

THE PILGRIMAGE

BY

WALT NICKELL

Tony Garman spotted the approaching headlights as they topped a hill nearly a mile away. In the half-light just before dawn, he quickly cleaned the blood and hair from the knife. That done, he snapped the blade back into the handle, slid the switchblade into his boot, and stuck out his thumb.

Tony liked to hitch, even if snagging a ride was getting tougher and tougher. People were hesitant to stop anymore, and often with good reason. His looks didn't help much either; what with his long scraggly hair, beard, tattoos, and a ragged old green army jacket to complete the picture. But he had learned a few things along the way that helped his chances, things he often thought of as The Golden Rules of Hitchhiking. Rule Number One: If you want to ride, you gotta play for the people.

As the headlights drew near, Tony concentrated on "playing for the people." He waded further out into the roadway and began emphatically backpedaling while waving his extended thumb.

The driver of the oncoming Mercedes slowed a little to give the hitcher a quick once-over. As their eyes met, the driver hit the gas, only to change his mind and bring the car to a squealing stop a couple hundred yards up on the road. Tony smiled when the brake lights flickered. He grabbed his shoulder pack and began to sprint toward the stopped vehicle, his breath pluming out beside him in the cold late November morning. That was Golden Rule

Number Two: If someone stops. You better get your ass in that car quick. People don't like to be kept waiting, and you don't want to give them the chance to change their minds.

Slowing in his last few strides, Tony watched the driver lower the electric window a couple of inches on the passenger side. "Happy Thanksgiving!" Tony said, smiling into the crack. "Give a guy a lift?"

"Where are you headed?" the driver boomed, his eyes consuming the other man's every detail.

Tony was accustomed to the look. "Oh, on up the road a piece," he said, indicating the direction the car was pointed. "I'm supposed to be at my mother's house outside West Liberty this evenin'. They're waitin' Thanksgiving dinner on me."

The driver nodded, eyes still greedily appraising Tony's every gesture. "West Liberty's about 60 miles yet, and I'm not going that far. I guess I can get you about halfway, though. I live in Frenchburg. That's maybe 30 miles. How'd that be?"

Tony brought his face closer to the window. "That'd be real fine. 30 miles is a lot closer than 60, and it's cold out here this mornin'."

"Climb on in then."

Tony waited a second for the door to be unlocked, then stowed his gear on the floorboard in the back. Ready to sit down beside the driver, he noticed the plastic that still covered the seats. "It's a great car," he said settling in. "Is it new?"

The driver, nearing fifty and dressed in an expensive suit, smiled. "Yeah," he said, obviously pleased that Tony had noticed. "I just picked it up in Lexington real early this mornin'. The dealer up there is a friend of mine. I had him open up special early on the holiday just so I could get it."

Tony smiled, rubbing the leather interior of the door. “Like I said, it’s a great car. I’d give my right arm for one like it. By the way, my name’s Tony Garman.”

The driver turned back onto the country road, then reached across the seat and shook hands with his passenger. “Good to meet you, Tony. I’m Clifford Murphy.”

“Nice to meet you too, Clifford.”

The two men drove on in silence for a few minutes, Clifford keeping his eyes steadily on the road, Tony keeping his eyes steadily on Clifford. When he thought it was safe, Tony bent over faking a cough, then deftly slipped the switchblade out of his boot and into his right-hand coat pocket.

When a couple more miles had slid by, Clifford asked, “You say your mother lives over around West Liberty?”

“Yeah,” Tony said, lying. “Lives on a farm just this side of town.”

“Well, what’s her name? I might even know her.”

Tony thought quickly. “Um, Vera. Vera Allan.”

“Allan? I thought you said your name was Garman.”

“That’s right. It is. My dad died a few years ago, and Mom got remarried.”

“Oh I see,” Clifford said, nodding. “So did you grow up around here?”

“No,” Tony said, fingering the knife in his pocket. “They just moved down here about a year ago. I grew up in Ohio. Little place called Lewisburg.”

“Must be little,” Clifford said, chuckling. “I used to be an office supply salesman in Ohio, and I never heard of it.”

“It is,” Tony responded, shifting in his seat so that he was a bit closer to Clifford. “When I was there, we only had a bout 1,500 people in the whole town.”

Clifford nodded again, "So they're waitin' dinner for you today, huh?"

"Yep."

"There gonna be a lot of people there?"

"No," Tony said, trying to think of a way to change the subject. "Just Mom and my step-dad. And now me."

"Oh really. Gee, we always have a big blowout at our place. Most folks tend to have their big get-togethers at Christmas, but we do ours on Thanksgiving. Gladys, that's my wife, she always cooks up enough stuff to feed the entire Navy, but what the hey, it's only once a year."

"Yeah," Tony said, his thumb circling the button on the side of the switchblade in his pocket. "A man ought'a be with his family for the holidays."

"You're absolutely right," Clifford said, confidently navigating another steep curve along the road. "Now, ya see, I got three daughters, all married, and yet they're all comin' in today to see us. But, my son, now he's a different story. He's married too, but you never know if he's going to be there until the last minute. We never look for him until we see him. I got me a feelin' that he'll be here this year though."

Lost in his own thoughts, Tony only nodded.

"That boy of mine, Bill's his name, he's got this high-steppin' wife and I don't know how he puts up with her. I guess you can tell that I never did care for that girl much, but I will say one thing for her, she does wonders with their kids. I've got an even dozen grandchildren now, but their two are just incredible. I mean, I love each and every one of them to death, but I've never seen kids as sharp as them two."

The sudden silence in the car jolted Tony from his thinking. “Well, that’s real nice,” he said, wondering what it was that was so nice.

“Hey, are you all right?” Clifford asked, concerned.

“Sure, I’m fine. Why’d you ask?”

“Well, you just got so quiet on me back there.”

“Oh, I was just listenin’ and enjoying the company.”

“I don’t mean to be talkin’ so much,” Clifford said, his cheeks a faint red. “It’s just that I’m pretty much retired, and what with being a salesman for so long, sometimes I just don’t know when to shut up.”

“No,” Tony said, suddenly needing to put the other man at ease. “It’s not that at all. You see I been on the road alone so long, I get tired of hearing my own voice. Like I said, I was just listening and enjoying the company.”

Clifford nodded, smiling. “Fair enough. Hey, we’re coming into Mount Sterling. There’s a McDonald’s just about a block on up. You want to stop and get a bite to eat or somethin’?”

Tony shrugged his shoulders, “I’d kinda like to save my appetite for that turkey spread Mom’s got planned, but I could use some coffee.”

“Coffee coming up then.”

Clifford pulled the new Mercedes into the drive-thru lane and told the static-filled voice at the other end of the speaker that he wanted two large coffees.

Tony began digging in his pocket for money that he knew he didn’t have, hoping that Clifford would stop him.

“Put your money away, Tony,” the driver said, digging for his wallet and maneuvering the car around to the pick-up window. “This one’s on me.”

“Thank you,” Tony said, watching as Clifford paid for the coffee with a hundred dollar bill. *Jesus Christ!* Tony thought, craning his neck to see all the cash in the man’s thick leather billfold. *There must be over two grand in there.*

Tony settled back in his seat, watching carefully as Clifford made the wad of money disappear with the dexterity of a trained magician.

“Here you go,” the driver said a moment later, extending a large Styrofoam cup.

“Thanks again,” Tony smiled, taking the coffee in his left hand, his right sweating as it tightened on the shaft of the knife.

Clifford wheeled the car out of the narrow drive-thru lane and then back into the light morning traffic. “Well, it’s only another 15 miles or so to my place. You better drink your coffee and get warm while you can.”

Tony nodded, tore the small sipping area from the cup lid, and tried to drink. The coffee was too hot, and scorched his tongue. “Shit!” he said, then remembered Golden Rule Number Three. “I’m sorry Clifford. I hope I didn’t offend you. I just burnt my mouth.”

“Why hell no, you didn’t offend me. You gotta watch those Styrofoam cups. They keep stuff hot enough to burn Satan himself. I always let mine cool awhile.”

Once they were through Mount Sterling, Tony immediately noticed how few houses there were along the winding, curvy road and once again he began to feel his hand sweat around the switchblade.

Clifford talked almost non-stop for the rest of the trip, only slowing down now and then to get a breath or to maneuver a particularly steep curve. Conversely, Tony spoke not at all, and

listened little more. He concentrated solely on the knife, only nodding or muttering “Uh-huh” when his companion seemed to require it. Twenty minutes outside Mount Sterling, Clifford pulled the car into a long stone driveway. “Well, here we are, Tony. Sorry I couldn’t take you any further.”

Tony smiled and looked out the window. “Sure is a pretty place you got here. Must be awful quiet though. I haven’t seen another house for at least a mile.”

“Yeah, it’s quiet all right. But that’s the way Gladys and I like it.”

Gripping the knife in his right hand, Tony made sure his thumb was properly placed on the button that would spring the blade open. Now, taking a deep breath, he jerked the knife free and pushed the trigger button in one smooth movement. The blade opened – FLICK!! – and Tony held it up for Clifford to see.

“Let me give you a piece of advice, Clifford,” Tony began, waving the knife in a slow hypnotic motion. “First off, you should be careful who you pick up on the road. With a car like this and the kind of cash you carry, you’re just askin’ for trouble. Secondly, you never want to show somebody like me where you live. I could come back, kill you or your wife – maybe both of you – and then steal everything you have. Including this car. In a place like this, nobody’d find you for a long, long time. And I’d be long, long gone.”

Clifford sat with his eyes bulging and mouth slightly open, cowering on the edge of the seat against the car door. “What do you want, Tony?”

“Want?” Tony said surprised, folding the knife blade back into the handle. “I don’t want anything. Just giving you a piece of advice.”

Clifford took a deep breath, nervous sweat standing out on his cheeks. “Jesus, Tony, you scared me to death.”

“Well, I hope I did scare you. That’s what I was tryin’ to do. I’ve been on the road some, and I’ve seen some things, you know? You’ve been awful nice to me, and I don’t want you to get hurt. See, I carry this knife for my own protection. You were probably kinda scared to pick me up, but if the truth be known, I was kinda scared to get picked up. There’s a lotta crazy people out there.”

Opening his coffee for the first time, Clifford watched the steam pour out, and then took a tentative sip. “Damn, that’s still too hot!”

Tony giggled, opening his pocket to put the knife away.

“Hey, can I see that before you put that away?” the driver asked.

“What?”

Clifford smiled. “Well it’s just that I’ve never seen a switchblade before. Except for in the movies, you know.”

Tony shrugged, handing the knife over. “Here, give her a look. Be careful, though, I try to keep it razor sharp.”

Clifford took the knife, looked it over carefully, and then flipped the blade open. “Shit!” he said, “that is sharp.”

Tony nodded, “A dull knife doesn’t do me much good. Sometimes that’s all that stands between me and starvation. I killed a rabbit with a rock last night, and used that baby to skin it out.”

Clifford turned the knife around in his hand, then brought his coffee back to his lips. Suddenly, he threw the steaming liquid into Tony’s face. Tony screamed, digging at his face with his fingers. Clifford quickly reached across the seat, grabbed his passenger by the hair, and

jerked his head back to expose the neck. Tony started to scream again, but the sound was quickly cut off as Clifford deftly drew the knife across the other man's throat.

*

*

*

Thirty minutes later, Clifford dropped Tony's body on the back porch cement, and went on inside his house. His wife met him practically in the doorway. "Did you get the meat for Thanksgiving dinner?" Gladys asked.

"Yeah," Clifford responded, pointing back the way he had come. "He's out there on the back porch."

"Good," she said, kissing him lightly on the cheek. "You better get cleaned up now, you've got blood all over you and your new suit. All the kids and the grandchildren will be here before long, you know."

"Yeah, I know. I'll get a shower in a few minutes. I need to clean up the car first though."

"You didn't have any trouble, did you?" Gladys asked, suddenly concerned.

"No. No trouble. Or at least not any more than usual. I am glad you reminded me to put the plastic over the car seats this mornin' though. Damn guy made a helluva mess."

THE END