

WHAT I THOUGHT IN SWEETGRASS
A LITTLE EXERCISE IN GOVERNMENT PHILOSOPHY

By Dave Olson, 1988

"Where you going?" His first question. A little vague.

Well I'll tell you. That's a toughie. I wish I knew. Finish school, get a job, wife, kids, that sort of thing. Or maybe not. You know how it goes. It was just a thought. A logical answer to his question.

"Utah." The reply.

"Where you been?" Another question. A thinking man's question at that.

A whole load of places, Disneyland even. Remind me to tell

you about this great little diner in Nebraska sometime. How about you? Religiously speaking, however, I couldn't tell exactly. Too deep for me. Just another thought.

"Just up skiing in Banff."

"How long were you out of the country?"

Long enough to spend every bit of our money, see the sights, take advantage of the 18 year old drinking age, lock the keys in the car, get three flat tires, get ripped off, be savagely humiliated, not to mention the headaches and general frustration. Kind of a hellish trip all in all.

"Oh, about four or five days."

"Four or five?"

Well, sorry, Mr. Picky. You writing a book?

"Since Wednesday night."

"What's your purpose?"

Ah! There we go, the eternal question. Why the heck are we

on this sphere anyhow? Tell you one thing though, I'm pretty damn sure my purpose isn't the same as yours.

"Just four college boys taking off for Thanksgiving to go dig some scenery."

"What's your status?"

Basic flesh and bones, mostly H2O, carbon, et cetera. These questions are getting boring. How about a game of Trivial Pursuit? He really ought to be more specific.

"American and one resident alien."

"Alien, huh? You boys park over there and go inside. I'm going to need some identification from each of you."

Grrrrr. The bastard.

Sweetgrass, Montana. Functional, run of the mill, one story prairie town with an uncommonly cool name. The home of the valiant border station that would herald our return to the land of the free and the brave. Functional, run of the mill, one story, cinder brick, sterile, plain, not real big but not too small. Basic government issue building.

We traded slices of I.D. for small, white, typewritten pieces of interrogation. They came with quarter-inch thick instruction manuals. Basic government issue forms. Believing for a moment that we would be treated fairly in this bastion of justice, we collectively scribbled nothings on the form and slid them across the warped counter top. We stood and looked at them until some dude in tight, polyester, basic government issue border guard garb came over to perform his part of the slow mental torture. He stared over at us. His beady pig eyes staring. This could really suck rocks.

"You through filling out these forms?"

"Guess so, found them a bit confusing though, on this part here it said ..."

"Anything you would like to correct?"

"Uh, no." He checked a box saying that he asked the required questions and left to talk to another border dude, a guy wearing piss-yellow shooting glasses, just in case he had to cut down some illegal at 100 yards or maybe just to look cool. They whispered, pointed at us, then laughed.

Laughed. Not a good sign.

He came back fully armed and barraged us with a salvo of questions. "Do you have on your person or in your vehicle any firearms? Controlled drugs? Alcohol? Products of endangered species? Stolen goods? Mexicans in the trunk, slave chicks..." A red flush began to boil, filling his slab of stinking, leathery flesh.

Checking boxes like a mad man, he continued, "Do you understand that any mistruths, intentional or not, will be held against you as evidence and be cause for you to forfeit all of your belongings to the government of the United States?" His pulse was going through the stratosphere. What the hell was he so excited about? I was nervous. Pretty damn nervous. "Fresh fruit? Wild animal products? Food? Minerals?"

We started to categorize, justify, qualify and beg for every meager possession we had in our car. Sweaters from thrift stores, maps, free pamphlets, food in our bellies, rocksalt from the road.

"So now the truth comes out. Why didn't you put that on the form? What were you thinking?!" His ears, his baldhead, his hands, his sideburns reddened, or maybe even purpled. The veins in his neck were throbbing, pumping. Ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-

thump. Hey careful Mr. Borderman, don't let your neck explode.
"You didn't claim anything on Form # d-2 62USDA X-1 w3456!!! Are
you kids dumb?!"

"Well, gee. What do you know? Guess we forgot a few
things."

"Forgot!" Ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump. "Do you realize the
potential consequences?"

We listened to one of those speeches you hear a lot in third
grade. Something about how the world of customs duty would
collapse causing the world to crumble if he forgot to brush his
teeth, filled out his forms wrong, picked his nose or something.
"We have no choice but to search your car."

So began the bargaining process.

"Well, come to think of it, we do have a loaf of bread and a
few cheese slices to get us home, and a friend donated a big chunk
of deer sausage and...."

But he didn't care. His veins were really thumping now. I
hated him. I wanted to grab his goddamn jugular vein between my
canine teeth and pull until the stinking bastard lay withering on

the floor. Then I would laugh with my faced smeared with his blood, arteries hanging from my teeth. Maybe not that, but I hoped with everything I had that his children would know what a ass their father was. Bastard.

Half an hour later, ten minutes had past. We slouched in four chairs, our backs towards the windows for all to see. Give us your hungry, your tired, your forlorn, your stupid; it says something like that on the Statue of Liberty, I think. But as forlorn as we were, we waited. And waited.

Waited as our emotions twisted and contorted through the hours, zooming between realms of depression, frustration, rebellion, hostility, and helplessness. Across in another room was a portrait of President Ronald Wilson Reagan. Something to stare at as the noonday sun heated backs of necks and fueled fires of nasty thoughts.

"Ron, stop laughing at us, give us a break, I didn't mean any of those things I said about you. You're the President, it's up to you to help us out. You appointed someone, who appointed someone, who appointed someone, to okay the hiring of these meatheads. We've been through a lot. Forgive us, we know not what we do. Hey, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, or any of those other constitutional dudes wouldn't approve of this garbage,

really."

That's it! I've figured this whole mess out. It has something to do with the Constitution. The guy just doesn't understand. But it's too late. We told the guy everything, and he didn't care and now he was out tearing apart the car just sure a kilo of cocaine somewhere.

The guy with the piss-yellow glasses walked by, I asked if the oil pan had been taken off yet. He said maybe. I thought he was joking. He wasn't. I had been.

Not a good sign.

Cars kept passing through. We were the only ones they had called in. Little old ladies who probably had a dozen illegals in their trunks, cowboys with a ton of pot mixed in with the horse poop in their trucks, Indians, Rednecks, tough guys, bikers and Hutterites with funny looking beards. They all went through with no hassle, except for us.

I watched them and thought of how to gently tell the guy that he didn't have to go through the trouble of searching us. The Constitution had been written to make everyone free, to do away with dumb rules. He would probably thank me. His job would be so

much easier. I'd figured the whole thing out after all. I was now a political science wizard. Either that that or just a bored person who was trying to be smart.

I would tell him that it was all right to ask a few questions--necessary precautions and all--and look up your license plate number maybe, but remember friend: Government that governs least, governs best. I'd allow him the opportunity to apologize and let him keep his job if he had cute pictures of his kids (sympathy factor) after all, government by the people, for the people and all that. He would breathe a sigh of relief and send us on our way.

He came in for a moment. He was carrying our box of treasure, our lifeblood, provisions to feed four hungry souls for the long journey home; a nine-pound box of mandarin oranges. Japanese Mandarins! Panic. Things had gone a little bit too far. I went up to have a little talk.

Marching boldly up, I swallowed hard and looked him in the eye, "Umm, where's the bathroom?"

"Can't allow you to use it in the event that a more thorough search becomes needed." Yikes!

I returned to my seat to contemplate the now huge and still growing list of bad signs. It was bad enough that he was reaching into our packs to find brown-streaked underwear; but now he was going to probe us. The border bastards stood around, talking and laughing. "So who gets this box? No thanks, I already have plenty. The back room empty? Is it gonna get used? Ha, ha, ha." They aren't border guards; they're a bunch of food pirates and amateur proctologists.

My accomplices in innocence and I sat locked to our chairs with verbal chains, left alone to dwell on the horrible things we couldn't see. All our tough guy aggressions that we had managed to muster up again crashed to the floor as the sight of his pulsing veins reminded us that we were prisoners, not of any country but of a room full of government issue border guards. Horny, cavity-searching, rednecked border guards with flashlights and piss-yellow sunglasses.

He had managed to think up a new load of redundant, meaningless questions which partially rekindled the thirst for direct and forceful contact. Almost. But not that much.

He explained how we almost single-handedly destroyed the agricultural machine of the U. S. of A. Quite a serious guilt trip, I'm sure. We thanked him for saving our intestines from the

delightful chunks of fruit that apparently overflowed with miscellaneous larvae. Then with a bit of fanfare he proclaimed our humble bundle of oranges seized. We asked if we could each have one to eat. His veins almost blew up. Ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump. So much for the philosophy.

We zoomed off after urinating on the bathroom floor (we couldn't kill him, so our adolescent prank had to suffice for revenge). Miles away, while reassembling our car, four oranges appeared from under a seat. Laughing, we enshrined the peels in a field. I reckon Thomas Jefferson would've let us keep our oranges.

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