

TRUE STORY

MAEVE GRIFFITH



My ass was tired. I hadn't been driving long, but I was already suffering. I had sat most of the day in a mandatory "fun" session. Even though the Soviet Union was just now ending its long slow fall, we were still planning missions and doing all the stuff that the Air Force was paying us to do, and that included the usual compulsory summer safety presentation. I really don't want to say where I was stationed or what my job was. Not so much because it may still be classified, but it's another story unto itself and I don't want to tell it. Suffice it to say, my job was in the desert Southwest and it involved a lot of flying and a lot of report writing. I was ready for a break. Now, thankfully, this last ridiculous obstacle was shrinking in my rearview mirror - the Summer Safety Briefing (don't get drunk and fall in a lake without a life jacket in the desert). Finally, I was free and was motoring to visit a friend up north, in the Bay Area.

The year was 1991 and I had my cassette player loaded up with my travel mixtape (Bowie, The Cars, Queen, Led Zep). I was just enjoying the drive, letting the desert hypnotically cleanse my mind. What would have been a few-minute blip in my work vehicle (classified) was a more enjoyable hours-long venture, in my Camaro, on the road.

I hadn't been driving more than an hour when I saw a guy hitchhiking up ahead. He had a flight jacket on. I slowed down to take a look and my first thought was, "What the hell is Bob Sondland doing out here? Did his car break down?" Well, from a distance it sure looked like Bob; so I slowed down. Thankfully there wasn't much traffic. I stopped about 50 feet shy of where he was standing. And as the hitchhiker jogged to my car, I could tell it wasn't Bob. Looked nothing like him. But, now this was awkward. I had stopped already, so I was committed. I unlocked the door. He hopped in the front seat of the Camaro and up close I could tell that this guy was probably 20 years older than Bob. He had a different haircut and was probably 20 pounds lighter. What was I thinking?

"Thanks for the ride," he said.

What struck me was the fragrance. I don't care what kind of plane you fly, from Cessna 150s to 747s, there is a smell of the cockpit. Avionics, ozone and St. Elmos fire.

Something almost like the inside of a camera when you put the film in. When people used to put film in cameras. That aroma always smelled like coming home to me. Still does.

“Where you going?” I asked without any desire of an introduction.

“Bakersfield, or as close as you can get me.”

Well, he didn't look like a serial killer, and the Summer Safety Briefing didn't mention hitchhikers. I guess if he did kill me, they could tack another ten minutes onto the next briefing. They might even mention my name.

He looked me up and down. “You in the Air Force?”

“I am. Your flight jacket... The SAC patch...” I pointed at his chest.

“Yeah, I was in it a while back. Can't talk about what I did.”

“Hah. Me neither. Wouldn't it be weird if we both did the same thing?”

I thought about that for a minute and realized, as I was pulling away, that whatever this guy had done, it must not have turned out good for him. I mean, why hitchhike unless you are out of money?

“I usually don't pick up hitchhikers.”

“That's good because I usually don't hitchhike. I broke down and had to walk to the highway.”

“I didn't see a car.”

“Nope. I had to land in the desert.”

“You were flying?”

“I guess you could call it that.”

I liked this guy.

“Where were you flying from?”

There was a silence for a while. I thought maybe he didn't hear my question. I had turned the music way down. You don't fly airplanes and have some kind of hearing loss, and I wasn't sure if he had already answered and I just didn't hear him. I started to ask again. “Where...”

“Not so much where, as when.” He smiled the biggest shit-eating grin. Almost frighteningly large.

“Oh you’ve been up in the air for a while. Is that it? You ran out of fuel?”

“No, I mean chronological, like years, months, like that. ‘What time did I come from?’ would be a more appropriate question.”

“You mean like a time machine?” It came out of my mouth like a normal question. Was I joking or faking nonchalance?

He replied immediately. “Well, if I say ‘yes,’ you are going to think I’m nuts and I am sure you will drop me off at the next loony bin or maybe right here.” He stared straight ahead. “OK. yes, a time machine would be a good analogy. But, so is the flying thing.”

Something about the guy made me feel comfortable. I was intrigued by the story he was surely going to tell me. “So are you from a post-apocalyptic world in a distant future?”

“Well, I could be. That would be plausible, but I am actually from the year 2024. Thirty-three years in the future.”

“And we have time machines then? Rocket pants too?”

“We’ve always had, uhm, time machines. That’s the nature of a time machine. Rocket pants won’t come around until 2030.”

“What?”

“Just kidding. I mean about the rocket pants.”

This guy was obviously full of shit. But, at least he was interesting. There was something about him that made me not at all nervous about the potential of him being crazy. If he was crazy, it was a good kind, a harmless crazy. And I wasn’t so sure about the cockpit, avionics smell anymore. Maybe it was more like a melting wax. It reminded me of the smell of the stands of votive candles at church. The kind where you put a nickel in a slot and kneel down to light a candle and say a prayer. Something I liked doing when I was a kid.

I was ready to dive in. “What’s the future like?”

“That answer is a little above your security clearance. A little. OK. I can tell you this... There are big changes in technology. The way people talk to each other. Not big changes in how we all get around, or get along. Some good stuff. Some sad stuff. But, I am here to, I guess, uhm, what I want to tell you is.... You like politics, right?”

“I find politics interesting. The strategizing. The messaging. The power to transform the world for good, peacefully.” Mostly, how that never happens.”

“You have a problem with the lack of peace?” He laughed and pointed to his old flight jacket at the Strategic Air Command patch.

“Sometimes. No one has their hands clean. This is a democracy and we are all in this together. Doesn’t matter what jacket you wear.”

“Republic.”

“What?”

“We live in a republic.”

“Yeah. a republic is a form of democracy.”

“There you go!”

His condescending tone sounded like he had heard this before. The desert stretched on. I knew this in my mind. My eyes, however, witnessed an end, heatwaves forming a watery wall on the road. A mirage that always moved forward, out of reach.

“So, are you hungry, thirsty, wanna listen to some music.?”

“No. No. Yes.”

“I suppose you’ve made a great mixtape for the trip. Keep playing. Don’t let me interrupt.”

So, I popped the tape back in and The Cars came on with *Candi-O*. How did he know I was on a “trip”? My suitcase in the back, maybe?

“Love this song.” His face pressed to the window.

I turned down the volume. “Hey, aren’t you worried about leaving your machine in the desert?”

“No machine.”

“But, you said…”

“A deceptive gambit on my part.” He paused. “You should really savor the time, this time, now.”

“Before what, a nuclear holocaust?”

“Worse. Hey let me ask you… You ever listen to talk radio? How about your buddies at the base?”

“Yeah. I listen to Art Bell sometimes when I can’t sleep. The weird stories people tell are funny. Hey, picking up a time-traveling hitchhiker in the desert might put me in the front

of the caller line, especially if you do something cool like sprout wings and fly away.”

He laughed and made a flapping motion. “How about your pals?”

“Well lately, they’ve been listening to this guy - Rush Limbaugh. He really pokes fun at the Democrats, Liberals - calls them ‘Nazis’ and ‘Commies.’”

“Those are contradictory terms. Nazis sprung up in response to communism.”

“Yeah. I know. It doesn’t matter. The point is he’s funny, a goofball. I mean I’m a Democrat, most of my friends in the Air Force are, but we still laugh. Some of the crazy stuff he says really gets my Republican friends worked up. It’s funny to watch. Lately, a few of them are carrying around his book, almost like a fashion accessory. They quote it to each other. It’s funny.”

“Do you ever contradict what they’re quoting?”

“I usually just let them have their fun. I mean some of the stuff is so goofy. You don’t need to go to the library, consult a newspaper index and look at the microfiche. It’s pretty common sense stuff, easily refuted.

“How do they take that, when you do that?”

“Tell them they’re wrong? Usually they are kind of embarrassed, maybe a little angry. Almost always they change the subject to some other bullshit from what that gasbag says and on it goes. Who cares?”

Scrubby, fuzzy, olive-drab little trees faded in and out of the passenger window as I snuck a glance at him. Miles and miles of nothing. Sometimes with a fence, almost like a picture frame around the nothingness. He remained silent.

He seemed sad. I cleared my throat. “I’m Dave, by the way.” I kept one hand on the wheel and gave him my right. He shook it. “Gabe.”

“Dave, look, I know you think I am full of shit, I mean about time travel and all of that. I think you should know there is more to it. I believe you are a good person. Probably above average in this regard. Not exemplary, but not bad.”

“Thanks for that, I guess.”

“Well, you are good, but average, in a lot of ways. Obviously, your piloting skills and your trustworthiness are well above average, or you wouldn’t be flying what you’re flying and where.”

“I can’t talk about that.”

"I don't want to talk about that. I am just telling you this because, like all of us, you are complex, a mixed bag of good and evil of lazy and motivated. All of that. Let me ask you a question, a political question."

"OK."

"You are entrusted with nuclear weapons."

"Again I can't talk about that."

"Right. Sorry. I mean let's face it there are a lot of things you can't talk about."

That made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I did a quick glance in the rear view mirror. Just empty road, no car following. Was this guy from the OSI? Had I said something I shouldn't have? Did they know things about me that they shouldn't have, like who I was seeing in San Francisco?

"What do you mean?" I said the words as coolly as I could with a rictus plastered on my face.

"Relax. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go there, I am trying to get to a point where I can ask you something. Let me put it this way - if you were assigned, hypothetically, the tasking of preparing to bomb the Soviet Union, would you accept that task? Why?"

"I do have moral problems with nuclear war, if this is where you are going."

"It's not."

"Well. OK. I guess I would accept the tasking because it's my job. I wouldn't have taken this job if I didn't have trust in the basic goodness of the American people and the wisdom of democracy. The leaders that the voters elect - no matter their political party - are trustworthy, smart and patriotic, for the most part. They wouldn't make me go to war unless the Soviet Union had launched first. They wouldn't risk the mass slaughter, maybe the end of civilization as we know it, unless it was absolutely necessary - as a deterrent. They know how serious it is and they are moral people - the electorate, the president, everyone who is elected. Even if I don't agree with them, politically."

"I would agree with that rationale. And I think the way you describe people today is mostly correct."

The way he talked, Gabe talked, was deliberate, like a lawyer making his case for a jury. I looked at him again. He reminded me of my cousin Paul. Same smile.

"I want to know more about the future." I really wanted to change the subject away from dancing around classified information.

"You got it. There are going to be big advances in science. LED light bulbs, electric cars, the Internet is going to change everything. That's probably the biggest thing."

“The Internet.”

“Yeah, you know about it. Everyone does. I think they are calling it the ‘World Wide Web’ right now. Something like that. Computers are going to get smaller. You won’t have a phone number assigned to a phone in your home but to a portable computer in your pocket. It’s a phone, camera and computer - all hooked up to the World Wide Web. Crazy stuff.”

“OK. I can believe most of that. It’s along the lines of what I’ve been reading. They are saying we’re on the verge of peaceful times, amazing times of learning and moving forward as a species. When everyone can see what the truth is, we’ll all be on the same sheet of music. It must be paradise. The amount of knowledge that will be available... Or are we, by the year 2024, just throbbing brains on plates that are hooked up to batteries.”

“No that doesn’t come until 2030.”

“Plate brains?”

“You watch too much Star Trek.”

He had me there.

Gabe continued. “Let me ask you a question and it’s a long one.”

“OK. I’m ready.”

“What would you say if I told you that in the early 21st century, America would elect a president who had no political experience, none whatsoever. In fact, he could not even name the three branches of government. He is someone who doesn’t know how government works or..”

“I would say...”

“Hang on. Let me finish. I told you this was a long question. This person, who presents himself as a savvy businessman has actually gone bankrupt numerous times and, during his campaign, never really presents any kind of plan of what he would do as president...”

“But...”

Gabe held up his hand. “What if this guy spoke violently about different racial groups and has been married three times, has openly had mistresses and has been caught on tape bragging about sexually molesting women, including minors, and almost 30 women have stepped forward to verify those rape allegations. What if this guy was an obvious security threat and would not even qualify for America’s lowest security clearance because he is, more than likely, an agent of Russia. Russia is the only entity that would

loan him money because of his record of stiffing everyone that he has borrowed from for his failing businesses. What if this guy's evil was only outpaced by his stupidity? He won't release his tax returns or his academic transcripts because it would only confirm what many think. He is a fraud and not at all smart."

"Are you done?"

"For a bit."

"I would say that's impossible. Just the infidelities would cost him. And someone that dumb? Any little mistake a politician makes, the media amplifies it. The Religious Right would never put up with..."

"They endorse him. The Religious Right endorses him." His smile was infectious. It made me smile back. Then I laughed. Gabe continued "And believe me, this guy will never come close to being able to spell 'potato.'"

"Potato!?"

"You'll get it next year."

The potato thing threw me a little but I got back on track. "OK. I would say, if this were the case, that someone like this gets elected, the country must have been an economic wreck. Worse than the great depression. Or maybe there was some horrible calamity that struck the United States and everyone was panicky. Some sort of Soviet psych op?"

"Nope the country was in great shape, economically, thanks to the party that ran opposed to this guy. Maybe it would help you understand if you knew that the president, at the time of the election, was a two-term black man. And the person running for president against the aforementioned trainwreck is a woman. A very accomplished woman who has held high offices most of her adult life."

"A black president? A woman running for president? And their economy was good?"

"Yes."

"No scandals?"

"Well, the trainwreck had been spreading rumors, easily refuted ones, that the black president wasn't born in this country. It was kind of part and parcel to his racism. And he said the woman running for president should be 'locked up.' He never really said why, but the World Wide Web, the one that you said would lead to peace on earth, spreads the same lies he does, if you look in the right places. A lot of the disinformation comes from Russia. Let me just cut to the chase that the Internet, the WWW will provide a person so-called 'facts' and a community around those lies for just about any position a person wants to take. From the earth being flat to a pizza parlor that houses an international child trafficking ring in the basement. You should hear the stuff they made

up about Tom Hanks.”

“Tom Hanks? Bosom Buds?”

Gabe just laughed and shook his head as if my incredulity at Tom Hanks was the weirdest thing about this conversation.

“So, this guy gets elected in 2024 and you’ve come back from then to warn me about the dangers. Am I supposed to stop it? I’ve read enough science fiction to know the last thing that you would want me to do was to mess with the timeline. In nine out of ten of these stories, you would no longer exist, or I would no longer exist. Or dinosaurs would drive cars.”

“No Dave, I am talking about the year 2016. He gets reelected in 2024.”

“For a third term?”

“No. He’s not reelected president in 2020 but gets reelected in 2024.”

“He must have done a great job in that first term then. I wouldn’t have seen that coming. Is this somebody who I know?”

“Probably not. Well, in 2017, the beginning of his term, he inherits, like I said a great economy from the nation’s first Black president. First thing he does is bring Russian spies into the White House. Like I said, he sure seems like a Russian asset. He goes after the woman he was running against, who is outspoken in her warnings about Russia. He uses the Department of Justice as his own police force. He bargains with a terrorist organization for withdrawal from a war we are in. He drives up the deficit to record amounts, thanks to his tax cuts for wealthy people. The economy slips into recession. He allies himself with the group that calls themselves ‘Christian,’ but are everything but, to appoint Supreme Court justices who will overturn Roe vs. Wade. They lied during their confirmation hearings, saying that they have no intention of doing so. He attempts to kick trans people out of the military...”

“Trans people?”

“Oh yeah that really isn’t a word yet. You work with transgender people at your job. But, it is illegal for them to tell anyone that they are trans because they could lose their jobs. After laws protect them from being fired for telling the truth, they come out. The military has a lot of them. All really good at their jobs. Same with police departments, fire departments, all over really. This comes on the heels of marriage equality which makes it legal for people of the same sex to be married.”

I was stunned. It felt like my head had sunk to my stomach, and because of its new location, I was having difficulty driving.

“Whoa there! Eyes on the road. You OK?”

“Transgender like transexual, I take it?”

“Yeah kind of. There’s more to it, but there’s more to this whole thing. Anyway, this president is starting to destroy a lot of people’s lives and some are regretting voting for him. His most loyal followers are unshakable, however. He bragged during his campaign, that he could kill someone, ‘shoot them in the face’ and he wouldn’t lose any supporters. This is about the only truthful thing he says during his presidency. In fact, the final tally during his first term is a documented 30,573 lies. He promises to take millions of citizens’ healthcare insurance away and replace it with something he calls ‘wonderful.’ But he never has a plan, and thankfully, by one vote in the senate, he is prevented from destroying their lives. But one of the worst things that happens during his term is a pandemic. 450,000 people die from in it in the US alone. His lies and his inaction are directly responsible for 40% of those deaths. He tells people things will get better when the weather warms up, that they need to go to church in the middle of a quarantine, and he makes fun of those wearing masks to prevent illness. He ponders the effects of putting a disinfectant in the bloodstream. His followers don’t like the idea of a vaccine, so even though he gets vaccinated, he never encourages others to do so. The economy, by the time he leaves office, is a wreck. Millions have lost their jobs. Grocery store shelves are empty. His incompetency is staggering.”

“This sounds like a great science fiction story.”

“More like a horror movie. When he loses his bid for reelection, he says that it was because the other side cheated, even though, in private, he admits this is just another one of his lies. He encourages his followers to storm the capitol to prevent the election from being certified by the House of Representatives. And it almost works. More people die. A lot of people go to jail.”

“I would imagine he is one of them?”

“No. The incoming administration is slow to prosecute in the interest of ‘national healing.’ There are many more indictments by juries composed of citizens from all political stripes, eventually. They do convict him on 34 counts of election interference for paying off a porn star to keep their affair from going public right before the election. But, the other things he would be going to court for - things like stealing classified documents and possibly selling them to America’s enemies, along with trying to overthrow an election, well, those charges get dropped when he’s re-elected.”

“He really gets re-elected?”

“Yes.”

“OK. Well, I suppose the economy is a mess still from his first term and the president who took over get’s blamed?”

“No. In fact, the economy is better than it has ever been in the United States’ history. And this president has done more for the average working man and woman than any president in modern history. But, he is old and drops out of the race. His vice-president

who is one of the smartest people, politically most accomplished people to run for president loses. It's close but she loses."

"She? Same woman?"

"No a different one. In the only televised debate the two have she destroys him too. Shows him for the fool he is."

"And she loses?" I pondered this, this hypothetical work of fiction that he was spinning, trying to come up with a new wrinkle in his apocalyptic narrative. "OK. Well, at least you have the other branches of government to balance him out."

Thus began a laughing fit by my passenger, ending in wheezes and coughs. "Oh no. Not at all," he choked out.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the House and the Senate, who rubber-stamp whatever he wants, takes the majority."

"But, there's still the Supreme Court."

"No. Due to a sense of fair play and not knowing what kind of evil they were dealing with, the opposing party lets his party stack the court. And this stacked court, in a ruling, says that Presidents basically have the powers of a king, reversing two centuries of thought about an imperial presidency. They do this about four months before November's election."

"Well, why doesn't the President in office, use this bullshit power to keep this enemy of America out of office then?"

"He and his party still view the world as it was, as it is in your time. You should see this goofy guy's cabinet picks after the election. You should hear, well you will hear, what he has to say during and after his campaign. Ridiculous, silly stuff, almost like he is insane."

"I am sure the press had a field day with that."

"Not really. Because of their business model, they want to make the election as close as possible, so people keep tuning in, keep clicking."

"Clicking?"

"Never mind."

"That's how he got elected the first time too. He is entertaining to watch. Like a train wreck. Only the audience doesn't really understand they are on the train."

“This sounds horrible.”

“It is. Did I mention he does all of his campaigning while wearing a crudely painted on partial mask of orangish brown on his face?”

“I don’t think you did.”

“It’s a small detail, but illustrative.”

The highway remained remarkably devoid of traffic. I found myself wondering if I had fallen asleep at the wheel. I had been up most of the night flying and I was tired before I even began the drive. Such an unbelievable story. Gabe’s prognostication was so over-the-top. The scenario so ridiculous. Entertaining but ridiculous.

“No one would vote for a guy like that. Nobody. He sounds like a character from a comedy based on *The Omen*, or some other movie about the AntiChrist. I mean almost ridiculously, unbelievably so. How does he do it? Is there some magical spell? Does the Soviet Union put something in America’s water? Aliens?”

“So, you wouldn’t vote for a guy like this?”

“Hell no.”

“How about your friends, the ones who enjoy the Rush Limbaugh show?”

“Never in a million years. They worry too much about their ‘honor.’”

“So, let’s say that they do vote for him. Three times, in fact. Let’s say that you vote for this guy... Why would that be? Hypothetically.”

“Well, from what you’ve told me, I guess I should blame the World Wide Web. But, that doesn’t make sense to me. If someone continually told me lies, and I was able to factcheck those lies on the computer, I would lose faith in the liar. They would be making me look stupid. They would have no credibility. And if I didn’t bother checking those lies or caring about the truth, I would lose my credibility too. All of my friends, no matter what their political beliefs are, what their religion is, whatever, are like that. Being seen as an honorable person, a truthful person is important to them, to me.”

“You have seen how your friends find comfort and camaraderie in being angry together. When they hear their radio host tell them lies about the world, you laugh about it. But they get a lot of energy out of the hate, the deception that they are being fed. So much so, that it is never enough, guys like Rush Limbaugh will have to make up worse lies to give them the anger that they feed off of. That will be a phenomenon you will want to keep your eye on. It will explain a lot. When you contradict him and prove that he has lied to them and made them look foolish, do your friends ever resent Limbaugh?”

“No. But, at some point they would have to see that the truth has to trump their sense of comfort, addiction to anger and desire for companionship. If only for their own survival...”

Gabe had been suppressing a laugh and finally had to let it go.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, just the word ‘trumps.’ It’s just funny.

What’s wrong with the word ‘trumps’?”

“Never mind. Thank you for the ride so far.”

“Well Gabe, thanks for the entertaining, albeit far-fetched story.”

“No problem. Hey, you should really hang on to that thought, the one about the truth. It will be something that will keep you going. I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable, but someday you will be able to tell the truth about who you are and who you are seeing in San Francisco. In a very short time people will get to say who they are, who they love, who they’ve always been throughout history. Truly, the truth will set you free.”

“OK.”

That he knew I was gay should have sent a shockwave to my system. If anyone had any kind of inkling about me, it would cost me a lot, my job, my security clearance, everything. But, instead, it felt good. It made me feel stronger, more grounded. I said “OK,” not because I was embarrassed or at a loss for words, there was just an ease to it. OK.

“I am going to leave it up to you to figure out why people in thirty years would rather sacrifice their credibility and their truthfulness for this comfort, this destructive force that will destroy themselves, their dignity and their nation. The truth will be something that will keep you going. Truth is the enemy of this force that puts this man in office, the second time putting him on a throne. All of those who would rather sacrifice comfort, in order to tell and live the truth are enemies of The Enemy. Gay people, transgender people, bisexual people, lesbians, doctors, nurses, psychologists, scientists, some preachers, some parents and teachers, a lot of people from all walks of life. All these truth tellers will be the enemies of those who hate the truth. Those who hate the truth are bound in a dark comfort and a companionship of misery.” His eyes turned to the little plastic crucifix that dangled from my rearview mirror, and stayed focused there. “You are one of the few that will be able to see this corruption, this possession, sprout, grow and entangle the world.” He touched the dangling crucifix. “They will call this guy ‘woke,’ and not in the way you think. Speaking of the truth. Truth is, I could use a restroom.”

That was weird.

Almost on cue, a Chevron sign loomed tall above the next exit. I signaled for the offramp and pulled next to a pump.

“Looks like you could top off your tank. Here’s some cash for fuel.” He said “fuel” not gas. Another sign of him being an aviator. Thanks.” He went into the gas station, which also had a small market attached to it. A common thing these days, but not as common back then. I pumped the gas and went in to pay with my credit card. He was nowhere to be seen. I moved the car into one of the parking spaces in front of the station and waited for another fifteen minutes. I went back in for a final search and he was gone.

His words stuck with me over the years. And I lived through everything he said. I watched friends, who would never support a guy like Trump, especially after all of his failures - moral and economic - vote for him, again and again. They would even wear the sign of the beast on their head - a red hat with a mysterious odd demon’s name emblazoned upon it. I often think what would have happened if I hadn’t heard it all laid out in front of me so long ago. Would I have been able to resist this pull, resist fitting in better with my coworkers, resist finding community, comfort, sweet anger in the opposite of truth, with The Enemy.

About once a week I tell my husband this story. We are old now. Nothing like the days of yore when I wore a crisp flight suit instead of a fading airline pilot’s dusty uniform. He smiles each time I tell it. And when I finish he always holds my hand, kisses me on the cheek and says, “The truth is I love you.”