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QEP Essay Contest recipient of honorable mention

Enterprise Mississippi

We were completing the last leg of our trip, crossing the border of Louisiana into Mississippi, the weather mild this particular Sunday. The sun was shining on my face as I lay across the white vinyl back seat of my newly acquired 1977 Ford Thunderbird. Finian was curled up under my legs, letting out a high-pitched squeak every time he yawned or stretched. Pigpen was driving, his black-rimmed prescription goggles tight around his large skull, giving him a look of a muscular raccoon. My boyfriend Zack lolled in the passenger seat wearing his quintessential uniform of a fedora hat and vintage cowboy shirt, cracking jokes to keep us entertained. His music was the reason we were traveling in the first place; and we were on a weeklong mission in the middle of March to play as much music as possible across the southeast. On this particular day, we were leaving our three-day stay in New Orleans and heading north to Knoxville, TN to play our last show and then headed back home to Virginia in the morning.

Fifty miles outside of Louisiana, I was happily relaxing in the back seat of the T-bird, when I heard a loud clunk. I quickly looked out the window and saw a small square piece of black plastic fly out from under the car. The guys in the front seat noticed the noise too and quickly disregarded it. No less than 10 seconds later the car completely shut off.

A 1977 Ford Thunderbird is beast of a car. The big American engine is almost double the size of a Japanese car. From my perspective--as someone who knows nothing about cars--looking under the hood of that beautiful monstrosity was a confusing mess of dirty rubber tubes, rusty screws, and grease. The inner workings of this car created a powerful thunderous roar that no one would ever want to hear silenced while barreling down a busy Mississippi interstate.

Pigpen calmly whipped the huge vintage steering wheel around, guiding what momentum was left in the shiny burgundy corpse onto the off ramp and towards a conveniently-placed, but abandoned, gas station. Luckily, in the vast emptiness surrounding us there was one house one hundred feet away, where an old black man covered in grease hunched over an old truck. Zack walked over to talk to him and ten minutes later I found myself steering the Thunderbird while Zack, Pigpen, and the old man by the name of Robert pushed the Thunderbird next to the dilapidated truck. Robert was obviously a very kind man, but understanding him was difficult due to his mumbled Mississippi accent. Fortunately his wife boisterously came out of the house wearing an animal print sweater with matching animal print sandals. She put out her plump hand and introduced herself as “Miss Mary”.

Hours into watching the guys toiling over the T-bird, Miss Mary offered to take me to some fried chicken. Since the only place to get food was a half hour away, I settled down into the animal print car seat and Miss Mary started telling sad stories: How her family and friends lost their homes in the hurricane and how she lost her brother to a stroke the same week. She told me these things so nonchalantly, it seemed that tragedy was normal to her.

We drove through a little town called Enterprise, which to me was an ironic name for a town that was completely abandoned and torn apart by Hurricane Katrina. I couldn't believe that I was still in America, if I was blindfolded and taken to Enterprise, Mississippi I would have thought I was in a third world country. I wasn't aware of the damage done to Mississippi; most of the damage done to New Orleans came from the levy breaking, not the hurricane itself. Mississippi was hit by the hurricane just east of the eye, which is the worst part of a hurricane with the strongest winds. Miss Mary said she had no choice but to live in the church with many other displaced families for almost a month after Katrina.

When we arrived back at the house, about four other relatives of Miss Mary and Robert were there all working on our car. None of them knew who we were, and yet they were all compelled to help the strangers in need. The problem with the car proved to be very complex and entailed finding a radiator. Robert spent his Sunday making phone calls and driving around looking for a radiator. Finally, just as the sun was setting, the radiator was in place and the car fixed. The only money they asked from us was \$180 for parts. Pigpen later told me it would have cost us more than \$600 at a repair shop.

We had missed our last gig, but we didn't care. We were just happy to get home safely. We all tried not to think of what would have happened without the help of Robert and Miss Mary as we drove away in that Mississippi sunset. An event that could have been a tragedy, turned out to be an eye-opening experience. I felt like I was supposed to meet those wonderful people and get a glimpse into their lives. Despite their tragic circumstances they were helpful and kind. They didn't judge us or ask any questions about our background, they just recognized us as fellow human beings and did what came naturally to them, they helped.