

## C H A P T E R 3



# MY HOUSE, IN THE MIDDLE OF OUR STREET

*“You hear a lot of dialogue on the death of the American family. Families aren't dying. They're merging into big conglomerates.”*

- Erma Bombeck

“I thought you were going to change Ben's diaper?”

“I just did!”

We are in the parking lot of the Crystal Mall, Waterford, Connecticut. Elizabeth has paused on the opposite side of her Ford Explorer for what only feels like a few seconds while I plop myself down into my wheelchair from the front seat on the passenger side. By the time I've positioned my feet in the foot rest and clicked off my scissor wheel locks she's already got Ben in the stroller. She's now reading Josh the riot act if he bolts across the parking lot, which seems as if it may happen at any given moment.

“Holy crap that was fast!” I'm even more impressed as Elizabeth bundles the used diaper into a neat little ball, secured on each side with the adhesive strips, which can be safely handled, stowed or disposed, the effluent material inside neatly contained. She gives a brief nod in acknowledgement, but is

preoccupied making sure that Josh won't race off into the waiting perils of the parking lot.

It is a Saturday afternoon late in May, and after opening up the shop and doing the morning food prep, I've decided to accompany Elizabeth on a shopping jaunt with the kids. This is the third or fourth such outing I've made with them. Josh is five and Ben has just recently turned two, and I'm starting to get an idea of the whole family dynamic between the three of them. At this point I'm still a vicarious observer; we've discussed Elizabeth's moving in, but there are no definite plans in place yet, so to the kids I'm just one of Mom's many acquaintances. But as I look on, I find myself subconsciously taking notes: "could I really do this myself if I had to?" This 30 second diaper change in the mall parking lot with Ben standing and kicking, in the open rear door of an SUV - a definite 'no'.

I have never seen two more active children, or perhaps I haven't really been paying much attention. They both literally attack nearly every possible object in the mall that's within reach. Josh, at age five, seems intent on making everything he encounters some kind of organized activity or game; whether it's systematically pulling blouses off of the circular bargain sale rack in Ann Taylor or stepping on the cracks of the tiled floor in a pre-arranged sequence, every new discovery is a process with its own set of complex rules that makes sense only to him. He is constantly attempting to bring Ben, packed into his stroller and still learning to form sentences, into this imaginary realm.

As for me, they both seem genuinely fascinated by the wheelchair, but no more so than an escalator or a big rock. I find the lack of presumption a refreshing change. For all I know, they're wondering when they will have one of their own. It must look like fun zipping down ramps in a wheelie and popping up curbs.

In the car, amid a constant chorus of laughter, singing, crying and sometimes screaming, we ply the back roads of the Mid-Connecticut Shoreline. Rustic beach cottages, colonial farm houses and a few mansions tucked away along beach roads and sequestered cull-de-sacs. Magnolias, dogwoods and other trees are flowering right now, but the woods are still bare, giving off a slight emerald-green glow from the newly forming leaf buds on bare branches that are getting bigger every day. It looks and feels foreign to me, as if I've stepped onto the surface of a strange new planet. It's as if my life has suddenly come to a grinding halt.

"Elizabeth? Uh Elizabeth, you'd better look at this".

We're back in the car now, and I'm trying to gain her attention as politely as possible (she's on the cell phone with her mother). Ben is attempting to toss his sneaker out of the window. The kids have been packaged and strapped into their seats as have I. I notice that she's adopted this chore much in the same manner as she has all of the kid-related tasks, incorporating me into to mental checklist, barely skipping a beat until my chair is stowed in the back, the strollers are folded, and we're all ready for take off.

"Oh – there it goes!"

Ben has successfully pushed his little toddler shoe through the narrow window opening. It's bouncing happily down the shoulder of Interstate 95. Elizabeth looks in between beats, still conversing, but the event hasn't yet registered with her. Ben's trying to hit the down button to open the window even more, but Elizabeth has disabled it via the driver's control panel up front.

This is one of the many fascinating child-proof features of the Ford Explorer that has completely captivated me; indeed, it seems the whole vehicle is one giant safe haven for traveling kids. My car of the last nine years is a '90 Toyota Corolla wagon with over 200,000 miles on it, stripped down and lean; not a single power option on it, so a loaded 1998 Explorer is for me a bit like riding in the flight cockpit of the NASA Space Shuttle.

Clearly this chariot is designed for comfort. For instance, there's a changeable display that shows you how many miles you can drive before empty, average miles per gallon, average speed, miles to go before the next oil change or tune up, and many other useful statistics that I normally find myself only guessing at. Not only are the seats completely powered, but so is everything; door locks, lights, mirrors, windows of course, and there's even more clever features under the covers. For instance, when you exceed a certain speed after getting in the car the power locks engage on every door automatically – the kids couldn't escape even if they wanted to (that is if for some reason they weren't bundled into state-of-the-art child car seats with 5 point NASCAR-inspired safety harnesses.) I almost shudder when I remember myself at Josh's age, riding in the front bench seat next to my Grandfather in his '68 Oldsmobile Cutlass. Not only was there no booster seat in sight, but I wasn't even strapped in; the front seatbelts had long since been swallowed up by that netherworld of lost change, sun glasses and gum wrappers unique to a precious few decades of American muscle car interior design, never to be retrieved again. My grandfather let me take the wheel - and this when I could barely see over the dash! Nowadays we needn't worry; with the Explorer's advanced front and side air bag system in the front seat and the State laws

prohibiting children under a certain weight from riding anywhere near them, Josh and Ben will be almost old enough to get their own driving license before they will be able to legally ride in the front seat of this car.

“Oh boy, it looks like he’s going to throw the other one,” I report, surprised at the flat, deadpan tone of my voice. Josh, in his booster seat, is in hysterics. Ben has a determined look of concentration as he wrestles with the Velcro straps to get the remaining shoe off of his foot. At this point, I don’t feel as if I have the authority or right to take any sort of intervention; I don’t know the first thing about preventative-child-shoe-throwing techniques. So I just sit deferentially, like a sportscaster up in his booth. “He’s got it off the other foot now and, (holy cow), he’s going for it “- I sound almost like Phil Rizzuto.

Elizabeth had just terminated her call, but it’s too late, for by the time she realizes what’s happening, “Oh, oops – well, there goes the other one!” Ben is wearing a broad grin, kicking his little liberated feet up and down, clearly pleased beyond measure with himself.

“Those were brand new!” Elizabeth is at first dismayed, but then quickly shrugs it off and soon joins the laughter. This will be the first time that it dawns on me just how flexible parents need to be. It’s too hard to hang on to anything tightly when there are young children around. When it comes to a pair of toddler’s sneakers, I guess we can let that one go.

\* \* \*

Of course, there are other times I feel Elizabeth should pull the car over and let me out right there.

*How am I going to do this?* It is 3:40 am and I’m sitting up in bed hyperventilating. A month ago, this all sounded so simple, seemed so noble, so selfless, so do-able; devoting my house and a good portion of my life to a greater good, to something far bigger than me. This would be their oasis, a warm yellow light in the window on a dark, rainy night. My bizarre, oversized railroad style ranch house - once an actual working gas station – will transform into what will hopefully look and feel like a real home. And the best part is that I do this of my own free will; I do this because somewhere, deep down I feel it is right; perhaps it is - dare I say it - *destiny*. A month ago, my heart grew to three times the size of that of an ordinary Grinch.

But that was a month ago.

It's now July 2, 2000 at 3:41 am, one week before they all move in. I'm wondering now, how in hell will this work? My house lies in pieces – renovations have begun but are far from finished. It will be several days before I will have the cash to purchase the next round of building supplies. I owe the painter \$650 dollars and Josh's room still isn't finished. *How am I going to do this?*

My house for many years had been both a scourge and a long-time curiosity to the local neighbors, many of whom own vintage 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian and Federalist homes, complete with plaques from the town historical society. Yet mine was an unwelcome anomaly; built as an ugly, uncharacteristic commercial structure amidst this happy enclave of New England history. Neighbors actual comments: “so what do you got in there, apartments?”, “You won't be trying to get it re-zoned for commercial use again, will you?”, “we're so glad you're not trying to get it re-zoned for commercial use again!”, “Yeah, they built that during the one year when there was a lapse in zoning”, “I used to pump gas there as a kid”, “Hah Hah – can I pull into your kitchen and get an oil change?”, “we had a running bet down at the hardware store that you'd never be able to get a front lawn to grow – thanks a lot – I lost!” and on, and on.

I took the ridicule in stride, because my reasons for settling on this house in particular had everything to do with accessibility, and almost nothing to do with pride. The fact of the matter is, when you are confined to a wheelchair, unless you end up residing in state government subsidized handicapped housing (which I did not qualify for) or build a custom designed house (which I could not afford), finding a truly accessible house in the pre-built market is like finding a needle in a haystack. Three little steps up into a ranch house might as well be a brick wall. So when I chanced upon a single floored, ground-level house that required almost no modifications inside or out, I jumped at the chance. I accepted the fact that Better Homes & Garden would not be knocking on my door anytime soon.

But oh, how I would show those sneering neighbors, I thought (imagine a Grinch-like grimace spreading across my face). This curious façade of rafters, joists, plywood and nails concealing concrete garage bays and cinder block walls, this oil stain on our otherwise quaint community, was about to become a living, breathing home. Complete with children. Children would promote the befuddled squalor of my lowly tenement to a higher, more credible functionality; I was on the verge of becoming a property owner with a legitimate purpose, cemented by the presence of a real family.

I had purchased ‘the house that used to be a gas station’ in the early 1990's amidst what could only be described as a perfect storm of major life events.

Within the same month I had a) accepted a job as an entry-level computer technician/network specialist, charged with building a modern computer environment for a small rehab hospital, b) got married to my first wife, and c) I bought my first house, the odd aforementioned structure.

Within a year's time I would a) separate and eventually divorce my first wife, b) get promoted to "Network Supervisor" c) hang a neon Michelob bar sign in the dining room. With the exception of a few blips on the radar, I began to settle into the lifestyle that I was living when I had met Elizabeth and the kids; a care-free bachelor, disabled, living fairly at ease within a small town, scraping by financially, waiting for life's Next Big Thing.

But soon, these dysfunctional rooms would be alive; their plain walls echoing with the shouts of children. The broad flat front lawn, where we had once done keg stands at my roommate's stag party (to both the horror and delight of the passers by), the same lawn that was at one time, long before my arrival, an asphalt parking lot with gas pumps, where, some time after my arrival, I had once stumbled on a woman from up the street deliberately emptying her car ash tray upon , and others, apparently pining for the many years when this property stood as a vacant lot, relieving their moving vehicles of beer cans, empty MacDonal'd's containers, and even full Hefty Tall Drawstring Kitchen bags - a convenient alternative to the local land fill. Soon, this lawn would be littered with balls, bats, pitch-backs, Big Wheels, roller blades, bikes, badminton racquets, squirt guns, soccer balls—all manner of things kid-like. Who in their right mind would have the nerve to toss an empty Heineken bottle here?

The house Elizabeth and her boys were leaving was a gut-renovated 17<sup>th</sup> century New England farm house set on a charming mountain road with fields and a barn. The house's impressive cadre of amenities would actually have been completely at home among the pages of *Better Homes* or *Architectural Digest*; original posts and beams had been rehabbed and lovingly restored along with original wide oak floor boards. Some of the updated features included a state-of-the-art kitchen with shiny, stainless steel Sub-Zero appliances and custom granite countertops. The sad, beige, vintage 1980's GE appliances in my own dark, narrow kitchen, the warped faux butcher-block laminated counters, and the splintering linoleum tiles would be a severe the culture shock for Elizabeth, Josh and Ben.

Why kid myself - they were going to hate it! A new school system, a new town, new friends to make, new social circles to fit in; on top of that, my home, 'the house that used to be a gas station'.

I sighed. The other major obstacle? My gas station was a frat house. My house had become synonymous with some legendary parties. One of the more infamous of these soirees was the “Luge Party”. As far as I can figure, this is an offshoot of a tradition from the Eastern Michigan University where my roommate Joe had attended, but there are probably many variations of this on college campuses across the country. The basic idea is to get a 500 lb block of ice, tilted up at one end, and carve narrow channels down the broad face of the block, using a chain saw, chisel or other cutting apparatus. Then, liquor is poured from the upper end down the channels and directly into the mouths of those in position at the bottom edge of the block. The amount and speed with which you pour the alcohol is at the discretion of the pourer and largely depends on how much they like or dislike the person at the receiving end, or simply how badly they want to get them drunk. The ice chills the liquor on its way down, thus making even the most noxious hard alcohol unusually palatable. It is a fun, failsafe way to ensure that all of your guests consume copious amounts of hard alcohol. It’s also a great way to silence that over-boastful office-mate with a reality check on just how much liquor they actually can hold, as those who have ended up lying on the floor of my living room, barfing and babbling incoherently can attest to.

As I sit here in darkness, these memories seem excessive and embarrassing. This comes with the sudden realization that my towering achievement thus far, the thing I am most fondly remembered by and identified with (other than being the only wheelchair guy in town) is as the ringleader of arguably some of the most brazen and decadent drinking experiences in the town’s recent memory.

\* \* \*

Picture a classic Descartes dualism; there might as well be a miniature devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other, nattering back and forth to one another:

- I don’t know the first thing about children (*You didn’t know a thing about computers, networks or programming either, but did that stop you from becoming an I.T. Professional?*).

- There will be awkward and difficult times ahead – no question about it (*and ‘awkward’ is something new for you?*).

- There will be doubts and questions from everywhere – my friends, family, from nearly every angle (*the average stranger looks at you like*

*you're an escapee from a nursing home, so you're going to be bothered by more doubting?').*

- As noble a gesture as it is, this whole adventure doesn't exactly make financial sense (*but has anything you've done in the last 10 years 'made financial sense?').*

- This will put a serious damper on my social life (*frankly, you've had enough social life to last an entire lifetime, thank you very much!*).

One by one, each pessimistic objection shrunk beneath a compelling rebuttal far outweighing it. Apparently, there would be no talking me out of this.

And the next day, I'm bugging my friend Joel – painter by day, fellow barroom musician by night - to help me finish up the kid's room before heading off to his other jobs. Joel has done me a great favor already by shifting off some of his other workload, so I feel strange having to insist on more of the same, especially since he's giving me a huge discount on his usual hourly rate. Joel is tall and lanky with long black hair and looks like sort of a cross between Ron Wood and Iggy Pop, so he projects the aging rock musician persona well, though the white overalls and painter's hat tone things down a bit during the daytime. At the mention of my kid dilemma his face registers little emotion; he doesn't seem to understand the need for urgency that I do.

"I mean, with school almost a month a way, Elizabeth was really hoping to have them move into rooms that were painted and carpeted. You know, with the separation and all, it's going to be rough enough on them. I just want them to feel at home."

Joel cocks his head, as if to say *wow, you're really gone, aren't you*. His reaction is one that has become typical of my friends who suddenly learn what I'm doing. They are generally speechless, not quite positive, slightly puzzled, but with just a subtle dash of disdain thrown in. It's almost as if I can hear their inner voice, *Ummm, good luck with that...*

But I know that subtle smirk out of one side of Joel's mouth. He is more astute than most – I know this, and a shivering tremor passes through my sternum as I realize that he's beginning to figure it all out. Hell, I'm still figuring it out myself, yet from this point on why question it any longer? I might as well just admit it: I am beginning to fall for Elizabeth.