

*It is impossible to know the mind of the driver next to you.*

## **A Kind and Forgiving Time**

By J. David Thayer

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## Picking Up the Check

Black SUVs on the interstate are ubiquitous. They are also ubiquitous on every other sort of road and in every parking lot and in any other place where vehicles tend to congregate. Even their owners often exit grocery stores and approach convincing clones and become angry and agitated when their fancy key fobs refuse to help them empty their overfilled shopping carts into the wrong vehicles. Where's the beeping? Lights flashing? Where's that automatic hatch-open when you actually need the thing to assist you? It certainly opens every time you need your hatch to stay closed. Walk at a typical pace around the rear to the driver's side and up flies the damn hatch every time. Except when you insist on unloading your groceries into someone else's black SUV. All those fobs can manage in such instances is to make some distant horn chirp away from underneath the hood of some random car outside of the equation and also two rows over. That's assuming the owner got close enough to trigger any response at all. How is this helpful? How is this better? And somehow those useless fobs cost hundreds of dollars to replace when broken or lost.

So many black SUVs on the road. Every make must have one. How was the man in the white dually going to keep from losing his prey while following this obvious asshole of the road at an inconspicuous distance when said asshole is driving the most duplicated vehicle possible? Lane changes and speed traps and last-minute exits and also road hazards. Look away for a moment and you might end up following a doppelgänger down an onramp to a rest stop and only then discover the sleight of hand that ruined your day. Then you'd have to choose between exacting vengeance on an innocent or else giving up entirely. A bad choice and not one easily made. He couldn't allow himself to be put in that position. Luckily

this particular asshole had made following the trail a lot easier for the man in the white dually. Of course he had.

The rear windshield of the black SUV in question was adorned with an oversized gold New Orleans football helmet decal across the center and also a bass fishing sticker in the lower right corner. The bass sticker likely meant the driver enjoyed fishing and the two men might have bonded over that under different circumstances. But that would never do now. Never mind. At the very least the driver of the white dually was certain that big helmet decal interfered with the black SUV driver's rearview line of sight and this came as no surprise to him at all. Selfishness is a learned behavior. Far more important for all passing motorists to understand the asshole's rooting interests than it was for him to work around his blind spots while changing lanes. And announcing that he was likely a fisherman as well was certainly information the rest of the world needed. The absolute narcissism involved in putting such things on cars. Why do people do things like this? Just drive; who cares what you like or don't like? The man in the white dually shook his head and the conceit on display solidified his hatred by a few additional degrees. He knew this man. His type at least. The picture was already clear and becoming clearer.

Of course a guy who just forces his way into someone else's lane and expects others to adjust themselves to his intrusion also covers his vehicle in irrelevant personal fetishes at the further expense of general safety. It is on the rest of us to watch out for him. Make allowances for him. This football fan and bass fisherman has implicit right of way. Yield to him. Yield to him in all things and at all times. He is more important than you. A guy like this has never thought of anyone but himself. He is in it to win it. What does that mean: in it to win it? To take from others what should belong to them? To assume you are the favored? To put yourself first in all situations? Every encounter a zero-sum game and always your

advantage to the detriment of every other player? No deference. No grace for others. No forgiveness. Yeah. He knew him alright. He hated people who struggled with forgiveness. We all need grace sometimes.

The black SUV with the New Orleans helmet sticker and the fishing sticker was signaling an intention to exit. Its driver was using a turn indicator. For a moment the man in the white dually was taken aback. He had put it past the man in the black SUV to observe such a courteous practice and especially in this situation. No other cars were particularly close to the black SUV. The cogs of his loathing slipped a few clicks of traction but quickly recovered whatever ground was lost. Sure. He'll signal when it is convenient for him to do so. He is probably congratulating himself for obeying the law. The smugness of it. He hated him more.

The road was paved across a series of gentle hills and when the black SUV diverted to the offramp the man in the white dually lost sight of him momentarily. Bit of panic. But the black SUV again became visible on the distant upslope and so the man reassured himself that the day yet remained unruined. He exited the interstate and continued his pursuit.

Perhaps the black SUV needed fuel or its driver might have needed a restroom break but the driver of the white dually doubted either case. Those were needs. This was probably a selfish move like all his other selfish moves. When he saw the black SUV pull into the parking lot of the Eat Good All Day, the man in the white dually felt vindicated. Of course. Gotta stop and stuff your face. You're probably in for a long road trip or even a short road trip and you have plenty of money to burn. Dontcha? Can't go through a drive thru and grab a simple combo meal or God forbid you put yourself out and pack some modest sandwiches ahead of time to eat along the way. Especially since we already know that driving while distracted doesn't bother you at all. Wouldn't even be a problem.

But oh no. No small cooler for you. You're the type who needs to indulge all his appetites to the fullest and whenever they arise. Gotta pick the biggest item on the menu and eat till your belly bursts. Dontcha? He pulled the white dually into a space at the back of the lot and let the engine idle. This will tell us all I need to know, I bet.

The man in the white dually opened his glove box and took out his snubnose .357 and he opened the wheel. There were four bullets already loaded. He took out the open box of shells and he placed two additional rounds in the empty chambers. Fully loaded now. He flipped the wheel shut and held it in his hand. Felt the weight of it. He knew what fully loaded felt like. His thoughts drifted back to his wife and his little girl and suddenly his agenda became very different. Why was he here? God, he missed them so much. He put his head on the steering wheel. He held the gun across his chest and he called their names and the tears began flowing like new streams along an ancient and angry creek bed. The parched and pancake-cracked flesh of his weathered cheeks was beginning to soften. He looked at his .357 and he imagined that it could transport him to wherever they were right now. This mental exercise was a bad road and he still understood that much. He tried to catch his breath and sort out all the different feelings currently fighting for control over his mind and over his soul. No, he said. They would be disappointed, he said. Stuff to do yet.

He looked up and into the rearview and saw the truck bed and the trailer with all of his belongings covered under blue tarps and he sobbed some more. It was difficult to sort out why exactly. He wasn't sad to leave Louisiana. That certainly wasn't it. Maybe he was sad to learn that several entire lives could be so easily packaged and quantified. Was this all there was? He looked back down at his piece and threw it into the passenger seat beside him. Focus, he said.

He remembered his current mission and suddenly it didn't make a lot of sense. He wiped his cheeks. For a solid minute he forgot why he hated the man in the black SUV and he nearly gave up the idea entirely. He sat there and fixed his eyes forward and tried to orient his thoughts. Why was he here? Why specifically? What had led him to this? In the closest possible parking space to the front door other than those allocated to the handicapped was a black SUV with a gold New Orleans helmet decal plastered across the center of the rear windshield and also a bass fishing sticker in the lower right corner. That old noise saw its chance to pin the man's chin against his skull and then it gave his old pain a nudge to step to the plate and swing for the fences. You're up, it said.

Teeth clenched and grinding away their irreplaceable enamel. The bottomless pain in his soul and no one left alive to blame for it. He'd do, this man driving his sparkly new black SUV and clearly an asshole of the road. Brand new and you couldn't wait to sticker it all up and make it ugly. Did you manage to park close enough? Wouldn't want you to take any unnecessary steps and burn an extra calorie or two walking your fat ass across a parking lot. Wouldya?

He looked at the .357 lying loaded and full and upturned in the passenger seat. No, he said. There will be families in there. I have all the time in the world and this asshole will make a mistake and I'll be there when he does. He picked up the pistol and returned it to its holster inside the glovebox. He closed the lid. Let's go in and see what we can see. The man shut off the engine and applied the parking brake. He stepped outside the truck and walked inside the diner.

When the owner of the white dually entered the Eat Good All Day he was uncertain as to how to identify his new enemy. The fact had not occurred to him before that moment. The memory of his face in the rearview during that brief encounter was fuzzy and fading and

now the owner of the black SUV could be any man inside the diner this morning. Back to Square One. But then he remembered that was not true. The owner of the black SUV was selfish and also an asshole. He would be easy enough to spot in a room full of normal people. Just have to pay attention. A snake cannot change its spots.

A hostess attempted to seat the man at the low counter and he refused. There was no way to survey the entire floor from that vantage point. He instead pointed to a solitary booth at the back center of the dining hall and the hostess was reluctant. It could accommodate as many as a party of six holiday traveling guests and this man was all by himself. After a brief exchange she remembered that she was paid minimum wage and this man was insistent approaching hostile and any tip he might leave or any hypothetical traveling party of six might have left instead would not be split with her in either event so she was not about to argue with him. Fine. Booth for six for one. The man thanked her.

A waitress with the name Freda embossed on a plastic badge came over and was instantly irritated that one of the choice booths in her section was now occupied by a singleton guest and on a Saturday over the holidays. She asked him what he wanted to drink and he told her he wanted coffee and water and that he did not need a menu. Dammit. She knew it and it was even worse than she thought. Not even gonna order any food. She brought him a cup and a handful of creamers. These he flicked to the side. He grabbed the sugar and poured too much of it into the cup. He stirred aimlessly and without ceasing, the spoon clanking rhythmically.

From his elongated booth he scanned the room. He was pretty sure this guy was also alone although he wasn't sure how he knew this. But it was an important detail now. Any tables and booths with families or even couples were summarily ruled out. That cut the possibilities down to less than a quarter of the patrons inside. Good

sleuthing, he thought. What remained were three tables and the two sets of barstools. Two of the tables occupied by solitary guests were women. One was older and one was younger but these distinctions didn't matter. He had seen his nemesis well enough to know he was a man. Of course he was a man! He would never consider pursuing this vendetta had it been a woman who cut him off on I-55. He had been raised too well for all that. This was a man-to-man problem and it would be handled man to man. Assuming his asshole counterpart was up to the challenge.

He hoped the owner of the black SUV also carried a pistol and he imagined them squaring off for a duel behind the Eat Good All Day somewhere between the dumpsters and the loading dock. There would be dignity in that. Time honored. Order and not chaos. And honestly any outcome would have been a welcomed end to it all. The end to this battle and to the end of the long con that had been his entire life up to and including this very morning. But he knew he wasn't that lucky. At least he had not been that lucky for the last two years and for a lengthy stretch before that. No way this guy carried a handgun. More likely he voted to prevent others from doing so. Stripping law abiding citizens of their constitutional rights to protect themselves from criminals and from the otherwise obviously guilty. Oh, how he hated this man.

One solitary guest was a man that appeared to be too old for serious consideration. He felt sorry for the old man. Eating a poached egg and some dry toast by himself and mumbling away perhaps to provide himself a substitute for sentient company. Where were his people? His family? This was Christmastime after all. That line of questioning began veering too close to the sun and he abandoned it just in time. Who else was in here?

The low counter or the high counter? Hmm. The low counter comprised six stools in total and three of them were occupied. There was a twosome and a singleton. The singleton was a man in post

office garb and this all but disqualified him instantly. In the first place it is hard work being a mailman. The sort of person he was tracking was naturally repulsed by hard work so that was Strike One. Secondly this postman appeared to be keeping to himself and such behavior simply did not track at all. The sort of man currently disgusting the owner of the white dually would likely go through life assuming he was starring in his own movie. The rest of the world were merely extras or at best the supporting cast. As such their lives would be made infinitely more interesting were he but to acknowledge their replaceable existences with any splash of attention whatsoever. This sort of man would naturally fill any vacuum of peaceful silence with personal answers to questions no one in the diner was asking. Maybe some postmen would do this also but not this postman. All he appeared to want was breakfast. Good man. On to the high counter. And there he was.

It was him. It had to be him. Of course it was him. All the owner of the white dually had to do was look at center stage of the high counter and there he found his asshole of the road. He clinched his fist without being aware of it. The pairs on either side of the centerpiece were of one sort and the man in the middle was clearly of another. That checked out. He was fat of the belly and that naturally made sense as well. Gluttonous and lazy. And this man at Stool 3 seemed to have no idea that he was an intruder amongst a foursome who certainly belonged there. From the elongated booth meant for six people occupied by himself alone, the owner of the white dually recognized the hallmarks of unbridled entitlement. The asshole was everything he thought him to be. Selfishness personified. Animated and in the flesh.

He thought about going out to get his .357 and he began to wonder who in the Eat Good All Day would blame him if he shot the owner of the black SUV right there at the high counter. And he wondered who would dare to testify against him. More likely they

would pick up his tab and provide him with an alibi on his way heading further north. Maybe it could happen right here. No, he said. Calm down, he said. You came in here to learn.

Freda came by to heat up his coffee but there was no room to even top off the cup. He did not look at her and yet still waved her off with his left hand. Jerk. Absolute jerk. She understood all right and she committed herself to never returning to his booth should hell itself freeze over while his unfriendly ass sat there waiting on hotter coffee. And she'd tell him so herself if only he had the sac to complain within earshot. Freda has her own story and she was at the end of her own rope today but no one in the Eat Good All Day took notice. Least of all the owner of the white dually.

With no further interruptions he leaned in across the table and listened. This was not easy. Two full rows of tables lay between his elongated booth and the high counter but he managed to piece together a few things.

There was talk of a mother in Chicago. He implied he was taking care of her in some way and that this trip was a duty of sorts to her. This new information was in every way inconvenient to the leech profile the owner of the white dually had constructed for the owner of the black SUV. He'd sort that out later. This guy probably just wanted a fat inheritance or something. No doubt he was exaggerating the nature of this supposed selfless act. Maybe he wanted all her stuff. No doubt he was ready to sell off her lifetime for pennies on the dollar. That was probably it.

Gotta be a golfer, this guy. He hated golfers.

There was talk of being newly landed in the South and this did track with his profile perfectly but there was also talk of crappie fishing. He doubted this man had ever seen a crappie in his whole damn life. Maybe he had read about them in one of those airline promo mags they stick inside the seatbacks in front of you when you fly. Maps with boastful travel routes and ads for steakhouses

conveniently located in hub cities and other fluff intended to reinforce their dominance in the air travel industry, as if an abundance of choices were still available. And there was no doubt this guy traveled plenty. That much was certain. Bet he had enough rewards miles to stay at a 5-star casino on the lunar surface this Christmas Eve. Probably pissed his sick momma ruined his trip, the louse. Then his order came.

With great relief the man owning the white dually learned that the man owning the black SUV had ordered T-bone steak and eggs. The world made sense again. Of course this asshole of the road could not satisfy himself with a simple combination of eggs and bacon and toast or maybe a breakfast sandwich. He had to throw in for the biggest-ticket item on the menu. The white dually owner let out a sigh of relief and embraced his hatred in full bloom and reckoned it fully justified. There he was in the midst of blue-collar regulars and he had to put on airs by buying T-bone steak for breakfast. That would make the locals notice him and hate him. And he was half right which is the same as being completely wrong.

The man owning the white dually strained his ears hoping to hear the regulars take their separate turns at the gall on display and he was astounded by what he heard but in utterly the wrong way. Yes this black SUV owner was conversing with the local regulars as if he belonged there and yes he was talking about crappie fishing as if he knew the first thing about it and yes he freely admitted a birth in Chicago of all places. But no. Somehow they did not hate him for any of those horrible things.

In fact he appeared to be duping them! And boy! Could this guy slather on the good ol' boy vernacular to please his audience! Dropping Gs like an authentic hick from Any Southern State USA. They actually bought his sacrificial story concerning his intent to help his poor sick momma up in Chicagoland. Bet she wasn't sick at all. If there even was a momma up there. But even worse: after

listening to all his horseshit they all became absolutely chummy! Started talking about the best ways to cook steak on a grill of all things and they acted like the owner of the black SUV might actually have something useful to contribute to the conversation! Could they not smell the douchebag reeking off of him? Damn! The man owning the white dually could barely choke down two swallows of his sweet coffee for the stench of it in his nostrils and here they were inhaling clouds of it by the lungful and inviting him to spew forth even more of it. He was embarrassed for the locals. Trucker caps and work shirts and boots and chew rings and none of that stood a chance against his white-collar smarmy mojo. A damned disgrace is what it was.

These local rubes might have fallen for the charade but not the owner of the white dually. He was not fooled and would never be fooled. Pursuing this man would be his new life until whenever his permanent new life showed itself. Freda circled back on her way to a paying table and he softly grabbed her by the left forearm.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said. “That handsome fatty gentleman at the high counter. Right there in the middle? White headed and candyassed. You see him, dontcha? Looks like he never worked a day in his life?”

“What can I do for you, sir?” She was still annoyed to have a singleton in her elongated booth and one only drinking coffee. Freda really needed money and she needed it today. It never occurred to the man that she might have an opinion about him one way or the other.

“I’m about to leave. But whatever cash I put down here is meant to cover my coffee and water and your tip for both tickets and his big ol T-bone breakfast. Hear me? He don’t pay a dime of what he owes. We’ll settle up later, him and me.”

“Oh, that’s nice, mister. Who should I say bought him his breakfast?”

“Oh, he don’t know me. Not yet. Don’t worry about that, darling. I’ll introduce myself to him in due time. Thank you kindly.”

“My goodness! We don’t often see that sort of kindness in here. Most people are mostly just worried about themselves these days. Are you a Christian?”

The question bothered him and it bothered him a lot. He certainly thought he was a Christian but even grunting a noise towards the affirmative was suddenly a bone in the throat.

“What do you mean, ma’am?”

“Nothing. I was just assuming you thought yous doing your Christian duty is all.”

“Uh huh. I guess I am. If you read the right parts of the Good Book, I mean. Lots a stuff is in there. You just have to know where to look for what you need and then ya just sorta ignore the other parts that might get in your way. Know what I mean?”

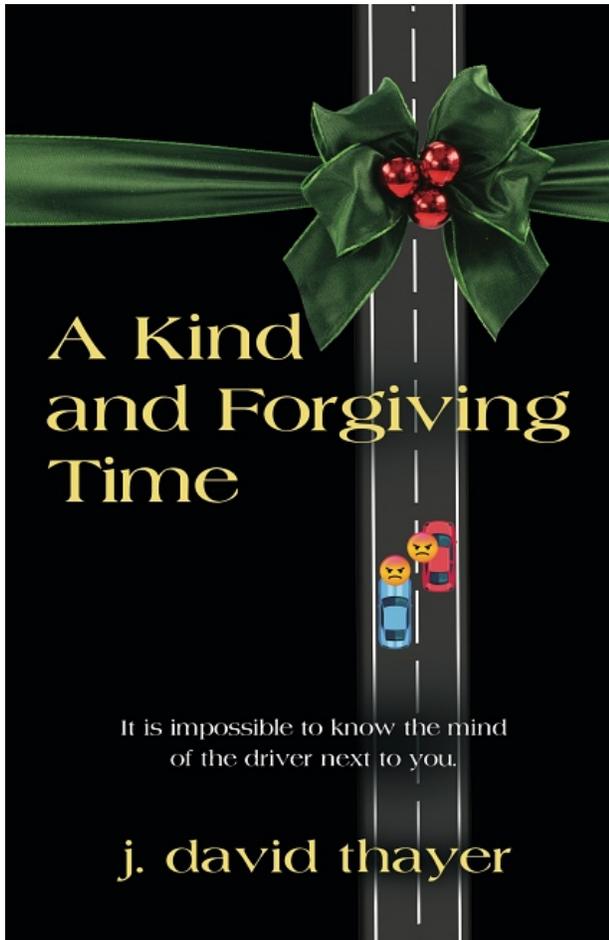
“No, not really. But have a nice day anyway and God bless you! You done a real nice thing. Made my day, mister. Merry Christmas!”

In the presence of such a thoughtful gesture Freda abandoned all of her former animosity towards the owner of the white dually. The holidays were a kind and forgiving time after all. Freda left the elongated booth occupied by a singleton and continued on her route to the coffee urn. She grabbed a fresh pot off the forward burner and she continued moving at a steady clip, serving her traveling customers with newly found inspiration and vigor that would last for the better part of an hour.

The man owning the white dually looked at the center stool at the high counter with renewed disgust. Chicago. He had believed enough of the overheard horseshit to accept that this trip might indeed take him all the way up there. Never been anywhere near there before. Never seen any of the Great Lakes. Why not? I’ll follow you to Juneau if that’s what it takes to have my peace, mister. Drive. I’m on your six.

He peeled off two twenty-dollar bills from a roll in his pocket and dropped them onto the formica table and he headed out through the vestibule and back to the parking lot. Only two sips gone from his coffee and he didn't even need those. Caffeine was useless today.

He started his engine and he waited. The other man took an additional twelve minutes to return to his black SUV. Another minute later and he was back on the access road looking to merge onto I-55 North once again. The man in the white dually put his truck in gear and resumed following the black SUV at a casual pace. It was a productive stop. At least he understood the game now.



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