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Tales from the Turnpike

When a marriage dies, it's a long and winding road to recovery for the children

by Barry Friedman

It is the kind of day in Oklahoma for which meteorologists like to take credit: a deceptively warm November Sunday with a few, fat lazy clouds sitting in the sky and a light breeze coming out of the south. The sun, slowing making its afternoon descent, is still bright over *Christie's Toy Box* and *Hunter RV* in Sapulpa, and the Turner Turnpike, stretched out on this lazy day and looking like a postcard, cuts the horizon in half. On either side, the hills, like bookends, frame the road. If not for the leafless trees, you'd swear it was spring.

Andrea makes this trip twice a month, twice, to a rest stop on the middle of the Turnpike where she meets her ex-husband to exchange their daughter Hope, who's now 11. Tim, the ex, is a dentist, living in Moore with a new wife, also named Andrea. *Andrea I* and Tim have been coming to Stroud for the past ten years, but lately, for Andrea, it seems longer. She has to go down on Friday, as well, to either drop off or pick up her daughter, but it is these Sunday drives which take the most of out her.

The mother remembers how talkative her daughter used to be on the trips back from Tim.

"Now," Andrea says, "she gets in the car and tells me to push six on the radio."

Hope is not in the car now, but with her father, who will be meeting us in about forty-five minutes.

The reason I am in the passenger seat is that part of their divorce decree states that neither Tim nor Andrea can be alone when picking up or dropping off Hope. In the past, that meant Andrea's dad or mom made the trip, but no longer.

"A few months back," Andrea says, "my dad nearly got into a fight with Tim-actually

went after him at the rest stop.”

The father confirmed it.

“I could have taken him,” he said. And this from a 78-year old man with pulmonary fibrosis.

Such are the stories of divorce.

Wedded Blitz

Regardless of the surveys used, Oklahoma is a bad place to stay married-statistically. According to the *Associated Press*, Nevada has the highest divorce rate (and this before Britany's 55-hour disaster), followed by Arkansas, Alabama, and Oklahoma as states with the highest frequency of divorce. In fact, the divorce rates in these three conservative states are roughly 50% above the national average. In the Sooner state, alone, that translates to more than 20,000 marriages a year calling it quits. The good news is that it's getting better: according to *ABC News*, in 1988, Oklahoma was, percentage-wise, the toughest place in the nation to stay married.

(Who's getting divorced? Make of this what you will, but according to a controversial study by the Barna Research Group, itself a Christian organization, Atheists and Agnostics represent the *lowest* percentage of divorced Americans. Jews at 30% and Born-Again Christians at 27% represent the highest.

Ron Barrier, a spokesperson for the *American Atheists* explains it this way: “Since Atheist ethics are of a higher caliber than religious morals, it stands to reason that our families would be dedicated more to each other than to some invisible monitor in the sky.” Religious groups, not surprisingly, dispute the figures, but Tom Ellis of the *Southern Baptist Convention* does concede that “Just saying your Christian is not going to guard that your marriage is going to stay together.”)

Andrea and Tim broke up ten years ago, and like many divorces, theirs is final but not finished. They still argue over child support, unreturned emails, who's paying for school clothes, and the scars left from 21 separate court appearances. But this isn't so much about the residue of their relationship, or even its effect on Hope, but simply about visitation-in this case, the long drive down the Turner Turnpike to a service station where Andrea and Tim will sit in cars in pre-arranged locations and watch their

daughter move from the backseat of one world to the backseat of another.

They are not alone. In rest stops all over Oklahoma, all over America, on alternate weekend, ex-spouses exchange their anger, their disappointment, and, ultimately, their children.

Not Alone on the Lonely Road

It's tough to get accurate statistics about how many couples actually deal with visitation this way, but all those cars at all those interstate rest stops and convenience store parking lots aren't just there for fuel and pop.

At the Burger King on Exit 125 of the Garden State Parkway, the half-way point between their homes, a woman from Smithtown, Long Island waits for her ex to bring her four children up from Ocean City, New Jersey. She notices her ex has a new car, and wonders how he could afford *that* when he's always bitching about child support. She takes solace in the fact his new wife's thighs are chubbier than ever.

Between Columbia and Greenville, South Carolina, in a Publix parking lot off of Interstate 385, a man waits with his adopted step-daughter for her mother, his ex, to take her back home. The mother thinks he's a shit, but gives him credit for staying in touch with a daughter who's not biologically his.

"Most of the time he doesn't get out of the car," she says. "He just waves to us as we leave."

Andrea cries easily. She talks on the trip down about how she only wanted to be a mother, to have four children, and not, though she doesn't come out and say it, to be on the Turnpike on this or any other Sunday afternoon picking up her daughter from a man she loved and to whom she was supposed to be married for the rest of her life. This is the same man who ultimately humiliated her and called her "a peanut server with a basket-weaving degree" when she was a flight attendant ... before hitting her; and this is the same man whom she once called a "Beverly Hillbilly" and whose work she derided as nothing more than *pulling teeth in Moore* ... before pouring water over his head while he lay in bed.

These, too, are the stories of divorce.

One can imagine in an SUV heading north, Tim and his new Andrea are talking about the same kinds of things.

Since the drop-off point is at the Stroud service area, which is on his side of the toll plaza, Andrea-and not Tim-has to pay the toll twice a month, twice.

"It's not much," she says, "but it is annoying."

And it has been annoying for ten years.

To compensate, Andrea plays a game with the Oklahoma Department of Transportation. She exits at 179-OK 99 Stroud/Drumright, a few miles before the Toll Plaza, waits in a gravel parking lot outside the tollbooth for approximately sixty seconds, and then re-enters the Turnpike.

"See," she tells me, "if you go through the Toll Plaza from Tulsa, it assumes you're going all the way to Oklahoma City, even if you're getting off at the next exit. By getting off before, it assumes I'm making a round trip to Stroud, which saves money."

How much? Andrea figures it's about four dollars a month.

(The woman from Smithtown also has to pay the majority of the tolls and isn't any happier about it than Andrea.)

We pass the former site of the Tanger Outlet Mall, or what's left of it after the tornado, and a half dozen semis in no particular hurry.

"I know he'll be on time," she says of Tim, who's always late. We're a few minutes behind schedule so she knows this is the weekend he'll decide to be punctual. She speeds up to 75.

Paths Converge, Road Separate

When we arrive at the service area, she pulls to a curb in the center of the parking lot and to the right of the main facility-she's in position. As it turns out, Tim is not here yet. We wait. Fifty yards to our left, two cars are parked in a row. In the first vehicle, a woman opens the driver's side door and gets out; a little girl, sitting in the back, opens her door and takes her time exiting. When she does, the woman hands her a backpack,

which the child takes and then runs to the car parked behind them. From that car, the back seat door opens from the inside; the kid tosses in the bag, and then gets in after it. There is no conversation between the two drivers, whom I'm assuming are the parents. The woman gets back in her seat. One car backs up and heads east; one goes west.

"Sometimes, it's peaceful," Andrea tells me, "sometimes you see and hear fights right outside. Usually, there are more people here."

When Tim arrives, he is not with his wife, just Hope, a clear violation of the decree. Hope gets out. Seeing me, he does, too. Andrea introduces us, small talk is exchanged, and then Tim gives Andrea a prescription he has in a zip lock bag for Hope.

"I had this filled." He says, letting her know it wasn't really his responsibility to do so. He wants credit.

"Oh, thanks," she says, quickly, sincerely, giving it to him.

Hope climbs in Andrea's backseat while her two parents and a stranger try to get out of a conversation none of them wants to be in. And yet, on some level, Tim and Andrea, for the moment anyway, could be any two parents discussing their daughter's allergy medicine in a bag.

Andrea comes around to the driver's side; Tim follows and comes to the back window where his daughter is sitting and taps on it. Hope opens it, but not all the way.

I get in.

"Say good bye to your father," her mother says.

"Bye."

Two miles down the road, on the way back to Tulsa, a rumbling sound comes from the front driver's side. We have a flat.

As I lay on the shoulder of Turner Turnpike, Andrea and Hope are standing and talking in the grass by the side of the road. As I feel 18-wheelers rumble by inches away from my legs, I can imagine them here, alone, two miles outside of Stroud, waiting for a tow

truck as first dusk and then night erases this glorious day. A state trooper pulls up, but seeing me, he inexplicably remains in his patrol car.

She has all the tools for a flat ... I think. *Righty-tighty, lefty-loosey*, I remember once hearing. *Don't lose the lug nuts*. Somehow it seems to be working.

The tire is changed. The trooper drives away with not so much as a wave. Andrea then calls her folks and lies about where we are in the trip and why she'll be late.

Tim is going back to Moore to his new wife; Andrea is going back to Tulsa with a temporary spare.

I tell her, to be safe, she should drive no faster than fifty-five. She knows this will add forty-five minutes to a drive she already hates. Only, in this direction, she has her daughter, who's sitting in the back seat and dying to ask her something.

"Hey, mom, press number six, would you?"