The not so great Popsicle caper

by Mathew Paust

I'm still older, by three years, and smarter. She's still luckier. We're both retired now. She's rich and I'm not.

We got to know each other in the back seat of the family car, our chief mode of entertainment before television destroyed life as we knew it.

"Wanna go for a ride?" This was the pre-TV equivalent of "My Little Margie's on!" These rides tended to be aimless cruising along country roads or to a neighboring town to a favorite eatery. The more exciting rides involved chasing fire trucks (our dad was a lawyer), driving into storms looking for tornadoes (we're all a little nuts, in his words) or chasing ambulances to airplane crash sites (he was a pilot, they're really nuts).

The back seat of the old black Chevy was the crucible of our development as rival siblings. There was the inevitable invisible line that separated her side from mine, which each of us constantly breached to make the other whine. Or to get our mother to say, "Stop that bickering this instant or we'll turn around and go home." Or, if she was really pissed after the third or fourth threat to terminate the ride, "...or we'll stop right here and make you get out!" Neither threat was ever executed but it helped bond us for better or worse as a family unit.

A highlight of every ride was the treat. We'd stop somewhere for gas. Our dad would tell the attendant, "A dollar's worth." I know, hard to believe. Gasoline was about a dime a gallon then. We'd climb out, stretch, use the "bathroom" (I don't recall ever seeing a bathtub in one), check out the merchandise in the "gas station" and return to the car with a treat, usually a twin-stick Popsicle our mother would break into separate sticks.

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Back in the back seat, the struggle for supremacy would begin in earnest as we licked our Popsicles and stole glances to see which one was lasting longer. I was smarter, remember, yet I couldn't solve the mystery of why her Popsicle lasted longer than mine. I tried complaining, and got nowhere. "She's littler," was my dad's mantra for settling disputes that managed to penetrate his concentration on the road. I had no defense. He was the lawyer. He was also right. She was indisputably smaller in size.

I could argue that point today, of course, contending size had nothing to do with how she made her Popsicle last longer than I did mine, but it's too late. He's dead and she's rich. My only recourse at the time, as I saw it, was to employ superior tactics. Cunning actually is the superior word.

"OK, here's what we're gonna do," I told her, making it sound like a game. She was a tad gullible, you see. She took the bait. I explained that to keep things fair we would each lick or nibble our Popsicle alternately while the other watched. She agreed. I cheated, pretending to lick or nibble while she earnestly followed the "rules" until her Popsicle was gone and I still had half of mine. This was the moment I blew it, revealing the trait our dad would warn us through the years to avoid like the plague - "feeble mindedness."

"Ha ha!" I said triumphantly, "I've got some left and you don't!" Lordy, if I could go back in time...

She cried, loudly. She was known to push the crying envelope to hysteria on occasion. Our dad drove to the nearest gas station, got a dollar's worth and a brand-new Popsicle. He gave the whole thing to her. I complained. He shot me an angry look and snarled, "She's littler."

The ride continued. She sat on her side daintily sucking her Popsicle, flashing me smug little smirks. I slumped on the other side - the right side, if you must know - nibbling on my melting stub, which disappeared long before her fresh twin sticks had shown any sign of shrinkage.