

Ice Cold

“Have you ever had an ice-cold Sprite in a glass bottle?”

We were about a hundred miles out when he first started.

“I can’t remember if I ever did or not - what’s the big deal?”

I soon found out. For the next two hours my brother prepped me on the pure wonder that was waiting for us (really just him, I ended up buying a coffee) near Henryetta, Oklahoma, where the state had carved a groove through a formerly picturesque knoll so they could plant an overpriced gas station for the fools who hadn’t filled up before they jumped on the Indian Nation Turnpike.

“That place (he was talking about the crappy gas station store) must have the coldest fridge in the state. And there’s nothing like Sprite in a glass bottle!”

Now, I’d had an ice-cold bottle of Coke before, you know, like the one that kid gave Mean Joe Green in the tunnel. And it was particularly good. It is true that while the aluminum canned drink is better than plastic, the glass bottle is the pinnacle of sipping pleasure. All this I concede. But the way he went on, you would have thought that Sprite was going to make us forever young. I just laughed and kept driving, hoping he’d give up trying to sell me. We had enough gas to get home, and I didn't want to stop.

Maybe I was just tired.

We'd played a week long gig in Colorado for all of these college kids from Texas Christian University. It was a ski trip, and the days on the snow and the singing each night went great. It was the trip back that was a drag. Maybe we should have been smart and brought our own car, but it was cheaper to ride the bus with the group. I should say busses. There were ten of them. And that is where the problem began.

So, on our way back I knew that our first stop would be pretty far along and I was starved after snowboarding all day without breaking for lunch, so I bought a large meat-lover style pizza and a tall soda and carried them to the back of bus. I hossed that meal in ten minutes.

Stupid.

We had to wait for two hours before we left, because the AC went out in one of the busses. I know, I know – its March and we're in Colorado, right? After that delay my stomach started to feel like it was carrying a weapon of mass destruction that could go off at any moment. But I got this thing about the potty at the back of a bus. And remember, I'm sitting in the last row, so I'm not trying to give myself unwanted company for the next fourteen hours.

We finally get going and make a little headway, but when it gets dark outside, all of the sudden the busses stop again. I should say the last three busses. Those lucky dogs in the first seven just sailed south without worry, left the rest of us in the hands of a drama queen.

I guess one of the co-eds in bus number eight got dumped, or cheated on, or rejected, during the trip. So she stewed those first hours, crying her little eyes out. Poor thing. Well, she decides she knows how to get her ex's attention. She gags herself until she throws up, and then begs to be taken to the hospital, 'cause something horrible is going on inside her body. Now, the

nurse is on bus six, merrily journeying along, gently laying her head on a pillow, lulled by the steady movement of her bus, homeward.

We were on our own.

The person in charge of bus eight doesn't know what to do. It's seems a lock the girl is faking, but what if she's not? She's thinking - lawsuit from hell. So, while bus nine and ten (my happy position) sit on the side of some country road for the next five hours, bus eight takes drama girl to the ER at the nearest hospital (some forty-five minutes away) so they can diagnose what we already know – she's a brokenhearted and immensely selfish person.

One other side note here. Each bus had those movie screens on the backs of the seats, so at least we could watch movies, right? Sure. Apparently the chaperone in charge of the movies on our bus was a sorority mom back at campus. No action, no thrillers, no comedies, no sports. Five hours of romance and sappy drama.

Brutal.

Anyhow, it was during this unfortunate setback that I realized my colon was losing. Submitting to my cruel fate, I entered the short and narrow door. Not to be confused with the straight and narrow way that is seldom trod by the righteous soul. No, pretty much all of bus ten and the rankest demons from the underworld had been back there before me.

After that, we pretty much got moving, but the net result was that fourteen hours turned into twenty-one. We got back to Fort Worth, and all of the college kids walked a few minutes to their dorms and went to sleep. But that was only stage one for us. We still had a four hour drive home to Tulsa. So we piled all of our music gear into my brother's Mitsubishi Montero, gassed up, and headed north.

An hour later is when the talk about the ice cold Sprite and the need to make a ridiculous pitstop began. And continued, for two hours. The closer we got, the more annoyed I got, but he was my brother, so what could I do. I conceded, and we pulled off the turnpike, right up to the curb in front of the Ice Cold Sprite Mecca.

He led me to the back of the store like a parent leads their child to the prize gift on Christmas morn. His eyes were twinkling in anticipation of my euphoria. I saw the bottle, even held it in my hands (it *was* so cold!), and then sat it back in the fridge. He looked like those door to door missionaries do when you've been polite enough to speak with them for a few minutes but then have the temerity to reject their faith.

“No, really, man, you've just gotta try one. Come on, you don't know what you're missing!”

And so on. I just nodded my weary head, found the coffee maker and poured a tall one, black, and hoped it would keep my eyes open for the final stretch.

Back in the car he kept up the banter, telling me what a fool I'd been, how I'd missed a golden opportunity, bla, bla, bla. I just sipped the coffee, let the aroma vibe up into my nose, and relished the jolt it gave to my bone weary body. I nodded to him, smiling.

“I'm glad we were able to make this pilgrimage, brother. You have found your true meaning, your illumination. *Well*, are you gonna keep worshipping that bottle or are you gonna drink?”

See, he was just holding the bottle, looking around mystically (really he was perplexed). I finally asked him – ‘what was the matter?’

He's twisting the top until his hands are almost bleeding, can't believe it's not a twist top.

“Of course it is, bruh. All of those ‘ice-cold’ bottled drinks are made that way. You need a bottle opener. Do you have one in here somewhere?”

He starts digging in the glove box and under the seats, climbs into the back seat and looks some more. Nothing. He’s getting desperate. I mean, the Sprite will not stay ice cold. The ‘holy’ fridge is already three miles in the rear view mirror, and we are on the turnpike, so there’s no turning back. He finally climbs into the front seat, looks hard at the handle above the glove box, you know, the one the passenger can hold onto when the driver takes a turn too tight, or when you go off-roading. He wedges the bottle against the bar and starts wacking at it, hard.

Now, I’ve done this before. You’re at a party at someone else’s place, they didn’t leave the bottle opener, you’ve got a beer just calling your name. So, you place it against the nearest table and give it a pop. You hit it just right – click – off comes the top, you tip it back, and you’re happy. Problem solved.

But that table at my friend's house was hard while the handle in my brother’s Montero is covered with some kind of spongy rubber material. He hits it about ten times, getting more frantic on each swing, his hands and face turning Coke label red. And then it happens. I hear the click, but not the relaxed sigh that normally follows. See, that Sprite bottle, no longer ice cold, has been getting jostled pretty good, and the bottle top has only been dislodged enough to allow all that pressure to escape through a tiny hole. And escape it does.

It starts spewing all over the inside of my brother’s Montero and all over him. Some got on me, too, but it was worth the spectacle. My brother held the bottle toward the floor, then toward the back seat, his face tense, and finally, he gave up. Rolled down his window and chucked his holy grail on the shoulder of the Indian Nation Turnpike and we left it behind at eighty-five miles per hour, just one more forgotten piece of litter.

Then he rolled up the window and wiped the residue of Sprite that covered his side of the vehicle. Face red, alternating between laughter and rage, he didn't say much the rest of the way. Tears of laughter streamed down my face. All that promise, all that hope – and he didn't get a single drop.

But he survived. He always does. Looking for beauty and satisfaction in every element of life, small or large, lofty or carnal, is something my brother learned from our father. Too often I get stuck, put my head down and just trudge down the path.

The pitfalls of my brother's grandiose style often give me a chuckle. I finally wrote this story because it makes me cry tears of hilarity at every retelling. But my brother is beautiful in many ways, and his ferocity about even the smallest of joys reminds me of my dad, and makes me smile deep, thankful, and full of hope.