

Chapter 26

Day Tripping

My father worked 70 hours a week every week of the year, every year that I could remember. Forget about Cape Cod or Hampton Beach or Disneyland, the Romanowski family never went anywhere. Pat and I didn't complain though because very few kids in the neighborhood went on vacations in 1967. Our vacations were the times spent at Robinson Field and Muncie Park, in the woods behind Sheehan's Farm, at Glickman's Drug Store and the Fire Station, in the backyards and driveways and streets of Morris Heights. One night when I was supposed to be asleep I heard my mom and dad.

"Life is passing us by, Stan. You go to work. I cook. I clean. I do the wash. The years fly by. Those kids are growing like weeds and they'll be out of this house before you know it." Mom wasn't yelling but it didn't matter. Our tiny ranch was not a good place for private conversations.

"If I don't work the hours and put in the overtime, how do we pay the bills? Answer me that. Do you think I like working and sleeping, working and sleeping?" Dad answered. He was yelling.

"I don't know, Stan. But that's about all I do, too," Mom said. "Life is passing us by."

Their solution for stemming this passage of time was "day trips". Dad moved his day off from Sunday to Wednesday because as he told us on the car ride of the first day trip to the Rhode Island shore, "The weekends are a nightmare. You get your lightest traffic flow on Wednesdays." Dad certainly knew traffic; many of his overtime hours were spent directing it.

It was obvious that Mom was directing this trip. "We're going to Misquamicut Beach," she informed us as Dad pulled the station wagon out of our driveway. The windshield wipers were going strong and Pat snored in time with their rhythm. "Don't worry. The weatherman says the rain will stop later this morning and we'll have a typical August beach day."

"Yeah, real typical," Dad said. Dad started every morning by ripping off sets of fingertip push-ups while singing – "From the halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli", the Marine Corps Anthem, but Mom's glare stopped cold our leatherneck father. There was a real chill in that front seat of our Kingswood Estate and it didn't warm up during the ride to Westerly, Rhode Island and Misquamicut Beach.

"It's still raining, honey," Dad announced as we saw the "Welcome to Westerly" sign. Dad used the word "honey" but what he really meant was "you and your weatherman were wrong and I was right and this day trip was a stupid idea."

"I think I see some clearing off in the distance," Mom said.

"That's fog," Dad said. "Did your weatherman mention fog?" Once again Mom gave Dad a look, one that could cut through the thickest fog.

"Maybe you should've just gone to work today instead of making everyone else miserable," she said.

"Maybe I should have," he snapped back.

"Wow, it's really pouring now," Pat added from the backseat.

The Misquamicut Beach parking lot was fogged in so we couldn't tell how many cars were parked in it. It looked like three. Three hours later we were pulling back into our driveway in Morris Heights. The sun was shining in Holyoke where it was a typical August beach day.

"That was fun," Pat said to me as we escaped the car. He was developing the Romanowski skill with sarcasm.

"Yeah, the way the Vietnam War is fun," I said.

One week later we went day tripping again. That day was typical August weather in both Holyoke and at Misquamicut Beach. "Hey Mom," I said that morning before we got in the car and experienced the Wednesday traffic flow. "You and Dad don't have to do this. Pat and I like it here at home, and we were going to throw water balloons at each other this afternoon anyways."

"Forget it, Eileen," Mom said. "Your brother already tried to get out of this. We're going to have a great time whether you like it or not."

Grandpa once told me about his best friend, Herman Nugent. Herman Nugent lost a leg in World War I, lost his eyesight in an explosion in the paper mills, and lost his wife when she ran off with a vacuum cleaner salesman. "Despite all the crazy curves that life has thrown him, Herman Nugent is the happiest man I've ever had the pleasure of knowing," Grandpa said. "Most of us go through life and don't see what truly matters, but Herman, he has a unique way of looking at life. He sees a world that so many people are blind to. He's living proof that it is all up to you. You can have every little thing in the whole world and be miserable, or you can be like Herman and have almost nothing yet have it all. It's up to you, kiddo. It's up to each of us." I decided that if old, blind and crippled Herman Nugent could find something to smile about every day than I could certainly make the best of a day at the beach.

Dad started the day trip by belting out Frank Sinatra tunes while Pat and I tried to sleep in the backseat. We all finished it by singing along with every song that came on the car radio the whole ride home. In between, Dad taught Pat and me how to body surf in the waves of Misquamicut. Mom smeared two bottles of baby oil over her skin and cooked in the sun. Dad covered himself with seaweed and pretended he was the creature from the Black Lagoon. The lifeguard was cute and when Dad and Mom went for a walk along the shore, they were holding hands. It was the first time in my life that I had ever seen them do that. We ate fried clams and cole slaw and French fries at Big Al's Clam Barn and got giant snow cones from a cart near the beach. We listened to the Red Sox – Detroit Tigers game on our transistor radio. The sound of Ned Martin announcing the game could be heard from radios on beach blankets up and down Misquamicut Beach. When George "Boomer" Scott smashed his second two-run homerun of the game in the third inning, so many people were yelling and cheering that the cute lifeguard asked me what was happening. "We're winning," I said. "We're winning."