

THE STORY OF A. JOSH ROUNDER

by

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Does anyone know what a rounder is? A rounder is a dissolute person; usually a man who is morally unrestrained or, in other words: a tramp, a hobo, a roustabout, a vagrant, a panhandler, drifter, roamer, transient, beggar, derelict, dodger, malingerer, and ragamuffin. He's a ne'er-do-well, an outward bounder, a rambling rover, adventurer, bum. You know, your average gadabout, globe-trotting gollivanter, gypsy, itinerant, meanderer, nomadic pilgrim. They call them stragglers, strays, or strollers; vagabonds, vagrants, or voyagers. He could be a mendicant, an urchin, a touch artist, or just your average tatterdemalion. In a nut shell: someone who casts his lot to the winds of fate and finds his fortunes or follies where he may.

I started hitchhiking when I was sixteen and have been want to stick out my thumb as a viable means of locomotion on a regular basis ever since. I'd say that makes me something of a veteran by now. I figure I've covered somewhere in the vicinity of 643,737.6 paces backwards which is longer than the length of I-90 that cuts across New York State (391 miles). I've worn out more than one pair of shoes in a uniquely peculiar manner: the outside of each toe worn as normally only the heel of a forward walking person's sole might be. Needless to say, while traipsing along dusty highways, soliciting free rides in all types of weather, I've had a few noteworthy experiences and I've formulated a theory or two about the art or Tao of hitchhiking, but I'll get to that later.

For a while in my twenties I fancied myself something of a hobo, or a roustabout (no, I never carried one of those sticks with a bandanna tied to it). I'd jump a train here and there (never went too far) or spend a night in some homeless dude's burnt out flop house with a pack of Pal Malls and Wild Irish Rose (or Night Train or Brass Monkey or Mad Dog) or find a gaggle of gutterpunk squatters and dumpster dive. One summer, for example, we decided to go on an aboriginal style "walk about" and ended up sleeping in some stranger's swampy back yard in the suburbs and getting arrested by the police the next day while exploring a "haunted mansion." I dropped out of college and set out across the country on my motorcycle with the expressed intention of learning how to read and write and become a

surfer on the Baja Peninsula. I held up with a methadone addict in a trailer park in Greenville South Carolina one Christmas season. I've found succor in a host of roadhouses, coffeehouses, Wafflehouses and outhouses. But as much as I liked to think of myself as a rake or a knave or an alleyway archeologist the thing is, even when I panhandled, couch surfed, roamed, shirked, scoffed and slacked I could never escape the awareness that all I had to do was make one collect phone call and my mom or dad could wire me a couple bucks or a train ticket home.

“Thank you for using A.T. & T.”

So you see, I was never a *real* hobo. I was a *fake* hobo. I was a josh rounder. And during that time, whenever I wrote a story with a character who was, more or less, a version of me, I'd refer to him as A. Josh Rounder and have continued to do so ever since.

I don't know if the theories I'm about to espouse count as rules or “universal truths,” per se, all I know is, based on my experiences hitchhiking, there are some patterns that almost never deviate:

- Hot chicks never pick you up.
- Young girls never pick you up
- People in fancy cars or RVs never pick you up (except in Alaska where hitchhiking is an institution)
- Non Caucasians never pick you up
- And getting a ride in the rain or snow is nigh impossible

Of course rules were meant to be broken.

I was heading north out of Greenville, South Carolina trying to make it to a court date. My luck was off, I could just tell. It hadn't occurred to me that shaving my head before crossing the Mason-Dixon line would incur such abject hostility. Nor had it occurred to me that anyone could spit with such accuracy from a moving vehicle. In spite of my appearance, however, I was pressed to make this court date on time. Furthermore the ominous clouds above looked about to unleash a torrent any second. Finally an old geezer

in an even older Harvester International pulled over for me.

As we hobbled down the middle of the interstate, the throttle wide, maintaining a steady clip of forty miles an hour (give or take an hour), cars passing on either side (we really were in the middle of a MAJOR interstate), this codger regaled me with tales of his virile and exuberant youth. His stories started out innocuous enough but as the drive dragged on – and I swear he was slowing down – the subject took a decidedly more carnal turn.

By this time in my hitchhiking career, I'd had plenty of propositions, unfortunately all of them from members of my same sex, and I'd certainly seen the tried and true technique of "buttering up the straight guy," but this randy octogenarian blind sided me. His saucy tails of his exploits throughout the South Pacific in the navy had started out endearing enough but quickly became more and more graphic and more and more homosexual, till finally, not bothering to pull over nor watch the road, he went for my package. I mean, I watched him reaching for my crotch with his Parkinson's shaken, age spot splattered, rickety old hand with such utter disbelief, like it was moving in slow motion, well I mean, it *was* moving in slow motion, only I'm sure he was darting as fast as he could.

"Let me see your thang," he mewled creakily.

I almost felt bad turning the dude away.

His ego piqued, he careened across several lanes towards an exit we would've surely passed had we been traveling at normal speeds. He screeched to a stop on a dusty shoulder of a secondary byway and shoved me out unceremoniously.

"Fine!" he snarled in the most classic old coot voice imaginable.

Remember those storm clouds I'd worried about earlier? Well, I hadn't even seen his break lights round the bend before I found myself in the middle of a steady downpour. I checked my soggy map and figured I could get to the courthouse along this road and might as well not bother trying to get back on the highway. But now I was done for. Everyone driving by was black so rule #4 applied and it was raining which meant I had to consider

rule #5 as well.

You can imagine my surprise when a beautiful, brand new, burgundy Porsche with one big windshield wiper whipping away, piloted by a young African American pulled over and the door sprung open. Three rules defied in one fell swoop! Sayonara rule #3! Needless to say I didn't hesitate to hop in out of the rain.

I told the guy where I was going and he said he could drop me off right at the spot after he made a child support payment at the house of his son's mother. I should point out that, though it doesn't quite constitute a rule, it's very common for people who pick you up to have to do an errand before going out of their way to drop you somewhere. In France these tangents took all day and often meant consuming many sumptuous meals and imbibing lots of wine and meeting entire extended families and pretty much getting no where ... but that's a whole other story.

As we drove along in his Porsche, which I admired, he explained that he had a Mercedes as well and that he was in the pager business.

"I had no idea the pager business was so lucrative," I said offhandedly.

"It isn't," he explained, "I used to sell cocaine. But I went straight and now I sell pagers and I have to get rid of one of my cars."

He was a little upset but philosophical about it.

"I like the Porsche, but I have to think about my son, so I'll probably keep the Benz," he explained, though he didn't sound fully committed to the idea.

He dropped me off at the courthouse and, like most rides, I never saw him again.

The moral of this story is not that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover or that you should judge a book by its cover or that one good deed deserves another or that you can come up with a bunch of rules that really don't mean shit. The point is, really, that you have

to trust sometimes. You have to trust your gut and I've turned down rides before when they don't feel right. I don't have to explain it, I just know the feeling. And what I've learned from getting rides and giving rides is that the news in the paper and on TV is usually bad news about bad people who do despicable things and it can be scary to think about those people running around out there doing inhuman things in the world. The conspiracy theorist in me believes that somebody benefits from keeping us afraid and isolated and untrusting, but when you hitch a ride, you realize that most people are good people. Most people are well meaning people at least. Most people want to help and lend a hand and I've witnessed such gestures of kindness time and time again.

I know, I know, I *know* that it is too cheesy to end this little missive with some blather along the lines of: the next time it's a sunny day and you're not in any big hurry to get somewhere and you feel like saving some gas I recommend hitting the road and sticking your thumb out but, the thing is, the next time it's a sunny day and you're not in any big hurry to get somewhere and you feel like saving some gas, I really *do* recommend hitting the road and sticking your thumb out.