirty miles outside of Biloxi, I saw a line of billboards advertising special weeknight rates at the Beau Rivage Casino and Hotel on the beach.

“It’s your turn” the first sign flashed, followed by “Find yourself in Biloxi,” and “Luxury rooms from \$75. Free breakfast buffet,” I turned the idea over in my head. What if...?

Mr. Kelly told me to do something nice for myself. Right. I would add that to my to-do list. But first, I needed to get back to Texas. I had a job to get back to. I had bills to pay. I was already behind schedule on this road trip as well as on those two projects that I had hoped to finish before the due dates. And I had a marriage to absolve.

And since when did I listen to perfect strangers in filling stations offering advice. Maybe since about 170 miles back. Maybe since I walked out of the waiting room at Kelly’s Chevron.

Yes. I did need to do all those things on my list. But they would have to wait. Today I was going to start learning the difference between important and urgent. Somewhere along the line, those words had become interchangeable synonyms that had taken over my life, leaving me with more than just a few regrets.

I thought about Mr. McArthur. Granny and Walter. David and Mr. Kelly. And I thought about what was truly important. And was really not that urgent.

And somewhere along that hazy Southern interstate highway, I saw what was important. I needed to get back to me. It was my turn.

I stopped in Biloxi, pulled into the parking lot and checked into the Beau Rivage. I watched the sunset on the beach, spent the night, filled up on a fabulous casino-style breakfast buffet and took my time heading back to Texas the next day.

It was my turn. It was the beginning of me. Along with a new thermostat for the Explorer, I had gotten a personal tune-up and already felt like I was running better. Yes, I still had the deadlines, the bills, the divorce waiting for me back home, but now I had something more.

I had control. I had stopped everything for one night in Biloxi and the world kept turning. No one was champing at the bit or worried about why I was not somewhere. No one was demanding that I be doing something right then and there.

I stopped. And took a deep breath. It was my turn. And it was the first of many.

By the way, I made it all the way home—in spite of those potentially bad tires.

And nothing is the same as it was.

I won’t soon forget the last real filling station in the South. If you’re ever near Montgomery and need a good mechanic, stop in at Kelly’s. They’ll take good care of you. ▼