

The Road Trip Trilogy

by Matt Lubich

Fight terrorism...blow something up

TO: Tom Ridge

Office of Homeland Security/Washington, D.C.

MEMO: Report from the Heartland on Independence Day

HURON, South Dakota -- Enclosed, please find receipts for reimbursement of expenses incurred on the trip (June 26-29) to Huron, S.D. I agree that the "cover" of traveling with Lesli and the girls to Lesli's family reunion was perfect for my assignment of monitoring and reporting on the mood of the nation.

Do me a favor, okay? Let's not have any argument from the bean counters in the GAO about the cost of two nights of bowling at the alley next to the Dakota Inn where we stayed. What can I say? The girls like to bowl. Tell them Harper (my youngest) actually won two games. Tell them they're just lucky the taxpayers didn't end up footing the bill for admission to South Dakota State Fairgrounds Speedway, where they were running late models Saturday night. Add that I AM NOT attempting to get reimbursed for the Sturgis 2003 baseball hat (with flames) that I bought for my sports editor Martin B. Hamilton. Call it my patriotic contribution to the budget crisis.

Here's a joke to soften the accountants up (compliments of my 9-year-old Riley): You know that the pheasant is the state bird of South Dakota, right?...It's the only state that lets you shoot the state bird. If that doesn't work, tell them the one I told you the last time I was in Washington about Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden and Bill Clinton walking into a bar together. I thought I was going to die when I told it then and President Bush laughed so hard that Diet Coke came out his nose.

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All I can say, Tom, is that these are troubling times to be celebrating the independence of our nation. I still haven't seen any news on how you all worked out the problem with transportation of fireworks by rail. I read in late May that fireworks shows in smaller towns across the country were threatened because railroads are refusing to haul the stuff and firework companies can't figure out how to work with the new anti-terror laws.

It seems to me that in the face of being unable to stop the violence of terrorism, we've almost begun to try and Miss Manner it out of existence by banning anything that might anger, or offend, or injure with misuse. No doubt you've heard the news recently from Greeley. First they banned political parties from the annual Fourth of July parade (note to your profilers: add people wearing donkey or elephant pins and hurling Tootsie Rolls to the "detain and question" list for potential terrorists), and now, the Union Colony Fire Authority says you can't shoot fireworks that require lighting by a match or lighter. They say you can have poppers or snakes, but I'm not sure about that. You have to light those snakes. Maybe the idea is that you just put them out on the sidewalk, then come August, when it's 115 degrees, they'll ignite by themselves.

Greeley fire officials say it's not a matter of homeland security, it's a matter of safety. A spokesman was even quoted as saying that Greeley's approach to fireworks is "more progressive" than the rest of the state. That's probably the first time the words "Greeley" and "progressive" were ever used in the same sentence. A fireworks seller was quoted in the same story saying that Christmas tree fires burn down houses every year. Are we going to ban them next?

And I also hear that I better prepare for a full cavity search at DIA if I intend to shoot off fireworks and then fly, because the machines to detect explosive residue on suitcases and skin are going to go berserk. Apparently they've also had trouble in regard to people's

golf shoes, because they're also designed to pick up traces of fertilizer. People with heart conditions have even had problems, because the machine picks up the traces of nitroglycerin from their tablets.

Tom, if this is the attitude that our government wants to project, then it's my advice that this Fourth of July the Office of Homeland Security post the following instructions on your web site www.Ready.gov — people should act like my dog Lucy and just stay inside under the bed and tremble.

If we as a nation can't celebrate our independence the way we want, then have President Bush go on national television tonight and announce that we've been defeated, we've officially lost the war on terrorism. That's what they want. Stopping the freedom of speech? That's like a nuclear strike on our whole society. Make us so afraid and frustrated that we bind ourselves in the chains of laws under the impression that we can legislate reassurance? No number of planes crashed into buildings can create that effect.

I've told you before, if you want to get a special ops team and have them track down Osama and send his mother his head in a box with a complimentary set of presidential cuff links included, count me in, that's my idea of fighting terrorism, but we're not going to break al-Qaida by banning sparklers.

And you know what, Tom? In all my travels this past long weekend I don't think I heard the word terrorism once. People are worried about their aging parents who are barely able to make it on a fixed income, facing the skyrocketing costs of prescription drugs. I heard about people who got laid off from their jobs, and are wondering what they'll do now without health insurance. But what I found most was a nation of hardworking people who are trying to do right, and most of all, simply want to celebrate and enjoy summer.

I sat there in a parking lot in Huron beneath the canvas awning of my father-in-law Merv's RV and watched family members like Lesli's uncle, Fred Behm, who fought for this country in World War II, sit and hold his great-grandchildren on his lap. How can you possibly make them understand the sacrifices he and his friends made for their independence? And how do you explain, how in some weird way, they fought for our right to shoot off fireworks and say and believe stupid things?

I sat and watched a family. Not forgetting all the disagreements over the years and all the jealousies and in-fighting, but by coming together, showing everyone (including themselves) the strength of unity that comes from a family. A strength that has helped them weather plenty of storms. It seems to me that we as a country can draw a lot of lessons from this simple tableau that no doubt will be repeated all over our land this coming summer weekend.

I know you paid me for a report, Tom, not for suggestions, but here's a little free advice: Mobilize the National Guards and have them go door-to-door in the next 24 hours handing out sparklers, then have President Bush call on Congress to pass emergency legislation that requires that at a prescribed moment this Fourth of July (have the eggheads in the National Weather Service tell you when it will officially be dark everywhere in the U.S.) everyone has to go outside and light one. We can call it Twinklers Against Terror or something catchy like that.

Let the combined light symbolize a candle of remembrance for those that lost their lives in the Sept. 11 attacks and for those servicemen and women who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. Let the spy satellites of all our enemies see the individual fires that burn in one blinding force, and think about that the next time they decide to try and scare us into submission.

Don't laugh. These base times call for primal responses. You've already tried war, right? In Santa Fe, N.M., since 1924, they've had an annual event as part of Fiesta that's called "Zozobra". Simply put, they build this 40 to 50-foot tall puppet out of lumber and muslin that is supposed to represent Old Man Gloom. At dark, they set him on fire and in essence burn away all the bad from the past year -- sending all the anguish, anxiety and gloom up into the heavens in smoke and embers. I propose we create a similar national cathartic event with Twinklers Against Terror.

And oh yeah, don't forget to make sure there's something in the emergency legislation about me getting reimbursed for the bowling.

Sometimes you have to go with the flow

GLENWOOD SPRINGS, Colo. -- It seems like the only people at the Cedar Lodge Motel right now are the cleaning women and me. As I lay by the pool alone, I can hear them in the rooms across the way talking in Spanish. The fact that I only understand about every 15th word makes the sense of solitude even more pronounced.

Every late afternoon, the parking lot fills with cars and the rooms become a hive of tourist activity. Last night, it was several rented SUVs full of what we finally decided were Russians; who sat drinking vodka out of the bottle at a picnic table in the motel courtyard until midnight. But every morning, everyone moves on -- except us.

This is not the vacation we planned. Lesli, the girls and I were to have gone on a 10-day houseboat trip to Lake Powell with her parents. Lesli's parents had went over early to get things ready. Wednesday, prior to our Friday departure, we got a call from Lesli's mom. Lesli's dad, Merv, had fallen off the side of the houseboat the night before, breaking four ribs and puncturing a lung. He was in

the hospital in Grand Junction. The vacation, at least to Lake Powell, was off.

Scrambling, and desperately trying to benefit from the incredible staff we've built that would allow us to leave for an entire newscycle of the paper, we called travel agents trying to book everything from a couple days in Vegas to a package deal to Mexico. Nothing was coming together. We called a hotel in Glenwood, thinking a week at the Hot Springs pool might be nice. No luck. Another call to another Glenwood hotel. Same answer. Finally, and with a little voice in our heads wondering why they had rooms when nobody else did, we were able to book a week at the Cedar Lodge. Already I could picture the sign out front: Nobody killed here since Tuesday.

But first, we had to drive to Grand Junction. Merv was released from the hospital on Friday afternoon and insisted that he was going back to Lake Powell with Lesli and her mom, Danni, to load-out and close-up the houseboat. The girls and I would stay the weekend at the Grand Junction Super 8 and wait for their return, before heading back east to Glenwood for the week. Grand Junction had the added attraction that Paul Shockley, a former reporter for *The Johnstown Breeze*, is now living there — having thrown-in with a start-up daily, *The Grand Junction Free Press*, that is taking on the corporate-weasel-run-rag *The Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*.

While Lesli did the good-daughter thing and helped Danni unload an entire houseboat in 112-degree heat, the girls and I lived like junkie rock stars. We'd started the day late in the morning, wandering down the street to Denny's, then it was back to the pool for the afternoon before a stop at the vending machines, where we'd stock up on candy, chips, pretzels and pops and then glide into the evening lying on the beds watching Cartoon Network in a sugar and sun-laden stupor.

They made it back from Lake Powell. We made it to Glenwood, and on Tuesday, Merv and Danni headed back to Boulder, leaving Lesli, the girls and me to our first real “family” vacation. Just the four of us.

Despite my fears, the Cedar Lodge turned out to be a nice place, with a crystal clear pool and a seemingly endless parade of interesting humans to watch come and go. We toured the underground caverns in Glenwood. We rafted the Colorado River. We found a great go-kart track just outside of town, and we had fun. Oddly enough, we never made it to the Hot Springs pool. Things didn't turn out like we thought they would, but Merv could have fallen a couple of days later, when the boat wasn't at the dock, but out in the middle of nowhere. Anyone who has gone to Lake Powell understands that the last thing you want to have to confront in those desolate canyons is a medical crisis.

Things work out for a reason, reasons that you and I probably weren't meant to understand. Which brings me back to lying by the Cedar Lodge pool alone that one afternoon.

In 1986, I interviewed with *The Glenwood Post* for a reporter job. Trust me, I've sat talking with enough editors who *didn't* want to hire me to know that I likely had the job. Lesli (we were still unmarried at the time) went with me for the interview/trip. She was worried that she wouldn't be able to find work in Glenwood, and I called the editor before we left town to tell him I was taking my name out of consideration.

There have been times in the past nearly two decades, late nights of frustration and fear, where I've wondered what would have happened if I had been offered that job in Glenwood and had taken it. Honestly, in my less-than-stellar moments, I have held that decision against Lesli, and on more than one occasion, resented having made it.

Until this trip. You want to know what's next door to The Cedar Lodge? You got it, the offices of what is now *The Glenwood Post-Independent*, a corporate chain newspaper that would have likely run my skinny butt off long ago. Lesli kept encouraging me to go over and tell them my story. I thought about it, but only because I thought maybe they'd give me a free hat. More than likely, however, I figured they'd just call the cops about this unshaven weirdo in surfer short swim trunks and a tie-dye T-shirt who was waving a can of Guinness around and raving about some job interview he had a long time ago.

Life certainly hadn't turned out like I had thought it would back in 1986, but that is mostly an indication of how limited my imagination was back then. The girls took enormous pleasure in telling anyone who would stop long enough to listen that if I had taken the job in Glenwood, they would have grown up there instead of Johnstown. But what if taking the job there had meant that Lesli and I had never gotten married? The concept of a life now without them, or her, no matter "what could have been", seems a pale, hollow echo of what the four of us have created together.

At one point I thought fleetingly about going in to the Glenwood paper and telling them that I had changed my mind, that I wanted to be considered for the reporter position after all, but the sun was out, the pool was empty and mine to slide in and out of at my whim and thermostatic whimsy, and my illegal smile as John Prine once called it, was enough for me.

So I just laid there, the staccato Spanish of the chambermaids my background music, and waited for Lesli and the girls to get back from their hike -- to see what the rest of the day, and my life, would bring.

Dead dads, Tiger Beat cops and Super Stocks

PUEBLO, Colo. -- Saturday, Aug. 23, was the 12th anniversary of my dad's death. I marked the occasion by traveling back to my hometown for the stock car races.

Some sons and fathers have football, others hunting, for my dad and me it was the races. My sister and I grew up sitting next to him in the stands at tracks from Pueblo to Denver. A former driver briefly himself, he quit before we were born but retained his love for the sport -- and passed that affection on to us.

When he died, he was cremated. We split his still-warm ashes up into plastic baggies. The majority were poured into a stream in the mountains above Pueblo -- where my aunt who was murdered was scattered -- and where someday my mother will be too. Part of my share went into a pottery glaze that my mother-in-law, Danni, used to make me a coffee cup that I now keep my pens in at the office. The rest, I took a week after his death to the races in Pueblo. Longtime family friends Bob Wright, another former driver, his wife Theresa and their kids accompanied Lesli and me. We sat amid the noise of the engines and laughed and cried and talked about my dad. At the end of the evening, after everyone left, I sprinkled his ashes in the stands.

Ever since, I've made the drive down to Pueblo on the weekend closest to my dad's death and went to the races. Most years I've gone alone. I prefer it that way. I don't have to feel like I need to make small talk, and I can sit with my thoughts and commune with my father.

Lesli had to work all weekend, so my daughters went to Pueblo with me Saturday morning. My sister broke her ankle recently and is on crutches. On top of that, her husband likely came down with West Nile last week and was just barely getting back on his feet. Trying to

give them a bit of rest, I offered to take my 5-year-old nephew, Jack, with us. While I went to the races, the three cousins could hang out with Granny Carol. I found several years ago, when I went back to Virginia with my family to where my aunt had lived and died, that small children have a very large capacity to chase away the gloom and the ghosts.

We arrived in Pueblo mid-afternoon. Mom and the kids took off for Mineral Palace swimming pool, leaving me sitting in my dad's old easy chair, surfing channels on the television.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

Thinking they had forgotten something, I opened the front door to my mom's house, only to see what I thought at first was a Pueblo Junior Police Cadet. I know I'm getting old when the cops start looking this young. This one looked about 15.

"Is James Turner here?" he said brusquely.

"Nobody named James Turner lives here," I said.

"Is your name James Turner?" he asked aggressively. About this time, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that another officer was standing around the edge of my mother's house in the driveway.

"No," I said slowly, still trying to figure out what was going on.

"Can you show me some identification to prove that?" he said. I pulled out my wallet and showed him my license. As if he didn't think I could hear him, he told the other officer, "It's not him."

"We just received a 911 call about a domestic disturbance at this location," the young cop said. By this time, the other officer was standing with him. I then noticed that their police cruiser was

parked about a half-block away at the corner. Here it is, 105 degrees, they're wearing body armor and dark blue uniforms, and they expect me to believe they're responding to a 911 call and going to walk to the house. Obviously, they were trying to serve a warrant on some guy named James Turner, and for whatever reason, thought he was here, or at least that I knew him.

"Nobody here called 911," I said.

"Whose house is this?" the young cop said, cutting me off.

"My mother's."

"Does she have a boyfriend named James Turner?"

It's never likely a good idea to laugh while cops are trying to interrogate you, but this was getting pretty weird. The thought of my 68-year-old widowed mother having a felon boyfriend just seemed funny.

"No," I said. "She doesn't. Look, do you want to come in and look around?"

They came in. While the young one went from room to room and then down in the basement, the older one stood and watched me. You could tell that he knew this had been a mistake. I just stood there with the channel changer still in my hand. I started to surf. The young one came back upstairs and went to the bedrooms. You'd have to know the layout of my mother's house, but she has what is obviously a hall closet just next to her bathroom.

"Is this a closet?" the young cop asked, putting his hand on the knob.

I came this close to saying, "No, it's the door to a parallel universe," but the only thing I could think was that if I got an attitude, I was going to get arrested and I wouldn't get to go to the stock car races. So I kept my mouth shut, and told him yes, it's a closet.

James Turner wasn't in there.

It was obvious that both of them by this time knew they had the wrong house. But standing there, staring at the skinny hippie in the tie-dye tee shirt with the goatee and earring, you could just tell that they figured I had to be guilty of something. After about 30 seconds, when I didn't pull a gun or a bong out of my pocket, they simply said "okay" and left.

The police have a horribly dangerous and thankless job, but you know what? They should be treated with the same respect they show others. One "sorry"...a single smile and a "Hey, guess this will be a good story to tell your mom"...and you wouldn't be reading this. Certainly at least, these two wouldn't be coming off as badly as they are. In retrospect it's pretty clear that the young cop was new and the older cop was a training officer. In my opinion, he's not doing his young partner any favors letting him think this is the way you deal with people. Someday, he's going to run into someone who doesn't like cops, who would love nothing better than to take one on, and he's going to find himself in a possibly deadly situation just because he thinks saying thank-you would ruin his command presence.

After my visit with Pueblo's finest, I headed to I-25 Speedway. I talked with co-owner Randell White. I explained why I was there and told him I wanted to put up \$100 for the winner of the super stock main event in memory of my father. My only request was that the announcer talk about what I was doing, and why I was doing it. He and the announcer readily agreed, thanking me for the gesture. The

announcer added that I could even come down on the track after the race and present the check myself to the winning driver.

In a day already filled with weird happenstance, I also found out that Amy Wright, Bob and Theresa's oldest daughter, was now the head judge at the track. Luckily, she was there to vouch for me — that I wasn't some yahoo, well, maybe I was a yahoo, but a yahoo that does in-fact own a newspaper and does in-fact have a dead father who I used to go to the races there with.

Del Sparks, the announcer, made a half-dozen mentions of who I was and what I wanted to do over the course of the evening. Most importantly, he talked about my dad and his love of racing. Unfortunately in our society it isn't enough to merit public recognition to just get up every morning for 30-plus years and haul a mail bag and raise a family, but finally, a dozen years after his death, my dad, Art Lubich, heard his name boom out over the speakers of the race track where he used to sit on hundreds of summer nights with his son and his daughter.

The super stock main was what I can only describe as heaven-sent. The guy that led the race for the first 18 of the 20 laps was someone my dad and I used to watch race. My dad didn't like him. The guy in second-place is sort of the next generation of another driver my dad had no use for either. I figured my dad wouldn't like me handing a hundred bucks to either of them, but he'd understand.

Then, the guy in second got into the back bumper of the guy in first as the cars came out of turn two, spinning the leader out. The guy in second then went on to win the race amid boos and cheers. When he pulled up in front of the start line for the trophy presentation, the guy who had been leading roared up next to him. I was still going to present the check, I decided, but first I was going to wait until the fight was finished.

All the other cars had left the track when they decided to bring them all back out, take the race back to lap 18, send the guy who had “won” to the back of the pack, and run the last two laps. At the restart, the guy now in second tried to get underneath the original leader on the backstretch and they crashed together, taking both of themselves out. The race was stopped to clear away the carnage. I pulled my cell phone out and dialed my home number. Sleepily, Lesli answered.

As they ran the last two laps I screamed a running commentary into the phone over the roar. It was just like when I was a kid, I told her, when I actually cared who won the race and my dad and I would boo the evil Ronnie McDowell, who I once described as Darth Vader in a yellow Chevy Camaro, and cheer on my dad's old buddy Lou Willschau. Bobby Regester from Cripple Creek won the race, and while people were still yelling, cursing and clapping, I shouted that I loved her to Lesli and hung up the phone, making my way to the track.

“I'll explain it later but I'm going to write you a check for a hundred bucks,” I yelled above the noise to the sweating young stock car driver as we shook hands and I had my picture taken presenting him with his trophy. He loaded up and left before I could get to the pits to do that, so I gave the check to Randell White. Another driver had suffered a heart attack earlier in the evening while racing and had crashed into a group of cars going flat-out. He was now on a respirator in the hospital, but was expected to live. The drivers, including Regester, had already agreed to donate their prize money for the night to his family to help with the medical costs — about \$6,000 all totaled. Sixty-one hundred if you counted the check from *The Johnstown Breeze* I wrote.

If you look closely at the picture, you can see a 10-year-old kid inside the body of a 42-year-old man. People tell him all the time that he looks like his father did when he was young. They hold

several other things in common: they both smoke; it killed one of them, and if he doesn't smarten up and quit, god help the other. They love their wives, they love their two children, and despite the fact that they yell too much, they're trying to do their imperfect best for them. And one other thing...

They love stock car racing.

