

Pleasantville

Matthew stared at the spray of antifreeze in disgust. For years he'd been forced to drive broken down wrecks because they were the only cars he could afford. He expected to have problems with those cars, and he was seldom disappointed. But now, for the first time in his life, he owned a car that was less than five years old. And on his first major Interstate trip, he blew a radiator hose?

Fortunately, when he traded in his last junker for this car he'd moved the box of emergency repair tools from the old car to the new one. Amid the rusted pliers, corroded screwdrivers, dirty rags, and other moldering items he found a roll of duct tape he carried for just such an emergency. He cleaned the split radiator hose and tightly wrapped the tape around it. Several cars and a large truck whizzed past him as he worked under the hood. He'd pulled as far off the road as he could, but still the noise and wind startled him as each vehicle shot past. You don't realize how fast you're going when you're sitting in a sealed car, cruising down the highway and listening to the radio. It's only when you're stranded by the side of the road that you understand how fast each car that blasts past you is going.

Matthew had pulled off the road as soon as the high temperature light came on, and the engine had cooled considerably while he searched for the tape and repaired the hose, so he decided it was safe to start the engine and add water. He had packed several bottles of drinking water for the trip and he slowly poured them into the radiator. They would have to do. He was pretty sure he'd stopped before he lost too much coolant anyway. He left the radiator cap loose, the way his father had taught him, so the pressure wouldn't build up and destroy his duct tape patch. He shut the hood and got back on the road, searching for the next exit. He didn't have to search long. "Pleasantville – next exit."

It turned out the town of Pleasantville was at least five miles from the Interstate, but once he got off the Interstate he could drive slowly to nurse his car into town. The high temp light came on again just as he entered the town, and about two blocks further on he saw "Fred's Auto Repair" on the right.

Fred looked to be in his late 20s. Medium build, trim, and wearing cleaner coveralls than the mechanics Matthew was used to dealing with. The whole shop looked clean, but Matthew also noticed there weren't many cars in the shop. Fred told him he didn't carry radiator hoses in stock, but he'd check with his suppliers in nearby towns and see how soon he could get one. He suggested Matthew check back with him in about an hour.

"Aren't there any parts stores in this town?" Matthew asked.

Fred shook his head no. "Used to be one," he said, "but it closed about two years ago. Not enough business since people started driving golf carts."

"They don't drive cars?" Matthew asked.

"They do if they're going to make a long trip," Fred answered. "A few of the rich folks drive electric cars. Most everybody else has a regular car, but they use golf carts for shopping, going to work, and

other short trips. Nobody wants to be seen driving a car in town. Carts are better for the environment. It's the right thing to do."

"Have you got a card with your number so I can call you?" Matthew asked.

Fred blushed and avoided eye contact. "Uh, I don't have a phone at the moment. My wife ran it through the washing machine. She didn't know my phone was in my coveralls, and I didn't know she was going to do laundry that night. I've gotta go back to the house and use her phone to look for your parts. Afraid you'll have to come back here to talk to me. It's a small town."

Fred suggested a café where Matthew could get lunch, then climbed into a golf cart and scooted off to use his wife's phone.

Matthew wasn't particularly hungry, so instead of walking straight to the café he took his time and explored several side streets. He was impressed by how, well, *pleasant* everything looked in Pleasantville. The houses were all well-kept, with flowers growing around the foundation and freshly mowed lawns. If there was a fence around a house, it was in good repair and freshly painted. The street signs all looked brand new, businesses were nicely landscaped, and the few vacant commercial buildings were neatly landscaped with unobtrusive "for rent" or "for sale" signs.

The "Cozy Corner Café" Fred had recommended was clean and welcoming. The lighting was just right – not dim but not too bright – and there was a fresh bouquet of flowers on every table. Unfortunately, the menu was not quite as appealing. It probably would have been appealing to a vegan, but Matthew was in the mood for a hamburger and fries. He asked if perhaps he had been given the vegan menu by mistake, but that was the only menu they had. He finally settled for a "better than beef" patty on a brioche roll with a side of toasted squash strips. When his meal came he decided the only creature who would think the patty was better than beef was a cow. Actually, a cow might enjoy it because it tasted like alfalfa. The toasted squash strips smelled like the jack-o-lantern they'd forgotten and left on their porch until Thanksgiving, but the brioche roll wasn't bad. The waitress was very perky and efficient, though, so Matthew kept his opinions of the food to himself. He paid the bill, left a generous tip, and walked back to Fred's.

"They have the parts you need in Pine Grove," Fred told him. "Their delivery truck had already left, but they'll get them on tomorrow morning's run and they should be here in the afternoon."

"How far away is Pine Grove?" Matthew asked. "If you put some fresh tape on my radiator hose, could I drive it there and have someone fix it today?"

Fred shook his head no. "I think you damaged the temperature sending unit when your car overheated," he said. "In any event, the computer threw an emission code. I can't let you drive away until I fix whatever generated that code. There's a town ordinance against that."

Matthew was debating whether or not he should offer Fred \$50 to tape up the hose when he saw an electric police car cruise by. The car stopped, and the officer inside rolled down the window and took a picture of Matthew's car.

"I had to report the emission code to the police department," Fred said apologetically. "That's in the ordinance. Best I can do is give you a lift to the motel." Matthew took a suitcase out of his car, put it in the back of Fred's golf cart, and with a whine the cart scooted them down the road. There was only one motel in town, the "Shady Oak." Like everything else in town it looked clean and well kept, three buildings with four rooms in each building nestled around a large oak tree. One building was a little longer than the others, with a freshly painted "Office" sign over the room at one end of the building.

"I'd like a non-smoking room, please," Matthew said to the man inside.

"All our rooms are non-smoking," the manager assured him. "Our check-in time isn't until 3 PM, though, and the maid is still cleaning the units. If you wouldn't mind coming back after 3, I can hold that luggage for you."

So, once again Matthew found himself walking through the town to kill time. As 3 o'clock approached he was about to head back to the motel when he spotted a used book store. It occurred to him that it might be 24 hours or more before he could get back on the road, so a good book or two sounded like an excellent idea. The gentle tinkle of a bell announced his entrance. A frail looking, middle aged man with round glasses and a green cardigan sweater welcomed him from behind the sales counter in the middle of the room. The man asked if he was looking for anything in particular and Matthew assured him he was just browsing.

As Matthew wandered through the store he began to wonder if the people who ran the Cozy Corner Café selected the books for this store. There were lots of self-help books, inspirational books for women, craft books, books on the world's great philosophers, new-age gardening books, and books on many other similar topics – none of which interested Matthew in the least. He was about to give up when he noticed a cardboard box of books sitting in a back corner of the room. Mostly paperbacks, he found three Zane Grey westerns and two Philip Marlowe detective stories in the box. None of them had a price tag.

"How much for these?" he asked, placing the books on the sales counter.

"Where did you find those books?" the man in the green sweater asked. He was staring at the books in horror, and Matthew thought he detected fear in the man's voice.

"They were in that cardboard box in the corner," Matthew said, pointing to the box.

"I assure you I had no idea these books were in that box," the man said. "I got that box in a closeout sale from a store in another town, and I haven't yet checked them in."

"Well, how much do you want for them anyway?" Matthew asked.

“These books are not for sale,” the man said firmly. “These are for recycling.”

“What’s wrong with ‘em?” Matthew asked.

The man looked at him in disbelief. “Why, they glorify violence! Gunplay! They denigrate Native Americans! And these books,” he said pointing to the Philip Marlowe mysteries, “objectify women. I can’t sell these! That wouldn’t be the right thing to do.” He scooped them up and dropped them into a recycling bin behind the counter. Matthew left without any books. Obviously the bookseller was some sort of a new-age nutcase, but why was there fear in his voice?”

Matthew thought about this as he walked back to the motel. Something about this town just seemed a little off. It was like everything was too perfect. Well, not perfect in the way Matthew would like, not with that “better than beef” patty, but perfect in the way he imagined old ladies would like. Then he realized there was something else strange about the town. He hadn’t seen any kids. Earlier in the day the older kids had probably been in school, but he hadn’t seen any younger kids. And now it was almost four o’clock. The kids should be out of school by now, but there weren’t any kids riding bikes, playing baseball, or playing in the playgrounds. He walked past a couple of playgrounds – with freshly painted swings and slides, jungle gyms, and not a trace of litter anywhere – but no kids.

When Matthew checked into the motel he asked the manager he thought he’d have any vacancies the following day. “My car’s supposed to be fixed tomorrow,” he said, “but so far nothing on this trip has gone according to plan. If I have to stay another night, would that be a problem?”

“No problem at all,” the manager said. “We almost always have at least one room vacant. Just let me know as soon as possible.”

Matthew decided to ask him about the children. “I walked around town this afternoon, and I was surprised I didn’t see any kids. No kids in the playground, no kids in the ball fields, no kids just hangin’ around being kids. You do have kids in this town, don’t you?”

“Of course we do!” The manager sounded slightly offended. “We have hundreds of safe, supervised activities for children. In addition to the normal after school activities we have sports programs, arts and crafts, nature hikes, movies, and many other programs for children. Sometimes the stay-at-home moms or dads will supervise play dates and playground periods for the pre-school children. What we don’t allow are unsupervised children ‘hanging around’ as you put it. That’s not safe for the children, it’s not productive, and it can lead to gang activity. It’s not the right thing to do. Any parent who lets a child under 16 roam unsupervised can be charged with child neglect.”

Matthew thought this sounded terrible. He remembered all the fun he’d had doing unsupervised activities as a kid. Playing pirates, superheroes, deep sea divers. Exploring the neighborhood woods. He learned a lot about leadership, planning, and socialization from those activities. He made a lot of mistakes, too, but he learned from his mistakes. He didn’t want to start an argument with the manager, though, so he simply said “Oh, I didn’t know that.” The manager gave him a key and he checked into his room.

He spent a couple hours watching inane programs on television before hunger pangs stirred him to venture out again. Vowing not to say anything controversial, he stopped by the office to ask the manager where he could get a good steak.

“Pine Grove” was the manager’s answer. “The head of our town’s health department is a vegan, and he doesn’t believe it’s healthy for humans to eat animal products so he won’t give a license to any restaurant that serves them. I suppose it is healthier, for the animals anyway.” He smiled and shook his head as he said this, so Matthew guessed the manager didn’t entirely agree with it.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a town that did that,” Matthew said.

The manager shrugged. “He’s just doing what he thinks is right. What’s the old saying? I may not agree with what he’s doing, but I’ll defend to the death his right to do it? The needs of the many and all that. We elected him, so I guess we gotta go along with it.”

“What about the constitution, and the idea of individual rights and limited government?”

The manager’s smile faded. “I’m not a lawyer,” he said. “I just know what’s right. My mother used to say you could either accept the world as it is or complain and make everyone miserable. All the restaurants in this town are vegan. If you want something that tastes like regular food you might try the spaghetti marinara at the Villa Roma. They’ve got good breadsticks there, too. Or try the perogies at the Bountiful Table. They’ve got a good vegetable soup to go with it.”

Matthew opted for the perogies. They were good, he thought as he walked back to the motel, but he couldn’t help thinking they would have been better if they’d had a bit of meat in them. He watched a few more hours of TV and was thinking about going to bed when there was a soft knock on his door. He answered the door and was surprised to see it was Fred, the car mechanic. Fred made it clear that he wanted to slip inside and shut the door as quickly as possible.

“I don’t think anyone saw me,” Fred said when they were both inside. “I parked on another block and avoided streetlights when I came here.”

“Why are you trying to hide?” Matthew asked.

“Because you’re a pariah!” Fred answered. “You’re all over MyTown.”

“What’s MyTown?” Matthew asked.

“It’s a social media site for small communities,” Fred said. “The mayor’s wife started a page for Pleasantville and pretty soon all her friends joined in. They posted notes about what they liked about the town and, more importantly, what they didn’t like. don’t know how they became the sole judge of what ‘the right thing to do’ was, but it soon became clear that anyone who disagreed with them would be hooted down. They weren’t just ridiculed on the web page, either. They were harassed at work, and if they ran a business their business was shunned.”

“You’re kidding!” Matthew said in amazement.

Fred shook his head no. “I wish I was,” he said. I’ve got a 1967 Mustang tucked away in my garage. I’ve had it since high school, and I slowly fixed it up over the years. My kids used to love to go for rides in it. One day one of my kids told a friend at school about it, and the next day there were all kinds of comments on the page about how I was setting a bad example by letting my kids ride in a car with no air bags and no emission controls. My kids started getting bullied at school. Their friends told them their dad drove a ‘gas guzzler,’ a ‘death trap,’ and a ‘planet destroyer.’ People started taking their cars all the way to Pine Grove for service and repairs. It was six months before everything blew over and my business returned to normal.”

Fred stopped for a moment to calm down and compose his thoughts. “The town lost a lot of good people because of that web page,” he said sadly. “People didn’t want to put up with the harassment so they left. The ones who stayed either agreed with the views on the web page or kept quiet about it. It wasn’t long until the only people who could win an election were the ones who had the blessing of the MyTown crowd. That’s how we wound up with vegan restaurants and no free-range kids.”

“Why didn’t you leave?” Matthew asked.

“My business is here,” Fred said. “All my kid’s friends are here. And my wife thinks that web page is the greatest thing in the world. She didn’t like it when the kids were getting bullied, but she thought the solution was for me to sell the Mustang.”

“What does all this have to do with me?” Matthew asked.

“I’m afraid things are going to get ugly,” Fred answered. “According to the web page, you’re a right wing gun nut who supports violence, is against women and Native Americans, and who thinks individual rights take precedence over the greater good of society.”

Matthew stared at Fred in stunned silence.

“Those are just the highlights,” Fred said.

“I found a couple of Westerns and a detective story at a used book store, but the store refused to sell them to me. I couldn’t understand why he seemed so upset about it.”

“Ahhh,” Fred said. “That’s probably what started it. The store owner was terrified you’d go on the web page and describe the books he was selling, so he decided to strike first by telling the world you wanted to buy those books but he refused to sell them. Then everyone else you’ve met since you got here chimed in, to make certain people knew they were on the ‘right side’ of the issue. They gang up on you like that, and your friends will keep silent for fear they’ll be next.”

Just then there came a knock on the door. “Don’t let anyone know I’m here,” Fred whispered as he slipped into the bathroom.

Matthew opened the door and it was the motel manager.

“You asked about staying an extra night,” he said. We booked a conference so we don’t have any rooms.”

“I didn’t know you had a conference center,” Matthew replied.

“They’re not holding the conference here. They’re just staying here.”

“They waited till the last moment to book, didn’t they?” Matthew commented.

“We don’t have any rooms available.” The manager scowled as he said this.

“OK. I understand. No room tomorrow,” Matthew said as the manager turned and walked away.

Matthew closed the door and sat down on the bed. Fred came out of the bathroom.

“See?” Fred said. “It’s only going to get worse. I called my friend who runs the parts store in Oak Grove. He’s going to open early so I can pick up the parts you need. We live on the edge of town, so if I start early I can slip out, drive to Oak Grove, and come back without anyone noticing. I should have your car finished by nine AM, so if you get to the shop then you can leave town before anyone else decides to hassle you.”

Fred slipped out the door and was gone. The next morning Matthew checked out of the hotel at eight AM. The manager never said a word to him. He just handed Matthew the bill, took his credit card, and charged it for the room. Matthew thought it best to skip breakfast. He carried his suitcase to Fred’s Auto Repair and waited while Fred finished his car.

“You’re all set,” Fred said cheerfully as he handed Matthew the key and a receipt for the repair. “Better keep the receipt handy in case you need to show it to the police. I notified them that I fixed the emissions issue, but they may want to check it just to make sure. They still don’t entirely trust me because of the Mustang.”

Sure enough, the police stopped Matthew within a block of Fred’s garage. He showed them the receipt, and started the car so they could see that the “Check Engine” light went off once the car started. They made him sit and let the car idle for fifteen minutes to prove that it didn’t come back on. They said Fred could have just “cleared the code” which apparently would have made the light go out temporarily, but if the problem wasn’t really fixed it would come back on. When it didn’t, they grudgingly let him leave. He was happy to see Pleasantville in his rear view mirror.