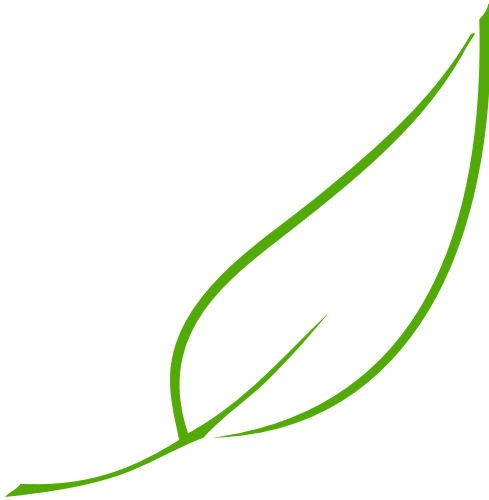


VACATE!

by Ken Bradbury



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It was war. There's no other word for it. All out war. The lines had been drawn, the supplies we running low, the field was littered with casualties, and the hopes and dreams of a lifetime lie shattered in the hot, August sun.

That's why I love family vacations. They're so much fun.

Mark Twain said that "The only way to find out if you really love or hate a person is to take a trip with 'em." That's how I found out I loved my family. When we take a vacation, we make the Simpsons look like Baptist missionaries.

I have a very average family. My dad is middle-aged, getting bald and grouchy at the same time, and he loves his children dearly, even when he threatens to throw us off the nearest mountain. My mom has no age. The little place for birth date on her driver's license is mysteriously smudged. She said she accidentally scratched it with dad's power drill.

My brother, Teddy, should be locked up. When he was six years old, I was given 60 days to live. They sent him to camp for two months. I'll give you a minute ... go ahead and think about that one.

I'm not sure why my folks even had Teddy. I guess they loved children and they would have given anything if he had been one. Teddy isn't exactly the missing link, but he's definitely one of the weakest. When we watch the *Wizard of Oz*, Teddy roots for the Witch. Other boys have dogs and hamsters for pets. Teddy has a leach. Need I say more?

But once, a year, we put all this aside and take a family vacation. It usually boils down to this: my dad wants an adventure, my mom wants a rest, Teddy was to expand his

horizons by showing the entire world how stupid he really is, and I just wanna die. This is called having fun with the family.

Most families label their vacations: The Year We Saw Yellowstone, The Summer we Fished in Minnesota, The Dream Vacation to Paris. We label ours too: The Camper that Kept Sliding off the Back of our Pickup, The Year Dad left his Credit Cards in the Bathroom of the Motel Six, The Time Teddy Brought the Snake into The International House of Pancakes. Memorable.

This year we dreamed big. Dad is big dreamer. He loves history and he looks upon a vacation as a cram-course for the entire family, an educational experience right up there with going to Harvard and finding out how sausage is really made. I think dad loves history so much because it reminds him of the years before he had children. So with a trunk full of guidebooks, we headed toward St. Louis.

St. Louis? This is history? London is history. Even Boston is history. St. Louis is a baseball team!

“Dad,” I said, “I’ve been to St. Louis. I saw it. I don’t need to see it again.”

“_____,” he said, “You haven’t seen St. Louis like I’m going to show it to you.”

No truer words were ever spoken.

Dad prepares for a trip like General Patton invading France. Road maps, driving strategy, miles per gallon, hours between rest stops. Of course, he never gives a thought to actually packing for the trip. On our trip to New Orleans he left his glasses and watch at home but he knew exactly how many miles the twelve-year-old bladder could withstand in the Texas deserts.

And you can’t sleep when dad is on vacation.

“Look kids! This is Highway 59! Good old Highway 59!”

I look at Teddy. For a brief moment we begin to bond ... Vacation is one of the few times when we have common goals and dreams ... ignoring dad.

"You know kids, this is where they fought the famous Battle of Wattahoochie!"

"Wow dad. Right here on good old Highway 59? Didn't that hurt the horses' hooves?"

Luckily for us, from the minute our van leaves home, dad never hears a thing we say. He's too caught up in his "adventure."

"Look there, Teddy! That's Porkerville! That's where they invented the hot dog just after the Civil War!"

"My life is changed forever, dad."

"And _____, you'll need to know this some day.

Missouri has an area of 69,686 square miles and its highest point is Taum Sauk Mountain at 1,772 feet."

"Thanks, dad. I'll bet I can skip the ACT test now and go straight to Yale."

"It's state motto is Salus Pipuli Suprema Lex Esto!"

"E pluribus unum, pop."

"What's that?"

"Cool dad, tell me more."

And he does. Ad infinitum.

Mom handles him better. She's had more practice.

"Look, honey!" he'll say, "There's St. Joseph! That's where the wagon trains started out for California."

"Yes dear. Wasn't that our exit?"

"You know honey, the state mines a lot of lime, zinc, coal, and iron."

"That's nice, dear. I think Teddy jumped out of the car. Think we've got time to stop?"

You can always tell when we hit a state line. Our van comes a screeching halt and we all pile out onto the hot asphalt so dad can take our picture in front of a sign that says, "Welcome to Iowa." Then we walk around the sign to stand in front of a billboard saying, "You are now leaving Nebraska."

"Dad, we did this last year."

"But last year isn't this year, is it!"

"You got me there, dad."



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