



# Holiday Road by Jonathan Riggs

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In my experience, a vacation with friends isn't really over until you all hate each other. Passionately.

It began when my friend Stephen got fired from his job. Now before I go any farther, you should know that Stephen is legally blind, and loving it. He prefers to draw disability or "suck on the government's teat" as he puts it. One time, though, he decided to venture out into the world of employment. Somehow, and I still don't know how, he got a pretty lucrative job doing computer work. Pulling in a steady paycheck did little for his general misanthropy and negative outlook, however.

"I'm an ass in a chair, dude," Stephen would say.

After a few months, the company apparently decided that their need for "asses in chairs" had decreased, and Stephen, that bundle of sunshine, was among the first to go.

My friends David and Dustin and I thought we'd take Stephen on a trip to make him feel better.

"I don't feel bad, dude," Stephen said. "Back to the government's teat."

We should have let him suckle in peace.

An overnight camping trip in Tennessee sounded like a good idea at the time. Not too long, something out of the ordinary, something outside of Kentucky. For my part, I think I was confusing memories of trips to a water park with actual camping trips, but nothing could dampen our spirits. We practiced setting up the tent in Dustin's backyard and talked about how much fun it would be to do it for real.

The day we left, Stephen was the most excited I had ever seen him since he realized that he could use the school-issued disability laptop to play Doom.

"Camping!" he kept yelling, and at first it was annoying. But then, as we started to drive off, the reality of our upcoming vacation took over, and we got caught up in the excitement. I liken it to that moment in a sitcom right before the credits roll, where someone does something wacky and everyone looks at each other for a second and then bursts into wide-open-mouthed laughter. We couldn't even help it.

"Camping!" Stephen would yell, and we would all start laughing.

The excitement, like Stephen's professional career, lasted all too briefly.

Thanks to an illegibly written set of directions and a general lack of navigational sense, we got lost and made the five-hour trip in about eight. Or maybe ten. By the time we got to the campsite, it was early evening, and we had to rush to set up the tent. And let me just say that the word "rush" rarely ever successfully precedes the phrase "setting up the tent." What was so easy in Dustin's backyard was practically impossible in the darkening evening in the woods. To make matters worse, Stephen had appointed himself supervisor while we struggled in the twilight, dropping tent poles on each other's feet and tripping over roots.

"Put that rod over there," Stephen would direct, and like the corporate slaves we were destined to become, we would grumble to ourselves but then do it.

I think I was going to break first, until Stephen said, "Camping!" again in that way he had, full of hope and excitement, and I just couldn't bust out the "blind leading the blind" comment that I wanted to.

"Camping!" Stephen repeated, trying to recapture the earlier feelings.

"Camping," we all mumbled, and about twenty minutes later, the tent stood. Well, leaned was more like it.

"We should make a fire," David said.

It was a good idea, but we had no wood. And in another demonstration of in-your-face irony, only Stephen had remembered to bring a flashlight.

"We can collect some in the woods. Follow me," he said, turning on the flashlight and stepping into the woods.

Perhaps inspired by a recent viewing of "The Blair Witch Project", or maybe just invigorated by the fresh air, Stephen started running through the woods, giggling. One thing you forget, living in a city, is how dark it is in a forest, even when you're surrounded by other campers, and Stephen's flashlight was the only thing we could see.

Hearing “Camping!” screamed in the dark woods probably didn’t do much for anyone else trying to sleep in the area, and I’m sure many children had nightmares because of it. I know I did.

When we finally rounded him up and got back to the campsite, we were too tired for a campfire.

“We can’t just go to sleep,” Stephen said.

“Why not?” I grumbled.

“This trip is for me,” Stephen added. He held the flashlight underneath his chin, producing a truly frightening effect. “I want to tell ghost stories.”

Since his most recent unemployment, Stephen had developed an unhealthy belief/obsession with the paranormal and spent hours on his online journal documenting his own experiences. These experiences ranged from a possible UFO sighting (later verified as a streetlight) to the terrifying time that Stephen had answered the phone, only to find that no one was on the line.

“You go first,” David said.

“I had another experience with the other realm,” Stephen said.

It was too dark to see, but I imagine that the three of us had the same reaction.

“I read about it,” Dustin said. “Whoever was knocking on your front door probably got tired of waiting and left. I don’t think it was a spirit.”

“That hasn’t been confirmed,” Stephen answered angrily.

There was a silence.

“Time to get some sleep!” David broke in, and it sounded like the best idea of the day.

We went inside the tent, and everyone unrolled their sleeping bags.

“What is that?” Dustin asked as Stephen pulled out his bag from his pack.

“My sleeping bag,” Stephen said, proudly.

David and I couldn’t help but stare as well. We all recognized it from elementary school sleepovers at Stephen’s house. While they were the height of cool back in the day, *The Real Ghostbusters* looked a little faded these days.

“How are you going to fit in that?” I asked.

“It’s fine,” Stephen said, and unzipped the paper-thin bag. What was warm enough for living room carpet was obviously not suited for real, outdoors camping. We all watched as he struggled to wriggle inside.

“It only comes up to your waist,” Dustin said.

“Shut up,” Stephen hissed. “I’m fine.”

“Aren’t you going to be cold?” I asked.

He clicked off the flashlight angrily.

“I had forgotten that there was a glow-in-the-dark Slimer on it,” David said.

“Shut up!” Stephen hissed again.

The next morning, thanks to the promise of leaving, some of the good cheer had returned. Briefly.

“You’re taking the tent down all wrong,” Stephen said. “I could do a better job myself.”

“Why don’t you?” I asked.

Wrong thing to say.

In fact, the trip home was full of the wrong things to say being said.

“You should get a haircut,” Dustin told Stephen.

“Cut that mullet,” David chimed in.

“I really appreciate your suggestions,” Stephen said. “How about the three of you go fuck yourselves?”

We let silence take it over from there.

When the long and tense car ride was finally over, we pulled up in front of Stephen’s house.

“Thanks for the trip,” Stephen said.

“You’re welcome,” I said, thinking that maybe all those years of friendship really meant something after all.

“What I meant to say,” Stephen continued. “Is thanks for nothing!”

He got out of the car and slammed the door.

David looked at me, and then I looked at Dustin.

Stephen walked back around to the trunk to get his sleeping bag. He started pounding on the trunk for David to open it.

“We earned that sleeping bag,” I said.

And that was my favorite memory of the trip—the squeal of tires as David peeled out of there.