

Liar! Liar! Pants on Fire!

Judge Judy frequently repeats the worn-out joke that the sure way to know if teenagers are lying is if their lips are moving. I resent and object to that stereotypical condemnation of all teenagers. I was not like that. I was brought up to be good religious boy. I didn't steal, I didn't cheat, I didn't use profanity, I didn't fornicate and I especially did not *prevaricate*! Never! Not, usually. Sometimes, maybe. Little ones. The white kind. Like stretching the truth a little or just fibbing a little to avert something unpleasant as long as you did it for a good reason.

Like in 1958.

Days after I graduated from high school, our economically challenged family packed our meager belongings into our 1955 Ford and took the Grapes of Wrath Trail (Route 66) west. We landed in Bell Gardens (AKA Billy Goat Acres), California, where my three brothers and I were soon immersed in a group of religious teenagers. It was a great group. Every Saturday we went en masse to Huntington Beach to bodysurf, toast marshmallows around a campfire, and sing along with some extroverted, ukulele -playing Hawaiian teenagers that were part of the church group.

These beach gatherings actually started at the church parking lot where about fifteen to twenty of us would strategically arrange for rides to the beach. Without appearing too obvious, the trick for a boy was to end up in a cool car driven by an older teenager with a driver's license, and lucky enough to own a car, and to hook up with an even cooler member of the opposite sex. The Hawaiian boys were not only musicians but were athletes as well so they had their own groupies within the group. Some of the kids were "in love" and thus off limits to the otherwise unattached.

On this particular day, God was with me. My older brother Stoy had just purchased the coolest car on the planet. A flashy red 1958 Edsel convertible with enough chrome to blind on a sunny day. Claiming familial rights, I had dibs on the back seat. Joining Stoy in the front seat was his girlfriend de jour, Cinderella. Not her real name but the analogy fit. Twenty-two-year-old Stoy was the patriarch of the group and he was her Prince Charming in his gilded carriage. After all the jockeying was over, my backseat companion amazingly turned out to be none other than Godiva! Not her real name but the analogy fit, as did the fantasy. She was very blonde.

On the way to the beach, Cinderella sat in the middle of the front seat as a polite concession to the two younger, more bashful, less experienced, near-strangers in the back. Godiva and I sat at opposite ends of the backseat of course. She, because it was appropriate since she didn't really know me. I, because I was shy, insecure, and clueless. Stoy and Cinderella were having a lively conversation up front. I was nervously looking with fascination at the telephone poles planted along the roadside.

Finally, Godiva asked, “So, Ralph, I note that you have a southern accent. Where are you from?”

“Abba dabba doo.”

“What?”

“Babba goodipsy.”

(I probably didn’t say those exact words or even close to it. That conversation took place sixty-four years ago but I do recall that I was nervous and a bit tongue-tied.)

Since my mouth obviously wasn’t working we spent the rest of the hour drive to the beach in silence. Because the top was down, Godiva’s long blonde hair was blowing seductively in the wind and my mind wandered, wondering if she owned a white horse. My flattop, on the other hand, had wilted with perspiration and was lying flat even though I had applied a generous dose of butch wax earlier in the day.

The mood of the night time return trip to the church parking lot was, however, different. It was charged with electricity. Something happens to teenagers surrounded by other scantily clad teenagers huddled around a campfire at sunset. Hormonal things. Stoy had turned off the radio and was engaged in an inaudible private conversation with Cinderella. She was no longer sitting in the middle of the front seat, but was now joined at the hip with my brother. His right arm had surreptitiously snaked along the back of the seat while he navigated with his left hand maneuvering the rotating steering wheel knob used by all teenage boys at that time.

Even Godiva was now in the mood. She decided to meet me halfway in the back seat, and even took the initiative to re start our aborted conversation. I was bewildered.

“So, Ralph, Where did you say you were from?”

“Arkansas.”

“How interesting! And when did you come to California?”

“A little while back.”

“How interesting! And why are you here?”

“I moved here.”

“How interesting! But *why* did you move here?”

Stoy and Cinderella were no longer talking but were romantically quiet and occasionally casting knowing glances at one another. I didn’t know what was expected of me. Actually, I did

know, but I didn't know how to do it. I couldn't think of anything more to say but I knew I needed to say something. Something *interesting*.

I blurted out, "I had to leave Arkansas! The police were after me!"

"What! Why were the police after you?"

She moved away just a bit. Why did I say that? Keep talking anyway. Don't stop. Anything that comes to mind.

"Well, you see, in the back of our house in North Little Rock was a wild four-o'clock plant. I loved that flower! I loved how every afternoon at precisely four o'clock all the flowers would burst forth in bloom simultaneously and at nightfall the petals would collapse only to re open the next afternoon all at the same time. I thought that was fascinating, but the flower itself was very small, too small, so I decided to try different kinds of fertilizer to make the flower more robust and soon I discovered one that did the trick. The bloom size got bigger. The more I experimented, the bigger and more beautiful the flower became. All the neighbors were soon talking about it and even asked if they could have one or two of my plants."

Godiva moved back.

"How interesting! But that doesn't explain why the *police* were after you. Why were they after you? What did you do?"

Stoy and Cinderella had not only stopped talking but were now both listening to me.

Keep talking.

"Well, I decided to go commercial. I started selling my plants. I even bought the vacant lot adjoining my father's house. My reputation grew and soon I had customers from all over the state of Arkansas. I started a mail order business and was shipping my hybrid flowers all over the country. I was making so much money that I quit school my senior year and dedicated myself to nothing but my horticultural enterprise. I had many employees."

She moved even closer.

"That's fascinating! But, I don't understand. Why didn't you stay there? And, oh yeah, what about the police?"

Oh yeah, the damn police. Stoy's shoulders were shaking as he had started to giggle. I felt a bit guilty but it seemed to be working out for me. Now, how to end this?

"Well, something bad happened. One day one of my four-o'clocks starting blooming at five-o'clock. And then another one. And then another. Not just in Arkansas but in Mississippi, and Oklahoma, and even way out in Oregon. My customers were irate. They started sending me

nasty threatening letters. I had to change my telephone number. I tried to find the reason for the change in the flower but I couldn't. A class action lawsuit was soon brought against me so that I lost my entire fortune. The police were starting to harass me. All our neighbors turned against us. My family was disgraced all because of me, so we left the state and that's why we're here."

"How terrible! You poor thing!"

This was great.

"Ralph, uh, did you leave a girlfriend back in Arkansas?"

"Yes! Yes I did! She's exotic and intelligent, and beautiful, and she loves me and she still writes me letters every day!"

Was that the right thing to say? Maybe not. Maybe. Maybe not.

"Oh...and do you write back?"

"No! Well, almost never."

"That's terrible, Ralph! How can you be so mean?"

Ooops.

"Well, when I do write, I write a long letter."

She moved back to the extreme far side of the seat just as we arrived back at the church parking lot.

It was only a little white lie and I was immediately sorry, but it was too late. I don't know what happened to Godiva. I never saw her again and that's too bad because I had planned to invite her to go horseback riding.