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I met Jesus on a road trip to California.

I don't mean that I had some metaphysical vision or saw his image in a grease stain on the highway. I mean I actually encountered the Son of Man face to face. In the flesh, as it were. And as it turned out, he wasn't at all what I expected.

I also met the devil that day and could say the same for him as well.

It was the middle of July, just outside Tulsa when I came upon a young man hitchhiking down the highway wearing faded jeans, a t-shirt and sandals, with an unbuttoned plaid shirt flapping in the hot Oklahoma breeze. Now that I think of it, his face did remind me of every painting I had ever seen of Jesus: sun-kissed, olive skin, shoulder-length, brown hair and a wispy beard. And he had friendly, hazel eyes. The kindest eyes I had ever seen.

I was headed west in my 911 with the sun on my face, the wind in my hair and Clapton belting out *Layla* from my stereo. I was on the threshold of an early retirement and looking forward to plenty of sun and golf. But my heart was aching with a sort of melancholy hope that reminded me of my college graduation thirty years earlier, when I was giddy with the anticipation of a new career yet mourning the memories of the life I was leaving behind.

Only now I was leaving behind more than just memories.

Son of Man – Tom Pawlik

All that to say you can probably see why at the time I had no intention of giving some unwashed hippie a ride.

But then it happened. Just as I was about to pass him by, he turned and looked straight at me. As if he knew me. As if he'd been waiting there for me all along. And that was when I heard the voice inside my head.

Stop and give him a ride.

It was just as clear as the voice inside your own head right now, reading this sentence.

I've heard people tell similar stories about hearing a voice at some significant juncture in their life. A voice they invariably attribute to God. I asked him later if he actually did that sort of thing to people or if it was just their imaginations. But he only grunted and shook his head like he thought I should've known the answer.

That's one of the things I came to learn about Jesus; he doesn't always answer your questions. At least not the way you think he should.

In any case, for whatever reason, I heeded that voice and pulled over. "You need a ride?"

He smiled at me, squinting in the sunlight, and nodded. "I'd love one."

He had a sandy, tenor voice that reminded me a little of Paul Simon.

The first thing I noticed as he climbed in was the condition of his crude leather sandals. They looked like they had been hand-made at a flower colony up in Woodstock. With tattered soles nearly worn through and wide leather straps so badly frayed they looked like they could snap any second. It was as if I had picked him up in the nick of time. Oh... and he also wore a WWJD bracelet.

I found out later he had a sense of humor.

I put the car in gear and pulled back onto the road. “So where’re you headed?”

“That way.” He pointed down the road ahead of us.

I chuckled. “No, I mean where *exactly*? Where do you want me to drop you off?”

“Palm Springs.”

“*Palm Springs?*” My eyebrows popped up. “You mean you were planning to *walk* all the way to Palm Springs? From *here?*”

“Not at all,” he said. “I was hoping you would stop and give me a ride.”

“Because that’s exactly where *I’m* headed.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“To Palm Springs.”

He grinned. “Right.”

“But you don’t have any luggage or anything.”

“It’s already there.”

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. “So... did you miss a flight or something?”

He laughed at that. “I never miss a flight.”

“Because Palm Springs is like a two-day drive from here.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And you don’t have any... y’know, supplies or a change of clothes or anything?”

“I’ll be alright.”

Son of Man – Tom Pawlik

I continued driving, wondering why I had ever listened to that voice. My inherent generosity notwithstanding, I wasn't about to pay for meals and lodging for some hippie freeloader. I didn't care how friendly his eyes looked.

“So, not to be rude or anything, but do you have any money with you?”

“You're very concerned about details, Frank.”

“Well, I made my living paying attention to details and, no offense, but when I offered you a ride, I thought you were just headed to the next town. Not... y'know, not all the way to...” Then it hit me. “How did you know my name?”

He curled up a wry grin. “Kinda missed *that* detail, huh.”

“Momentarily. Do I know you from somewhere?”

“You should. I know *you*. Frank Coswell.”

I frowned, feeling my anger and curiosity growing simultaneously. “Okay, what's going on? Is this one of those hidden camera shows?”

He laughed. “I know all about you. Frank Donald Coswell. Fifty-two years old. Grew up in Iowa but lived most of your life in Chicago. You went to college at Iowa State where you majored in marketing and business administration and where you also met Diane Kingsley. You were married for twenty-six years until she passed away from ovarian cancer almost two years ago. You have two kids, Trevor and Jenna, both now in college. You attended Riverside Community Church for many years. You're an avid golfer and successful entrepreneur. You started your own advertisement agency, Cosway Creative Group, when you were thirty-two and then sold it six months ago for a tidy sum. And that plus a few other investments have given you a rather nice little nest egg. So you sold your house in Highland Park and purchased a luxury condo at the Vista Paraiso

Estates, just off the fourteenth hole of the Twin Palms Country Club in Palm Springs where you hope to enjoy an early retirement. And play plenty of golf.”

At that point I was done being jovial. This joke had just gone too far. I pulled over and ground to a stop on the shoulder of the highway. “Alright, get out.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You’re kicking me out?”

“Unless you tell me what’s going on. Is this somebody’s idea of a joke?”

“It’s not a joke, I assure you.”

“Well, that’s why I’m kicking you out.”

He looked amused by my reaction. “But I’m telling you the truth. I *know* you, Frank. I’ve known you your whole life. I know everything about you.”

“Great.” I held up my phone. “Know what I’m doing now?”

“There’s no need to call the police.”

“You have exactly five seconds to get out of my car.”

“But aren’t you at least curious about who I am? Or how I know so much about you?”

“Nope. Nowadays you can get all that information off the Internet.”

“Okay, then how about this one.” He cleared his throat. “When you were twelve, you snuck into the girls locker room at Hamilton Junior High and hid in the supply closet to watch the girls from your gym class—including one Sandy Hoffman—take showers. It was an eye-opening experience to say the least, but you didn’t get caught *and* you never told anyone about it.” He folded his arms. “Now, did I get *that* off the Internet?”

The car shuddered as an eighteen-wheeler *whooshed* past. I stared at the guy—too shocked to say anything. I hadn’t thought about the Sandy Hoffman episode in decades.

But now a parade of images poured back into my head—memories spilling out and tumbling over each other like puppies escaping from a kennel.

Sandy Hoffman. Beautiful, blond, fourteen-year-old Sandy Hoffman, my first adolescent crush. She was every boy’s crush at school and I can remember the burning pubescent angst that would uncoil in my stomach whenever I saw her. Excitement, awe, pure joy and sheer terror all struggled for dominance inside my scrawny twelve-year-old frame. And yet I never once mustered the courage to actually talk to her. She was two years older than me for crying out loud. There was no way I could talk to her.

That locker room episode *had* been educational to be sure but the guy was right, I had never told a soul. I didn’t have the guts to brag about it to the other guys. I was too afraid one of them would rat on me to Sandy. I never had many friends in school—certainly no one I felt like I could trust. So I had tucked that little memory safely away in my head where it eventually got buried beneath all the other junk.

Until now.

Now this hitchhiker showed up out of nowhere and dug it out again. He was wiping the dust off and holding it up like he had found an old photograph in my attic. Like it was some kind of trophy.

Another truck thundered past and I shook off my daze. I could feel my jaw clenching again but I was too angry to be amazed at how he had managed the trick. I felt violated in a way. What business did this guy have mucking around inside my head?

I scowled at him. “Look, I don’t know who you are or how you did this, but—”

“That’s what I’m trying to explain to you.”

“Fine,” I huffed, “if it’ll get you outta my car, go ahead and explain.”

“I’m Jesus.”

I just sat there, not quite sure I had heard him right. “Jesus.”

He grinned. “Right.”

“Christ.”

“Yep.”

Then I started dialing. “Okay funny boy, let’s see how these Oklahoma cops feel about blasphemy. I’ll bet there’s like a dozen laws against that in this state.”

But the phone went dead in my hand, and then the engine. The dashboard flashed an assortment of warning lights and went blank.

He showed me the palms of his hands where I could see thick, puckered indentations of white scar tissue in the center of each one. “Technically, it’s not blasphemy if it’s true.”

I inspected his hands for a moment. The scars looked real enough, which made me wonder what kind of psycho would willingly endure such disfigurement just to impersonate Jesus. Otherwise, it was a great special-effect makeup job. I started looking for the hidden cameras again.

“There aren’t any cameras, Frank. It’s just you and me.”

“How’re you doing this?”

“I told you. I’m *Jesus*.”

“*Knock it off!*”

“You believe in me, don’t you?”

“Oh, I believe in Jesus alright.” I pointed at the sky. “He’s up *there* somewhere right now, busy doing other... more important things than talking to me.”

He smiled. “Right now there’s nothing more important to me than you.”

“Sure,” I said, “of course. Right now the whole universe can go without your attention because your *main* concern at this very moment is for a middle-aged guy stuck somewhere in Oklahoma. No, I get it. It’s totally plausible.”

His smile widened. “Seriously? You don’t think I can multi-task?”

“See?” I pointed in his face. “That’s what I mean. Right there. Jesus would never say something like that. *Multi-task*. He wouldn’t be so flippant or joke around like that.”

The guy laughed. “Now see Frank, that’s exactly why I’m here: to change your archaic misconception of me. Everything you know about me came from a stuffy white-haired preacher, thundering off dry sermons to a near empty church your whole childhood. He never laughed or told a joke, or even smiled much. But you know, in reality, I have a pretty good sense of humor.”

What he described began to recall some uncomfortable memories of the tiny church in Iowa where I grew up, with the venerable Reverend Grossmeyer, a perpetual curmudgeon whose entire theology seemed to center around avoiding the devil’s cigarettes and the devil’s alcohol. And the devil’s TV. And the devil’s music and movies and cars and...

Basically, anything remotely enjoyable in life belonged to the devil.

The guy was so busy trying to drive the devil out of our lives that he ended up driving most of us over to the devil’s house. And why not? He had all the cool stuff.

“Bernard Grossmeyer,” Jesus said.

“What?”

“Your pastor. Bernard Grossmeyer.”

“How did you...?”

“I was there, Frank. Remember? Wherever two or three are gathered? Every Sunday, all those years, I was there listening. And cringing usually.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Okay, let’s say—just for the sake of humoring you—let’s say for the moment that I believe you. Why are you here? What do you want with me?”

Then for the first time since he had gotten in my car, his smile faded. “The truth is I’m here to keep you from making the biggest mistake of your life.”

All I could do was shake my head. Had I heard that correctly? The biggest mistake of my *life*?

I rolled my eyes, still not sure this was even happening to me. Maybe it was a hallucination or a very vivid dream. Or more likely an elaborate, early-retirement hoax. Someone from the office had hired an actor, fed him a few bits of trivia about my life and set him up on the highway. And the rest of them were all hiding nearby, watching on monitors or filming it to play back at the office or maybe to post on You Tube. And they’d all have a good laugh.

That’s all this was. A hoax. It had to be.

A very... incredibly, elaborate hoax.