

Panhandle

Philip searched the cab of the pickup truck for his tooth. He checked under the driver's seat, then the passenger's, turned over the floor mats, and ran a finger through the grooves of the gearstick console. He even opened the glovebox to see if it had found its way in there, but all that he found was an untouched packet of breath mints and an air-conditioning manual for the Boeing 767. He sighed, resigned to the reality that he would never find his missing top-right incisor.

"That was always my least-favorite tooth anyway," he grunted, even though he knew full well this wasn't the case. His real least-favorite tooth was actually his top-left premolar, which consistently caught the side of his cheek. But that tooth was still in his mouth and the incisor wasn't, so at least the premolar was loyal. Philip could appreciate that. He inspected the new window in his mouth in the rearview mirror, running his tongue over the fleshy gap. He wondered if this was what it was like to be a baby, perplexed and intrigued by the feel of your own gums. No, he concluded, when you're a baby, you've never had teeth, so you don't know what you're missing. By the time you've been around for 81 years you've had plenty of time to grow accustomed to a mouth full of choppers. He made a mental note to add "Appreciate your teeth while you have them" to his book once he got home.

Turning away from the mirror, Philip gazed around the rest of the cabin to survey the damage. The storm had given the old, white pickup a good shakedown, jostling it with a force that was aggressive yet tender, the way a male protagonist would grasp the female lead in one of those old noir movies at the moment when he told her he never wanted to get married, but then realized he was madly in love with her and they kissed. Not that Philip had ever cared much for that melodramatic routine. He preferred Westerns, especially those with John Wayne. He loved

the way The Duke marched to the beat of his own drummer, saddling up when danger called, saving the day with rugged swagger, and dishing out anecdotes in his cautious baritone voice. Rubbing his stubbly chin, Philip realized that he looked a bit like his old hero, his white scruff and beige bucket hat making him a sort of cowboy in his own right.

His mighty steed was a little worse for wear. The stacks of newspapers he kept in the backseat had been scattered on the rear floor, which had already been occupied by the loose nails and screws Philip had a habit of collecting. You never knew when you would need the perfect bit, and why bother paying for a brand-new box when people left perfectly good individual bits lying in the road? The newspapers were all collected from the street as well, as Philip firmly believed that you should never pay for a newspaper. Keeping up with current events was important, of course, and in fact was Tip #4 in his book. But the news was rarely time sensitive within a day, so Philip happily picked up discarded newspapers from the day before, read them cover to cover, and then neatly placed them in his backseat. He planned to let the stacks sit in his car for a decade or so, after which he would organize them by year, package them with rubber bands, and sell them on Craigslist. People on the Internet would buy anything, so no doubt they would shell out the big bucks for a stack of headlines as a memento of times gone by.

Rain had blown through the open windows of the pickup, soaking the edges of the fabric seats so that the cab was beginning to smell more strongly of mildew. Philip wrinkled his nose but made no plans to address the odor, nor did he regret leaving the windows of his car open during a hurricane. His policy for his vehicle was to keep the windows down and radio off at all times. He didn't want any distractions, and if anybody had any issue with the way he handled his truck while he drove it, then they could get hell out. Philip's rules were strict, which meant that he left the windows down no matter the temperature, rain or shine. The fabric interior had

long ago yellowed from the water damage, but the same windows that let in the rain also facilitated the breeze which blew gently through the truck's interior at all times, keeping away any significant mold growth.

He had relented a bit on the windows this time around though, and had begrudgingly rolled them up three-quarters of the way when the wind from the hurricane blew his hat from his head. He hadn't minded the wind so much, but the loss of his hat had revealed the large hole in his scalp, and the other people hunkered down in the cement parking garage had gawked at Philip from their own cars. Usually the stares didn't bother Philip. In fact, when he rode his scooter around the grocery store, he would purposefully put his hat in the front basket so that dauntless adolescents would come up to him and ask what happened.

"Cancer!" he would bellow proudly. "I've been pruning trees for 60 years. Never wore a hat. Then one day a branch lands on my head and leaves a pretty good cut. I leave it because I don't care. I keep working. Then one day it really starts bothering me so I go to the doctor and they tell me that the cut in my head has turned into cancer! So, what I'm telling you is: never leave a cut unattended or it could turn into cancer!" The children would gasp and run off to tell their parents and Philip would beam as he continued on his way. However here, when the storm was in full force, he couldn't get out of the truck to give the onlookers his important message, and he didn't want them to see the gash in his hairline without getting the necessary warning.

The skies had been subdued for several hours before the cars in the parking garage finally got the go-ahead to leave. Philip turned the screwdriver in the ignition, having lost the original key somewhere in his trailer days after purchasing the truck. Pulling out onto the main road, he strained to get a good look out the window at the destruction around him. Just a little over 5'2", Philip wasn't necessarily designed to drive anything much bigger than a lawnmower.

Maneuvering the pickup was more of an aerobic exercise than anything else, as he had to stretch his legs to reach the accelerator and pull up on the steering wheel to get a good look out the front. Sure, barreling through Panama City in such a position was a sort of guessing game for Philip, but this gave him the thrill of possibility that few things in life ever offered him. Someday he planned on getting around to inventing a car seat for adults, but that was lower down on the list of the 72 patents he was currently working on.

Everywhere he looked were downed trees. Forests that he had driven past for decades were leveled, the remaining pines either leaning at harsh angles or left snapped in half like used toothpicks. Houses were blown open, their roofs torn off and tossed into yards as if some giant had mistaken them for tins of sardines. Shingles littered every inch of the ground, giving Philip the impression that the hurricane had dropped roofing material instead of rain. Few roads were functional, most blocked by massive logs, floodwater, or sand banks. Philip slowly navigated the apocalyptic scene, thankful that his home was less than a mile from the garage.

Turning onto his street, he was surprised by the relative normalcy of the conditions there. Even though the neighborhood was comprised mainly of double-wide trailers, not very much damage could be observed, aside from the brush littered in yards and on the pavement. Otherwise, the rusted mobile homes had fared pretty well. As Philip parked the pickup in front of his driveway, he was almost disappointed that the only significant loss he had incurred was the collapse of his carport, which had caved in when the wind snapped its supporting beams. The large oak trees in his backyard stood resolutely despite missing a few branches, none of which had fallen on the trailer.

“I’ll have to cut those down now,” he muttered, frustrated that they had lost the ability to effectively provide any shade for his backyard. Philip popped open the door of the truck and

hopped down onto the sandy soil, clutching his large stomach as he braced himself for the small impact. Sticking the landing, he smoothed out the work apron he wore around his waist and adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses.

“Philip!” someone called from across the street. “I’m so glad you’re okay!”

It was his neighbor, Mike, who had decided to ride out the storm at home.

“Keep an eye on things while I was gone?” asked Philip as he looked up and down the street.

“Sure did,” said Mike, who gazed down at Philip benevolently. “Not sure I did as good of a job as our honorary neighborhood policeman, though,” he added.

“Damn right,” Philip chimed, “I see you let a storm blow through here.”

“Oh no! What happened to your tooth?”

“Someone needed it more than I did.”

Back inside the trailer, Philip tried the lights, which didn’t turn on. He let his eyes adjust to the dim interior and sauntered toward his kitchenette, eager to make himself a drink. Philip was parched from the many hours he had spent in the truck, waiting for the storm to end. During the storm, when the eye had passed through and all was briefly and artificially calm, a middle-aged woman with a warm smile had knocked on his truck window and offered him a bottle of water, but he had declined, explaining that he didn’t drink water. Her smile turned to a scowl.

“What do you mean you don’t drink water? What do you drink?”

“You see, all water nowadays is filled with fluoride, which they tell you is supposed to be good for you, right? The thing is, fluoride is a chemical they use to filter the water, and it’s

actually poison. That's why I never let it near me," he had replied calmly, giving her the same speech he had delivered to concerned family members, doctors, and waiters for nearly 60 years.

Reaching inside the freezer, he was happy to feel that it had remained cold despite the loss of power. Philip pulled out a tray of ice cubes and rummaged in the cabinets for a glass. He carefully removed four ice cubes from the tray and placed them in the empty glass, then returned to the freezer, where he swapped out the tray for a bottle of chilled vodka. He measured out two shots and poured them in the glass with the ice cubes, relishing the satisfying crackle of the ice as it adjusted to the new ingredient. Philip then opened the fridge to find his bottle of club soda, which was the next addition to his witch's brew. He then made his way over to his pantry and removed the box of Chilean concentrated lemonade mix he regularly ordered for a dollar on the Internet. Moving back to the glass, he measured two spoons of the mix in with the ice cubes and vodka and stirred the concoction together. Taking a sip, Philip sighed, savoring the familiar burn of the drink as it slid down his throat. This was it, the only drink he had consumed for the greater part of a century, and the only way in which he would let any form of water into his body. Four or five of these a day was all a person needed to stay alert and alive. For a while, people had argued with Philip adamantly about his drink of choice, urging him to drink the water that they so blindly accepted as good for them. However, once Philip had reached his seventies, the arguments were replaced by dumbfounded stares and solemn nods.

The surf was still rough, a sign that the tail end of the storm was still making its way through the Gulf of Mexico. Philip had decided to go to the beach after ensuring that there was no structural damage in the trailer. On a typical evening, he would watch every news channel for

45 minutes each, write some thoughts in his book, and then stare at himself in the mirror for an hour before going to bed. However, the lack of power meant there was no television to turn on, and Philip had decided that this would be an okay time to get a break from the routine. He had chosen to forgo driving in favor of walking to the beach instead, given the state of the roads.

Now he stood at the water's edge, looking off into the fog that blurred the horizon. He couldn't see the sun, but he could tell it hung low in the sky, as faint white light meandered delicately through the mist. Philip noted that this might be what going to heaven would look like. You would stand on the banks of a white sandy beach, cold water tickling your toes as the waves slowly came up to greet you. Unafraid, you would take a step out onto the water, your feet remaining on the surface as you moved forward into the mist. Eventually, the fog would surround you and you would-

"What are you thinking about?" asked a woman who had suddenly appeared next to Philip.

"Death," he replied, meeting the woman's gaze. She stood just as short as him, and he felt immense relief at the comfort of talking to someone without have to strain his neck upward.

"Why would you think about something like that?" she pouted.

"Well I've only got four and a half years left to live," said Philip, "That's what the IRS told me."

"Well that's a shame," said the woman, "You look in okay shape to me. Except what happened to your tooth?"

"I lost it in a bar fight," said Philip, aware of the way the new space caused him to whistle softly as he spoke.

“Really? I used to own a bar up in Wisconsin,” replied the woman.

“I’m going to stop you right there,” interrupted Philip. “I have a very specific policy when it comes to talking with people. I’ll talk your ear off if you let me. But if you want me to stop talking, just tell me to shut the hell up and I will.”

“Well I don’t want you to shut up,” the woman said quietly, her raspy voice fighting to be heard against the evening sea breeze. “But that’s a good policy, I like that.”

“Thank you. It’s Tip #1 in the book I’m writing, *Things Your Grandfather Never Told You*,” said Philip.

“Really? Have you written other books?” asked the woman.

“No, this will be my first published work. I used to write the manuals for airplane air-conditioning systems, but that doesn’t really count,” said Philip.

“You’re a very interesting man,” commented the woman.

“Well you’re a very beautiful woman,” said Philip, and she blushed.

The woman looked around at the desolate beach, which was usually crowded with college students and snowbirds.

“It’ll be a long time before things are back to normal here. That was one heck of a storm,” said the woman.

“It sure was, but I think things are clearing up,” replied Philip, and he smiled.