



HOW DID YOU COME
FROM A PLACE LIKE THIS?

THREE STORIES

MATT LEE

HOW DID YOU
COME FROM
A PLACE LIKE THIS?

THREE STORIES

MATT LEE

GPS

My friend John was completely self-absorbed. He was always doing intrusive things like insisting I feel the fabric on his authentic Detroit Tigers jersey, or forcing me to sit through a soundboard recording from the most recent Phish tour. His house was filthy, too. His furniture lay beneath a wasteland of pizza boxes and fast food bags. You'd have to move an empty take-out container or fountain drink cup just to set something down.

The most annoying thing John would do, though, was trick me into driving him around town to run his errands. He'd lost his driver's license after multiple DUIs, so for most of our college careers, he didn't have a car.

It'd start off innocent enough. He'd invite me over to hang out. We'd shoot the shit and watch TV. But before long,

he'd ask me to take him to the store to grab a couple groceries—you know, since he couldn't drive, and a man's got to eat. Then, after what would inevitably turn into an hour-long marathon grocery spree, he'd ask if I might also mind driving him to pay his cell phone bill—you know, since we were already out. After the cell phone store, he'd need to swing by another friend's houses to retrieve the DVDs he'd lent out, and so on. Before I knew it, I'd spent the entire afternoon driving him all over town on his personal errands.

I fell for this trick more than once.

After we graduated from college, John landed a sales job, and was frequently out of town on business. This was a welcome reprieve from the constant barrage of favor-asking and imposition I'd become accustomed to. We both became so busy in our post-grad lives that we only hung out every couple months.

One year for my birthday, John gave me a GPS device that he picked up while on a sales trip in Japan. I kindly thanked him for the gift, but informed him that I didn't really use GPS devices anymore. My phone had an app that I used for directions. He told me that this one was special, and that the guy who sold it to him said that it was the best one on the market.

Whatever. I still wasn't impressed. I ended up stashing it somewhere in the depths of my closet, along with all of the other gifts I'd been given over the years.

Last summer, John died in a car accident. I'd never had one of my close friends die before. I missed my buddy.

This past spring, I got a new job that relocated me across the country. While packing for the move, I came upon my box of unused gifts and decided to toss them. But when I came across the GPS device John had given me, I decided to hang onto it.

After moving into my new place, there remained a few household items that I still needed to get. As I climbed into my car to find the nearest Home Depot, I decided that instead of using my phone, I'd use the GPS John had given me. In a weird way, it'd be kind of like having John right there in the car with me, telling me where to go just like old times.

I plugged the now-primitive piece of technology into the cigarette lighter and powered it on. It beeped a couple of times, and the screen lit up. After performing a couple software updates, a robotic female voice spoke up.

"Hello. Wherewouldyoulike... to go today?"

"Take me to Home Depot."

"I'm so-rry," the device replied. "Please enter... your... desired lo-ca-tion."

"This thing's a piece of shit," I muttered, using my phone to find the address. Once I found it, I typed it in and began receiving directions from the monotone, choppy-voiced woman.

"In one-hundred feet... turn left onto... Orchard Avenue."

I started playing with the settings to see what other options were available. Thankfully, there were other voices to choose from. One of them was called British Guy.

Well that could be interesting, I thought. It'll be like having a butler give me directions. I selected it, and was greeted by a polite male voice.

"Good day, sir," it said in a cheery, British accent.

"Hello, British Guy," I replied. "Do you still have the address I typed in?"

"Why certainly, sir," it replied. "In thirty-seven meters, please kindly turn left onto Hesperian Way."

"Ugh," I muttered. "This one's kind of lame, too." I began scrolling through the voice options again. The next voice was called Your Buddy.

Now, I'd seen GPS devices before that had a woman's voice, and even ones that had a British voice, but I'd never seen one that had a buddy voice. So I selected it, and was greeted by a familiar sounding cadence.

"Sup bro," the voice greeted me.

"Hey, man. Not much," I replied.

"Sweet. So where we headed?"

I looked back down at my phone to find the address again. "I'm going to Home Depot. It's on 3727 Industrial Drive."

My request was met with what sounded like a long, drawn-out sigh.

"Honestly, bro, I'm probably not going to remember that. Can you just type it in there on the screen?"

I typed the address into the GPS, and Your Buddy spoke up again in an excited tone.

"Oh, yeah. I know that spot. I've been there before. You're gonna want to make a right up here."

"I'm sorry, where?"

"Uh, up here. You see that yellow sign?"

"Yeah."

"Just past that. Then, uh, you're gonna make a left in a couple blocks, I think."

"Where?"

"Uh, let me think. Is there an Arco station on the corner right there?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, cool. I know where we are. Just go up like two lights and make a left."

A moment of silence passed, and then Your Buddy spoke up again. "Hey do you mind if I put on some music? I just got off Phish tour. I've kind of been on a Tweezer kick."

"Uh, I don't have any Phish. Sorry."

"Oh, no worries. How bout some Dead?"

"No, no Dead either," I replied. "All I've got is som--"

"Oh shit," the buddy voice interjected. "You were supposed to turn back there."

"Back there? I thought you said at the light?"

"No, sorry. That was it back there. My bad. Just turn around in this parking lot up here. I got it now. We're good."

I turned the car around and began heading back the other way. We made it about a block before Your Buddy spoke up again.

"Hey, do you think you can swing through that McDonald's right here? I haven't eaten since this morning."

I was a little confused by this request. "Uh, how exactly do you eat?"

"I don't. Just set it on the dashboard. I like to smell it."

"How do you smell? Actually, don't answer that. I keep forgetting I'm talking to a--"

"Hey!" Your Buddy interrupted. "Did you just pass that McDonald's?"

"Oh, yeah," I replied. "Sorry about that."

"Aw, man. Do you think you could turn around and go back? I'm really hungry."

"But I thought you just said you don't--you know what, forget it." I scrolled back through the voice settings. "Bye, Buddy. Try not to take it personal."

After a moment of silence, the British Guy spoke up.

"Good day again, sir."

"Hello again, British Guy. You still have the address?"

"Of course, sir. In seventy meters, turn left onto Kensington Lane."

"Thank you, British Guy," I said. "You know, you're a lot less obnoxious than that last guy."

"Why thank you, sir. I do so appreciate the compliment. And I'm terribly sorry for any inconvenience you may have suffered during my brief holiday."

"No problem, British Guy." I turned onto Kensington Lane, enjoying the momentary silence, when the British Guy spoke again.

"Pardon me sir--and so sorry to trouble you again--but your friend wants me to ask if we'll be stopping at McDonald's."

I sighed. "No, British Guy. We're not going to McDonald's."

I slowly reached my hand towards the GPS and pressed my finger down on the power button. "Sorry, John," I said as I ripped it from the dash.

I rolled down my window and tossed the GPS onto the side of the road, but in the back of my mind I somehow knew that wouldn't be the last I'd ever hear from John.

THE CHURCHY SWEARER

Frank Bitterman was an honest, hard-working man, whose greatest enjoyment in life—outside of the companionship of his loving wife—was his involvement with the local church. All of his friends were either fellow members of the congregation or loyal employees at the Christian office supply store he'd started eight years ago with a loan from his father-in-law.

Frank's father-in-law, also named Frank, had retired several years ago from the manufacturing plant where he spent thirty years slaving away to provide for his family. He enjoyed hunting, fishing, smoking cigars, and playing poker with his buddies. He'd helped Frank out with a loan because it was in his daughter's best

interests, but in truth he didn't really like his son-in-law. He found him to be too effeminate for his tastes. Frank also resented that his son-in-law had the same first name as him, one he considered to be a strong and masculine name.

Younger Frank's wife, Jennifer, loved both her husband and her father dearly, and wanted them to spend more time together.

One winter, Jennifer's father was going on a hunting trip with two of his buddies, and she convinced him to invite her husband. Her father, anticipating that his offer would be declined, invited Frank in an effort to make his daughter happy.

Much to Frank the father's displeasure, Frank the son-in-law accepted his invitation, and was excited to be included in such an intimate activity with the father of his wife.

While Frank eagerly prepared for the trip, his father-in-law begrudgingly broke the news to his buddies that they would be accompanied by his foppish son-in-law. His buddies, who shared similar worldviews with Frank the father, were not pleased. They knew Frank the son-in-law, and did not care for him, either.

On the day of the hunting trip, Frank the father and his two buddies swung by his daughter's house to pick up his son-in-law. It was late afternoon, and a cold, bitter wind swirled gusts of snow around the icy roads. The four men squeezed into Frank the father's car and embarked on the three-and-a-half hour drive to their hunting camp.

Frank sat in the back, next to one of his father-in-law's friends. For the first half of the drive, he remained mostly silent while the other men conversed about things that men on a hunting trip discuss.

In an attempt to make the best of an awkward situation, the men eventually made an effort to initiate Frank into their conversation, but they found his anecdotes about recent church group outings to be boring, and his musings about the world of office supplies to be entirely uninteresting.

Towards the last hour of their drive, the men grew restless, and started antagonizing Frank. They attempted to get under his skin by asking him uncomfortable questions. They asked him about his sex life—much to the chagrin of his father-in-law. They asked him to reveal past indiscretions, laws he'd broken, times he'd gotten into trouble—anything that might make for a good tale.

But Frank offered them no such reward. He insisted—much to the relief of his father-in-law—that his sex life was private. He claimed that he'd never broken any laws as far as he was aware, and that he'd never gotten into mischief in his youth. Frank apologized to the gentlemen, but remained steadfast in his assertion that there was nothing of ill-repute from his past upon which he could draw for the sake of their entertainment.

"God damn, boy," one of the men eventually exclaimed in frustration, "You are one boring mother fucker, you know that? I'll bet you never even swore before, have you?"

Frank shrugged. "Sorry, guys. I honestly don't remember ever swearing. I just don't use that kind of language."

"That's it, I want to hear you swear right now," one of the father-in-law's friends demanded.

"Oh, I couldn't," Frank replied. "I'm not going to swear just because you guys want me to."

"Why the Hell not?" The other friend asked.

Frank was becoming visibly flustered. "Because I just don't want to, okay?"

His father-in-law joined in the persuasion. "Come on Frank, just say a fucking swear word so we can be done with it."

"No, Mr. Johnson. I'm not going to swear," Frank said through an undertone of nervous laughter.

At this point the men had had enough.

"Stop the fucking car!" one of them screamed.

Frank's father-in-law slammed on the brakes and pulled onto the shoulder of the road. His friend continued, pointing his finger at Frank, "We aren't gonna go another fucking inch until you say a God-damned swear word! You hear me?"

The three men were all facing Frank. Frank sat up straight and scooted back into a defensive posture.

"I'm not going to swear, guys."

"If you don't fucking swear," one of his father-in-law's friends said, "we're gonna throw you outta the car and leave you here in the middle of the fucking road."

Frank tried to glance out the windows, but they were covered with frost. He could hear the blistering winds howling.

"Come on, guys," Frank pleaded, "Let's just keep driving. This isn't funny."

"Nobody's fucking kidding, fruitcake," Frank was warned, "Say a God-damned fucking swear word or we're throwing you outta this fucking car!"

For a moment, the men remained deadlocked in silence. Frank shot his father-in-law a look, as if pleading with him to stop this insanity. The three men just glared back at him, waiting for him to say a swear word.

Frank chuckled nervously. "It's like twenty degrees outside, guys. You can't leave me out there. I could die."

"Then swear, you fucking pussy," one of the men persisted.

Frank was scared. This situation was reminding him of numerous encounters he'd had with bullies as a kid. He rendered his final decision in a soft, resigned voice.

"No, I'm not going to swear. You guys need to stop. Let's just get back on the road."

"So you're not going to do it?" One of the men asked.

"No," Frank responded defiantly, thinking it was about to be over.

"All right," one of the men said. "Enough of this shit. Someone grab his legs. I'll get the door."

Sheer panic shot through Frank Bitterman as he watched the men spring into action. The three of them opened their doors and got out. Two of them walked around to Frank's door and opened it. Frank tried to get away from them, but his father-in-law was guarding the other door, blocking his only path of escape.

Frank kicked and screamed as the men drug him from the car onto the side of the road. They then climbed back into the car and proceeded to drive away, leaving him all alone a hundred-fifty miles from home in the middle of a cold winter night.

Frank grabbed the unzipped front sides of his jacket and pulled them tightly around his body and tucked his head down for warmth. As he did this, one of those core-rattling shivers ripped violently through his body, and in his frost-laced frustration he exclaimed out loud, "Mother fuck!"

Realizing what he'd just done, he raised his head slowly and dropped his arms down to his side in disbelief. The foul language of those men must have rubbed off on him. A swear word had come from his mouth.

There was no taking it back. The one thing he'd so nobly refused to do--holding his ground so adamantly that it had

resulted in him being cast out into this miserable winter night-- he had ended up doing anyway.

"God damn it," Frank muttered. And no sooner had those words crossed his lips than he realized he'd done it again. He let out a growl of frustration as he started walking back home.

He walked for hours, enduring the brutal conditions. It was the kind of cold that makes a man desperate, kicking into gear survival instincts he never knew he had. By all logic and reasoning, Frank should have died of hypothermia, but he somehow kept marching along, losing his sanity just a little bit more each step of the way. Each time he'd stumble in the ankle-deep snow, or skid on a patch of the merciless ice, he'd let slip a barely audible curse word--mentally kicking himself for it each time.

Frank eventually staggered back into town in the wee hours of the morning. But he was no longer the same man.

The following Monday, Frank went into work at his Christian office supply store and lit into his staff.

"What the god-damned fuck are all these letters doing on my mother fucking desk!?"

His staff was surprised by this outburst. None more than Lucy, the sweet, young girl who worked in shipping and receiving.

"Well don't just stand there and look at me," Frank screamed at her. "Pick this shit up! What the Hell do I pay you for, anyway?"

Lucy made a run for the exit. She locked herself inside her car and proceeded to cry.

A few moments later, Frank walked out the front door. A look of pure anger encompassed his face as he stormed down the block and went into a bar.

Over the next year, Frank Bitterman's life continued to spin out of control. His wife left him. His office supply store went under. He spent most of his time at the dive bar down the block from his old store, being abrasive and getting into fights with the regulars--of which he was now one.

One afternoon, as Frank was hunched over the counter at the bar, belching through his twelfth beer of the day, he was blinded by daylight as the front door swung open. A man that he recognized but couldn't place walked in with two other men who also looked vaguely familiar. He soon realized that it was his former father-in-law and his two hunting buddies. They sat down at a table and ordered a round of drinks.

Suddenly it all came back to Frank. He stood up and stumbled away from the bar, approaching the men.

"Hey!" Frank yelled. "Hey!"

The men watched as this drunken man stumbled their way. They looked at each other with confused looks, trying to figure out whom amongst them he was addressing. Frank finally made his way to their table and sat down in the extra chair.

"Hey, m-m-mother fuckers!" Frank stuttered belligerently.

Frank Johnson, finally recognizing the man as his former son-in-law, sat up curiously.

"Frank, is that you?"

The former son-in-law snapped in Frank's direction, his head wobbling like a bobble-head.

"Hey Mr. Johnson," Frank said. "Hey, Mr. Johnson. I've gotta... Mr. Johnson, I've got a swear word for you, m-m-mother....f-f-f-FUCKER!"

"Frank, just quiet down," his former father-in-law calmly requested. "There's no need to make a scene."

Frank looked at his former father-in-law's buddies with the same bobble-headed wobbliness. "So... are we gonna go on that fishing trip?"

One of Mr. Johnson's buddies spoke up. "You mean hunting trip?"

"Yeah," Frank said in an eerie, drawn-out tone. "Let's go on that hunting trip. You guys wanna go?"

Frank waved his finger in their general direction. "I gotta swear for you guys... FUCK!" He raised his eyebrows and nodded, as if to ask if they were impressed. "See? It was easy."

Frank Johnson and his two friends squirmed in their chairs.

"And I said it right after you left." Frank let out a loud belch, and then began laughing like a demented, drunken clown.

"I said it right after you guys left. I said fuck!"

Frank Johnson finally broke his camp's silence.

"That's nice, Frank. It's good to see you. Why don't you go back over by the bar and finish your drink now?"

Frank swung around violently toward the bar, where his beer was waiting. Then he swung back to face the men again.

"Are we gonna... go do that fishing trip? I fuckin... LOVE hunting!" Frank was being so gesticulate in his speech that he was wearing himself out just by talking, and this latest proclamation left him half slumped over and leaning to his side, wavering like a car on the edge of a cliff.

He looked at the men. "I'm gonna go now." And with that, Frank Bitterman slunk down onto the floor and fell asleep.

Frank Johnson and his pals collected themselves, and his two buddies led the way out the door. Just before exiting the building, Frank Johnson paused and turned around to take one last look at the man who used to be married to his daughter, then he resumed his exodus.

And as the men all climbed into his car, he said, "Hey, what do you guys think about going hunting next weekend?"

BASEBALL STORY

When I was a young boy, I spent countless summer evenings on the swing set in my backyard, listening to the little league games being played at the ballpark across the lake from my house. The sounds carried across the water so clearly—action being called over the PA, cheers from the sparse but enthusiastic crowd, and the chorus of car horns that'd erupt whenever somebody hit a home run. If the breeze was just right, I could even smell the scent of hot dogs and popcorn wafting over from the concession booth.

It was that same field where I would play when I joined little league just a few years later. Though tall for my age, my strength and coordination were still a few years behind. As badly

as I wanted to be a pitcher, my coaches always arrived at the conclusion that my talents were better suited for right field.

During the second-to-last season I played--in '93, when I was thirteen--my team made it to the Michigan Little League district 1 finals. It was the deepest any team from my town had advanced in the playoffs since '87.

Our opponents that day were the Cougars from Oil City, a superior team from a much larger town. Their pitcher was a year older and more mature than we were--he'd already gone through puberty at a time when the rest of us were just discovering it--and he threw harder than anyone we'd faced all year.

During my first trip to the plate, I didn't lift the bat off my shoulder once. Through sheer luck, I drew a walk.

By the time I got to bat again, my team was behind 4-2. Now that I'd seen this pitcher's stuff once already, he didn't seem quite as imposing. I stepped into the batter's box determined to be more aggressive.

His first pitch came right down the middle and without even thinking I swung and crushed it deep to centerfield. The clang of aluminum rang across the diamond like a miner striking pay dirt. It was the hardest I'd ever hit a ball in my life. I could tell the moment it left my bat that it was leaving the park.

I watched the ball soar higher and farther into the air. I'd just hit my first-ever home run--and in the playoffs, of all times to do it! It was the greatest achievement of my little league career.

The centerfielder raced towards the fence in his best effort to catch it, but the ball sailed just over his out-stretched glove and--to my horror and surprise--crashed into the billboard on the front of the fence with a thud.

My hit had come up short.

As the fielder bent down to pick up the ball, I realized I was still standing at home plate. I quickly tossed the bat aside and took off in a panicked run. But the ball was already on its way in, and I only made it to first base. My first-ever home run turned out to be just a single.

I sheepishly looked toward the bleachers, where my entire family was in attendance. Even my uncle Danny, who lived two towns away, had come to cheer me on. I felt foolish. I knew I should have reached second base, probably even third, but instead of running when I hit the ball, I'd just stood there admiring my shot. If only I'd have hit the ball just a little bit farther, I could have been in the dugout getting high-fives from my teammates. Instead, I stood stranded on first base, having come mere inches short of glory.

My next turn to bat came in the sixth inning--the final inning for a little league game. We were down 7-3. There were two

outs, but the bases were loaded. By now I felt like I had this pitcher's number. He hadn't gotten me out all night, and I'd come oh-so-close to hitting a home run off him during my last trip to the plate. This time I was determined to finish the job.

I leapt into the batter's box and dug into my stance, dancing with anticipation. I was ready for my big moment, ready to be the hero I knew I could be. The pitcher, who'd possessed such an intimidating aura earlier in the game, now just seemed like a regular kid whose body was developing faster than he could keep up with. That wispy mustache that had previously seemed so impressive, now just looked like a pathetic patch of dirt atop his lip. The defeated glance he shot me as I awaited his first pitch told me I was the last batter he wanted to face.

His first two offerings came in high and outside. I could tell he was afraid to give me anything to hit.

I smacked the bat against my cleat in frustration. A walk wouldn't be enough here. I needed to make the big play.

The next two pitches missed the strike zone as well, but in my desperation to make a play I swung at both and fouled them off. I stepped out of the batter's box to regroup. I needed to be more patient. I assured myself that the right pitch would come.

His fifth pitch was in the dirt. There was a moment of excitement as the catcher scrambled to corral the ball, but he was

able to keep it from getting past him so none of the runners could advance.

The count was now full. I was down to the final pitch. He wouldn't want to risk walking in a run here. There was no doubt in my mind this one was coming right down the middle. And I was ready for it. I was about to clobber that ball over the fence and tie the game.

My body pulsed with adrenaline as the pitcher went into his windup. His arm went back and I lifted my front foot in preparation. Delivery was on its way. I was so excited I couldn't think.

And that's when I saw the first change-up I'd ever faced in my life--the first one he'd thrown all night. I unloaded as soon as it left his hand and immediately knew I'd swung too soon. I whiffed helplessly as the ball floated safely into the catcher's mitt.

The game was over.

I desperately wanted another chance. I wished I could rewind time by thirty seconds and face that pitch one more time. But it was too late. My opportunity had passed. I'd come so close to being the hero, but became the final out instead.