

Driving to Michigan is a story about a family that experiences the death of a loved one due to addiction. They launch out on a cross-country odyssey to get their family member and bring them home. It's a story about coping with addiction.

Driving to Michigan

By Robert Brent

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ROBERT BRENT

DRIVING TO MICHIGAN

What do you do when you receive
a phone call that changes your life forever?



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The Puffing Professor and Vapors in The Truck

Driving north. Lili had died two days before. It was the last day of September during the confusing time of the Covid pandemic...

The four of us (Vera, Ben, Carrie, and me) were in the truck on our way to pick up Lili—our daughter, their sister. It was a different kind of road trip. The kind you never want to go on but you don't really have a choice. I was determined to make the best of it. Our son, Ben, the "Puffing Professor" as I called him, puffed his way from Tennessee all the way to Battle Creek, Michigan, and back. He had a broad array of vape juices to satisfy every craving (cinnamon roll, chocolate chip cookie, lemon custard, watermelon, cream soda, strawberry, blueberry, cheesecake, vanilla, cherry cola, bubblegum, glazed lemon tart... He spent a fortune on this stuff and couldn't live without it.).

The Puffing Professor was stroking half of the beard on his chin and suck-puffing on his lemon custard flavored vape tool. Sometimes it was a stick, sometimes it was the block, a kind of electronic brick to which he would add flavored oils laden with nicotine. Whichever tool he used, it was part of his body like a vestigial organ that was separate yet attached to his hand and mouth at all times. Incredibly, he would even fall asleep with the thing in his mouth puffing away even in his sleep. It was the ultimate adult pacifier. It was outrageously annoying to the non-puffers, especially in the closed quarters of an extended cab pickup truck on a long journey.

Puff: How long is this going to take?

Me: Well, the distance from here to Battle Creek is about six hundred and thirty miles. Accounting for potty breaks and food stops, I'm estimating it'll take us around eleven to twelve hours.

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- Puff: Oh my God. What are we going to do for twelve hours as captives in this stupid pick-up truck?
- Me: Guys, this is a one-time event. What are we supposed to do? We're driving to Michigan to get Lili, your *sister*. She's all alone up there. Can everybody please just relax and cooperate while we're making this drive? I'm sure we all have something else we'd rather be doing. Especially Lili. Let that sink in for a minute.
- Puff: Well, all I can say is you people need to wear your masks whenever we stop. Do not get out of this truck unless you are wearing your masks. Got it? And you need to wear them properly. I'm not going to die because you guys were irresponsible and refused to wear your masks or are incapable of wearing them correctly.
- Me: Jesus, son, how many times must we go over this? We'll wear the damn masks, but you must stop obsessing over it. And please stop yelling about it. Can we stay focused on what we're doing here?
- Puff: It's a matter of life and death. The science is clear, Pop; no mask, you die.
- Me: Actually, the science is not clear. There's no proof that wearing a mask will prevent you from getting Covid. Fauci said that himself and then changed his mind later. These guys have no idea what Covid or these vaccinations are doing to our bodies. It's a moot point anyway. We're all vaccinated, boosted, and wearing our masks. Now give it a rest.
- Vera: Honey, please.
- Me: Vera, I'm just having a conversation.

Puff: Pop, I used to think you were a reasonably intelligent man, but you are foolish and ignorant if you don't understand the far-reaching effects of this pandemic. You and Mom are old. You're going to die if you don't comply with the protocol. Mom especially. Half the time she has her damn mask pulled down below her nose like some little toddler. It's pointless. If you guys refuse to comply, I am not going on this trip.

Me: Well, you are stuck in the truck with us for now and there is no turning back. We are driving to Michigan. We all have our masks and will put them on when appropriate. Please stop obsessing over masks. We're all vaccinated and boosted and are good to go. Enough already.

Puff: We are not all good to go.

Me: Do you even know how the vaccine works?

Puff: Of course I do. Do you?

Me: I don't think anybody really knows how it works, including the people who developed it. It's experimental. We haven't had enough time to understand its long-term effects. How do you think it works?

Puff: I've studied this, Pop. The mRNA vaccines were developed using the latest medical technology. They're not like old-school vaccines like you guys are used to. These are not the days of Louis Pasteur and smallpox and polio. This vaccine is like the difference between my digital world and your analog world. They developed the Covid vaccines using genetic material that produces a spike protein. Once the spike protein assay is injected, it latches onto the surface of your cells

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and causes an alteration at the cellular level that activates your immune system to fight the virus.

Me: If only it were that simple.

Carrie: You guys are nuts.

Puff: It is that simple. You're just in denial.

Big cloud of lemon custard fills the cab.

Me: It's not that I'm in denial. It's just that I've learned to question everything, especially where the government and Big Pharma are involved.

Puff: You have to follow the science, Pop.

Me: That's just it. The so-called science is not absolute truth. There are lots of unknowns associated with these vaccines.

Puff: So, you're a science-denier?

Me: No, I'm a natural skeptic. I accept verifiable and verified truth. The long-term effectiveness of these vaccines is too new to know one way or the other. Time will confirm their efficacy one way or the other.

Carrie had been looking at her phone and texting quietly.

Carrie: Oh my God, am I going to have to listen to this all the way to Battle Creek? I'd rather be fighting fires.

Me: It's just a conversation.

Carrie: It's tedious and boring. You guys need to find something else to talk about.

Me: We will but we're not done yet, are we?

Puff: Like I said, I guess you're a science-denier.

Me: Like I said, I'm a skeptic. I refuse to eat the pablum ladled out by our government without a thorough examination of the facts. Once I fully understand something, then I form an opinion about it.

Puff: Actually, it's the opposite. You form an opinion and then try to understand the facts. The vaccines work, Pop. Their efficacy has been proven. This is a fact. Just accept the fact.

Me: So you say.

Puff: So say the scientists.

Vera: Could y'all please talk about something else?

Me: Not yet. I think it's important that we arrive at a resolution and point of agreement.

Puff: Well, that's not going to happen.

Me: I am persuadable if you can present a fact-based and convincing enough argument. Take the emotion out of it.

Puff: This has nothing to do with emotions. I follow the science.

Me: If it has nothing to do with emotions, then why do you get so emotional and angry when we try to have an intelligent conversation about it?

Puff: Ignorant people make me angry.

Me: I could say the same thing.

Puff takes a huge drag off his vape brick and fills the cab with more lemon custard vapors.

Me: Could you please stop sucking on that thing for a little while?

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- Puff: It's harmless, Pop. You want me to roll down the window again?
- Me: You can't. I switched on the baby lock to prevent it.
- Puff: I'm not a two-year-old.
- Me: Then don't act like one.
- Vera: Fellas, please.
- Me: So, Ben, please tell me you're not a sucker who believes in the pangolin, civet, and bat story from the wet market in Wuhan.
- Puff: What else could it have been? It's a fact, Pop. You've been to China numerous times. Even Wuhan. Of all people you should know that it's plausible. They eat all kinds of nasty things over there. You told me that yourself.
- Me: I think you don't want to believe in the lab leak idea because Trump said something about it.
- Puff: Trump's an idiot.
- Me: I agree that he has many moronic qualities, but I think he was right about the lab leak and calling it the "China virus."
- Puff: That was unnecessarily provocative, Pop. He's going to start World War III.
- Me: But it could be accurate.
- Puff: I think it's unlikely the virus was the result of a lab leak. Nobody in the industry could be that careless and sloppy. Pop, you know they have protocols and procedures that would prevent anything like that from happening.
- Me: It's nice to think so. I think you're giving the Chinese way too much credit. I used to work for a Chinese

company... trust me, you *are* giving them too much credit.

- Puff: The source of the virus was the wet market in Wuhan.
- Me: I still say that's very unlikely. I've actually been to the wet market in Wuhan and I've seen and eaten a lot of weird things in China—a lot of nasty things. I never saw anyone eat the scales off a pangolin, the paws of a civet, or the skin of a bat.
- Puff: So, I guess you believe in the lab leak theory and aren't willing to entertain the wet market theory.
- Me: One hundred percent.
- Puff: Well, I'll admit that it's another possible vector but it's not proven. Don't forget that bats are natural hosts and carriers of the coronavirus that causes Covid.
- Me: Okay, so let's agree on that. It's another possible vector. And I'm not saying that bats are not involved. I just read an article about the ancient bat cave in some province of China where they were harvesting bat guano containing the SARS virus to take back to the lab to study.
- Puff: Hubei. It's in the Hubei province in China. I've read all about it. What they were doing there was crazy, I'll grant you that.
- Me: Yeah, several guys died in the cave.
- Puff: That's true but there's still no proof of a connection to Wuhan and a lab protocol violation there.
- Me: Sure is suspect though.
- Puff: Look, guys, just wear your masks. It's people like you who refuse to follow the protocol running around not wearing their masks or wearing them in the wrong way

- like Mom does. It's people like you who are going to infect the rest of the population. It's irresponsible!
- Me: We're not arguing about wearing masks. We have our masks, and we'll wear them whenever we stop. Let me tell you straight: I am not wearing a mask in my own vehicle. Every time I see somebody driving around wearing a mask alone inside their car, I can't help but think about how stupid they look, how stupid they are. Now, you are welcome to wear your mask in the truck but consider how difficult it will be for you to puff on your non-nutritive sucking device if you do.
- Puff: Here we go with that again.
- Me: Let's be honest. Think about how stupid it is to be sucking all this smoke and vapor into your lungs. You're just making yourself sick and creating a dual dependency on Big Tobacco and Big Pharma. You and your sister are going to have massive health problems as you age. Who's going to pay for all this?
- Carrie: Y'all can leave me out of this discussion.
- Me: Well, it pertains to you too.
- Puff: I switched over from cigarettes to vaping because it's proven not to be as damaging to your lungs.
- Me: It is not a proven fact. In fact, I recently read an article that says the particulates in vaping are much smaller than those in cigarettes and can infiltrate deeper into your alveoli and close them off at a microscopic level that is even more damaging than cigarettes.
- Puff: Pop, vaping has been around for over twenty years now and there are no prevailing health problems associated with it. Unlike all the chemicals in cigarettes, the by-

product is propylene glycol and it's completely innocuous.

Me: So, you think inhaling aerosolized anti-freeze is harmless.

Puff: There's no proof of deleterious effects on humans.

Me: You know that when dogs drink anti-freeze it kills them, right?

Puff: Now you're really jumping off the cliff of conclusion. The two are not interchangeable. Anyway, I'm not drinking the shit, I'm inhaling it.

Me: Well, you're right about one thing. It is shit. And inhaling toxins is a lot more dangerous than drinking them. Your lungs are the most effective and immediate vehicle of chemical exchange with the environment and with vaping you're using the most efficient delivery system. And antifreeze is not the only by-product, there are other chemicals... what's the other big additive they put in vape juice? I just read another article on it.

Puff: Diacetyl.

Me: Yeah, that's it. That shit is poison too.

Puff: No, it's not; they put it in food and all kinds of things.

Me: It's the same stuff that causes popcorn lung.

Carrie: What is popcorn lung?

Puff: It's a lung condition that was caused by huge concentrations of diacetyl in a microwave popcorn factory environment. Pop, you're conflating that factory anomaly experience into the use of a harmless vaping device.

Carrie: You can get sick from microwave popcorn?

- Puff: That's only if you work in the factory that makes the stuff.
- Vera: It's not good to eat it either.
- Carrie: Jade and I eat it all the time.
- Me: They put the same stuff in vape juice to give it the same sort of buttery flavor and oily consistency. It should be illegal. Can you imagine the damage done by such concentrated and toxic inhalation? You are breathing diacetyl, nicotine, formaldehyde, and other toxic chemicals in a heated aerosol form. These microscopic particles are suspended such that they penetrate to the minutest and deepest recesses of your alveoli. And, Ben, you realize there is no cure for it, right?
- Carrie: Alveo-what?
- Me: Alveoli. What do they teach you kids in school these days?
- Carrie: Okay, alveoli. What's that?
- Me: It's the tiny air sacs in your lungs where oxygen from the air you breathe is exchanged with your red blood cells that, once infused with oxygen, circulate throughout your body keeping you alive. Carrie, you don't need to worry about them, yours are already coked up from twenty-five years of smoking.
- Puff: Once again, Pop, you're misinformed. First, the concentrations in vape juice are nowhere near those in the air of the microwave popcorn factory. And second, I'm young and I don't have popcorn lung. Besides, as far as the miniscule amounts of diacetyl in vape juice, I'll worry about that later. As it is, I'm not feeling any residual effects from vaping, and I have no intentions

of stopping so there's no point in talking about it. It's a fact: vaping is a safer alternative to smoking, guys.

Carrie: Doesn't sound like it. I think I'll just stick to my Marlborough Reds.

Me: Diacetyl is just one of many toxins in the stuff. And what about us? Do you have any idea how obnoxious, no noxious, it is for us to have to breathe your chocolate chip cookie dough flavored air in the confined space of this cab? And we're old; we don't have the restorative effects of youth that you have. Although you are not getting any younger and you've been smoking something now for, what, fifteen years? I've watched you. You're thirty-one years old and you get out of breath walking up a flight of stairs.

Puff: It's chocolate chip cookies, not chocolate chip cookie dough. And right now, I'm enjoying lemon custard.

Me: Oh, okay, I stand corrected. Lemon custard. Either way I really wish you would stop. Your mom and I don't want to breathe those toxins. The vapor is so thick in this truck it's choking me. You realize we are in a confined space, right?

Puff: Pop, it's harmless.

Me: Harmless or not, do you have any idea how silly you look puffing on this giant adult pacifier? It's like a stupid brick in your hand. You look like a giant baby gnawing on a chew toy and holding a security blanket. You might as well suck your thumb.

Vera: Pop.

Puff chuckles.

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Puff: Open the window lock and I'll crack my window back here. It'll be alright.

Me: I don't want the window open. Whenever you open the back window, it causes a kind of wind tunnel reverb in the cab. It makes my head hurt and nauseates me and makes me feel like I'm getting vertigo.

Puff: It'll be alright. Don't be so dramatic.

Vera: Pop.

Me: What?

Vera: Can we talk about something else? I've heard enough about pangolins and bats and civets and non-nutritive sucking and popcorn lung.

Me: Well, I just don't understand why he's so committed to non-nutritive sucking. I could understand it if he hadn't been breastfed. He got the titty as a baby and has no reason to feel tit-deprived as an adult.

Puff chuckles.

Carrie: Y'all do realize I'm sitting right here, don't you?

Me: Oh, I didn't realize you were listening. Well, Carrie, at least you have some reason to be a smoker. Your mother was not able to breast feed you or your twin sister. I hate to say it, but that woman couldn't do anything right.

Vera: Don't be unkind. She's not here to defend herself.

Me: It's just a fact. Your mother didn't have any milk. We had to feed you and your sister with a bottle from day one.

Carrie: That figures. I didn't know that. I'm not sure I need to know this. Probably had something to do with her fake

- boobs. So, why are you telling me this? Your theory is that being bottle fed is what led me to being a smoker?
- Me: First, don't label yourself as a smoker. Just think of it as you are currently smoking, not that it is a permanent condition. Why am I telling you this? Because it was just another failure in a long list of failures on your mother's part. She had twins and then couldn't produce milk to feed you. That's a natural selection problem. It's not your fault. Now your brother, on the other hand, was breast fed and was lavished on the titty and never wanted for mommy's milk. You were a fat, happy baby like a little Buddha who got to cuddle and suckle mommy's soft warm bosom whenever you wanted it.
- Puff: Maybe when she pulled me off it, I missed it so much that it drove me to seek satisfaction through non-nutritive sucking elsewhere.
- Me: No comment.
- Vera: So, it's my fault. I did a good job nourishing you and now you're a smoker.
- Puff: Maybe you should have kept me on it.
- Vera: You grew teeth!
- Me: You are still on the titty just not in the soft mammalian bosom form. You guys are co-dependent.
- Carrie: Oh my God! Nobody says bosom anymore!
- Puff: Thanks for that, Pop. And Mom, I couldn't help growing teeth. It just happened. I don't want to talk about this anymore.
- Carrie: Y'all are crazy. I'm still not sure why I need to know any of this. I never knew I wasn't breastfed. Mom never told me. We could never have a conversation like this. As if I needed another reason to be angry at my mom.

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Me: It's a metaphor for everything that was wrong with the woman.

Vera: Pop don't be mean.

Carrie: I know about my mother. I still love her.

Me: I'm sorry. She just did so much damage to you girls, and me. It's hard for me to forgive her. In fact, I don't forgive her but I have forgotten her.

Puff: Doesn't sound like it. And not very Christian of you.

Puff chuckles.

Me: Who said anything about Christian?

Puff chuckles again.

The way I see it, what happened to Lili is directly connected to y'all's mother.

Vera: Don't be unkind.

Me: It's just a fact.

Carrie: How's that?

Me: There's just so much you don't know.

Carrie: Lili and I talk about everything. I pretty much know everything about my mom.

Vera: Can we stop talking about her? She's gone now and all that is in the past. Can we go back to non-nutritive sucking?

Me: Stop talking about who?

Vera: That's better.

Me: Okay, so, why am I stuck on the subject of smoking? It's my way of understanding your need for non-

nutritive sucking and being at a loss for your brother's non-nutritive sucking. Even the tip of his vape tool is shaped like a nipple. Look at it. It's literally shaped like a nipple, a little black nipple.

Puff takes a big drag and holds it up and chuckles again.

It's like an adult human pacifier. All this sucking and blowing is so infantile. In addition to that, they're mostly made in China. China is killing us from the inside out. Both of you guys are spending a large percentage of your income on non-nutritive sucking products that are super-efficient nicotine delivery systems. Big tobacco gets you hooked, takes your money, makes you sick and then you become a ward of Big Pharma who takes your money and pretends to make you well. Another perfect circle of addiction.

Puff: It's been proven that nicotine is good for you. Would you rather I go back to smoking cigarettes?

Me: Why smoke anything?

Puff: Because we enjoy it.

Puff takes another huge drag off his lemon custard flavored vape block and fills the cab with it.

Me: I wouldn't exactly say it's good for you. That's like saying masochists enjoy hurting themselves. It doesn't make it right. Yes, studies have shown that nicotine can positively affect mood, focus, and concentration but its addictive qualities and unhealthy delivery systems far

outweigh any benefits. I really don't understand what happened to you guys.

Puff: Pop, it has neuroprotective effects and can reduce the possibility of developing Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. You should probably take it up.

Puff chuckles.

Vera: Well, that's not going to happen.

Me: So they say. But contrast that with the damage to your heart, lungs, endothelial system, and other internal organs. It even affects your sexual function. Do you really think it's worth it? Do you want to have ED? Why don't you just quit?

Carrie: What's ED?

Me: Erectile dysfunction.

Carrie: Gross, Dad. Sorry I asked. Is there nothing that's off-limits in this truck?

Me: Like I said, why don't you just quit?

Carrie: It's not that simple, Dad. When we were growing up everybody smoked. There was tremendous peer pressure. While we're on this trip, maybe I'll try one of those vapey things.

Me: Do you think it was any different when we were growing up? When we were growing up the percentage of smokers of all ages was much higher and smoking more prevalent. It was glamorized, not stigmatized like it is today.

Puff: It's a fact, Pop. Vaping is good. You need to follow the science and get caught up on the latest information about nicotine and vaping.

- Me: And who do you think develops “the science” as you call it and the scientific papers that support it? All I know is that you and your sister will eventually regret all these years of smoking regardless of the delivery system you choose. I watched my sister die from emphysema and lung cancer from smoking and it was horrific. She was only fifty-three. She went from being this pretty, athletic woman who, once she passed the point of no return, became a sickly, feeble shell of her former self, doddering about with an oxygen tank gasping for breath and unable to do *anything*. You think it can’t happen to you. I’m here to tell you it can, and it will. I don’t want it to happen to either of you.
- Carrie: Either we’re going to quit or we won’t. It’s really up to us. I’m not sure how this conversation is helpful.
- Vera: Can we talk about something else?
- Me: Okay, I’ll let it drop. Hopefully, we won’t recall this conversation from a hospital bed in the future.

I thought, *There is that limited free will idea again.*

- Vera: You said you would drop it.
- Me: I’m just trying to impress upon these kids the deleterious effects of their smoking habit and the ultimate, horrific, and inevitable health decline and death, not to mention financial losses and untimely goodbyes.
- Vera: I think you made your point.
- Puff: Always got to have the last word.
- Me: I’ll stop now.
- Puff: Like I said.

Me: I don't think so, Vera; they both continue to smoke.

I looked in the rearview mirror and the Puffing Professor was sucking on his plastic nipple and stroking his beard or at least what was left of his beard. He has a condition called trichorhizophagia, where he plucks the hairs out of his beard and eats them. It seemed totally contrived to me, another bogus condition that came straight out of the DSM. He declares that it's a real mental disorder and they gave him a prescription for it. From my perspective, the more you read the DSM, the more diseases you are able to justify and apply treatment. Half his beard was gone on one side of his face and it made him look crazy. Beard on one side and then baby booty bare skin on the other.

Me: Hey, Ben, could you maybe stop that plucking? It's unnerving to watch.

Puff: Then don't watch. Keep your eyes on the road.

Me: It's hard. Every time I see you jerk in the rearview mirror, it distracts me.

Puff: Then keep your eyes forward. I like doing this. I'm always in search of the perfect hair; you know the ones with the juicy little follicle bulb on the bottom. They're the best ones.

Me: That's so gross and weird. It would be better if you just ate boogers. At least it would keep your nose clean.

Carrie: Now that is gross.

Puff: Maybe I'll try that sometime.

Me: I give up.

I was reminded of when Ben was a boy, maybe eleven or twelve. He had started plucking the hairs out of his eyebrows and eating them. And he didn't pluck them evenly. He plucked one eyebrow completely

out before we realized what was going on. It made him look really weird. Back then we had enough parental influence to convince him to stop but even that wasn't until after the other one was completely gone too. Why he didn't pluck equally from each eyebrow was a mystery. He'd pluck one whole eyebrow out until there was just bare skin and then when there was nothing left to pluck, he'd go to work on the other one. Because he was so adamant about his need to do this, we allowed him to pluck them both bare at the same time so they would finally grow back at the same rate. Having just one eyebrow made him look insane. I guess the trichorhizophagia was a real thing. It just didn't seem real to me. Still doesn't, but what do I know?

He'd changed his vape juice and now the truck cab was filled with the smell of cinnamon roll.

Carrie: So, Daddy, did you really go to China?

Me: Many times.

Carrie: Wuhan?

Me: Yep, and many other places too.

Carrie: What was that like?

Me: Wuhan?

Carrie: Yeah.

Me: It was interesting. Every time I went there I got sick as a dog. I think I got Covid before there was a Covid. Maybe it was SARS. I don't know. I was sick for four or five months after I came home from Wuhan the first time. Over a two-to-three-year period, every time I went back to Wuhan the same thing happened. I swear I think they were infecting me intentionally at the hotel.

Puff: That's ridiculous. You are so paranoid and such a conspiracy freak.

Me: I'm just saying. In China, they know who you are, who you work for, and why you're there. The CCP controls everything. It could be that once they infect you, there is an incubation period when you're not contagious. The symptoms usually hit me on the airplane coming back. It's a very long series of flights to get home. Talk about misery. It always started with a massive, debilitating headache, like a migraine, and then the disease would move down into my lungs. I would start coughing uncontrollably on the airplane and after I got home this cough would persist for months. People didn't want to be around me in the office. Or anywhere. Doctors in the states were baffled. They could never figure out what was wrong with me.

When I look back on it now I absolutely believe the Chinese infected me with some kind of virulent disease and staged it so the incubation period was timed just right for me to get sick on the airplane and bring it back home to America. It happened to me every one of the three times I went to Wuhan. The symptoms were the same every time. Is that a coincidence? It never happened when I went to other Chinese cities. Only Wuhan. This was two to three years before the pandemic. I believe they were experimenting with it and would infect me right before I left so I would be contagious after I got home.

Puff: Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds? That's irresponsibly conspiratorial. When you talk like that it makes you sound insane. Do you really think they are that evil? I think you are being paranoid.

- Me: I do. I believe they went in my room and planted viruses everywhere... you know, had them in some kind of petri dish and rubbed them on the doorknobs, sink handles, telephone, toilet handles, bathroom glasses, TV remote, pillows... Every time I went to Wuhan I became deathly ill by the time I got home.
- Puff: That is totally paranoid. Think about it, Pop. They would run the risk of infecting their own population.
- Me: They are a Machiavellian adversary that respects no civilized boundaries. They will do anything to bring us down and elevate themselves. You do realize they have sophisticated genetics where they can make diseases that are specific to one race and not to another, right?
- Puff: You've said a lot of nutty things in your life, Pop, but that has to be the nuttiest of them all. You're so paranoid! You sound nuts!
- Me: Well, I wouldn't put it past them.
- Puff: I just don't believe it. Make sure you don't talk like that in public, okay? I'm sure it was just a coincidence.
- Me: Still, it's hard to explain. Three for three.
- Carrie: Hey, Dad. Not to change the subject, but what was the nastiest thing you ate?
- Me: I ate a lot of nasty things.
- Carrie: Like what? I want details.
- Me: Well, some things were okay, even normal, like pork, chicken, bacon, rice, and something like tarot. And that was just one meal. As an appetizer to that meal though, one of the Chinese guys ordered a common snack that I didn't care for. And mind you, I've eaten everything over there. It was some kind of fish skin that was rolled up, marinated in some kind of fishy slurry, and deep

fried. No meat on it at all. Just skin. To me it was like eating deep fried, thinly sliced rhinoceros hide with a sickening odor of old smelly fish. It almost broke your teeth to bite down on it. Like eating glass. Super hard and crunchy. You could hear the loud crunching sounds even when they had their mouths closed. And even though it was deep fried it still tasted horrible—just like rotting fish.

Carrie: Sounds nasty.

Me: Not as nasty as the little eels.

Carrie: Eels?

Me: Yeah, and they were not fried. I wish they had been fried. You know you can almost fry a dog turd and it'll taste good. But these little eels were not fried. They were baked in their own slimy juices or boiled or something. Ugh, it makes me gag just to think about it. God, they were very mucousy like boiled okra but unlike boiled okra they tasted awful. It was like eating some kind of snail spaghetti with the texture of oily earthworms. They had little slimy strings hanging off of them like snot as you lifted them off the plate with your chopsticks. Of course, everybody eats everything with chopsticks over there. I'm pretty adroit with chopsticks but they kept sliding off my chopsticks and back onto the community plate. The guys chuckled at me but I had something to prove and was determined to pick them and get them into my mouth. You had to kind of slurp them in like a kid eating spaghetti. If you weren't careful the sauce would spatter everywhere and stain your clothes. So nasty.

Carrie: Gross!

- Me: You asked.
- Puff: Were they worse than sea cucumber?
- Me: Right up there with it.
- Carrie: Ugh! It's making me gag just thinking about it.
- Me: I'll never get that wormy oily mouthfeel or that earthwormy taste out of my mouth or my mind. It made me think of baiting a hook when I was a kid. When you spear the hook and barb through them this yellow juice would squirt out while they squirmed on the other side of the barb. You had to keep wrapping them and threading them onto the hook. It was all I could think about while we were eating them.
- Carrie: Disgusting!
- Me: Those baby eels may have been the worst thing I've ever eaten in my life. Of course, I wasn't going to let on to the Chinese guys how disgusting it was to me. They were gobbling them up like they were a slimy wormy delicacy.
- Puff: Probably were to them.
- Carrie: Okay, I've heard enough. Sorry I asked.
- Me: I was actually gagging and fighting the gag reflex while eating them.
- Carrie: Dad! Yuck! Are you sure it wasn't worms? As I ask this, I don't think I want the answer.
- Me: Actually no. And there were other things. Sometimes I felt like they picked the nastiest things on the menu just to screw with me, you know, like some kind of test to see how far I was willing to go. Most Americans would stick to ham and cheese sandwiches, plain stir fry, simple stuff like that. Such cowards! When you're in

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China you have to participate and stop being so *American*.

Puff: What else did you eat?

Me: I ate live jellyfish, drunken prawns, live sashimi with the fish tail curling up as it was being fileted and put on the plate, slimy chicken feet, stuff like that. Did you know that chicken feet are covered in fat? How does that happen? That was a surprise to me. Baby eels were the worst though. But my all-time favorite was hot pots.

Carrie: What's a hot pot?

Puff: It's when everybody sits around a fryer and they give you all kinds of meats and spices and batters and you cook up your own food right there at the table.

Me: That's right. They were the best. I'd always make mine super spicy because some of the meat was nasty, like stomach and lungs and other internal organs.

Carrie: What else?

Me: I did have many funny food related incidents over there. There was one where I was at this high-powered meeting with the CEO of this aerospace company in Chengdu. He took me to lunch at this swanky club to impress me before we entered into a formal negotiation that was scheduled to start after lunch. So, we're at this club and left all business off the table and just made small talk to get to know each other. We were literally from two different worlds. He didn't speak English and I didn't speak Chinese so he had a young female employee accompany us as an interpreter. Being polite, the young lady ladled some soup into my bowl and I made the mistake of asking what it was. In China it's

usually best not to ask what you are eating. Her English wasn't great but she told me it was pork and lotus root.

So, we're going through this long get-to-know-you conversation having to pause and use the interpreter to go back and forth. In spite of the awkwardness of having to wait in between interpretations, we did relate and communicate quite well. Anyway, while I'm eating my soup, I raised the spoon to my mouth and noticed I had fished something out of the bowl that surprised me. It was fluted and looked like it had been carved directly from a pig's snout, you know, like a pig's snout had been cut in half and laid open. I hesitated for a second but went ahead and ate it assuming I had just eaten a pork snout. The rest of the food we had was a fairly benign lunch by Chinese standards and eventually we got the rhythm down and engaged in a great conversation through this little interpreter.

After lunch and dessert, I commented that I'd never eaten a pig snout before and that it was quite tasty and not tough at all. She made a funny little face. It was clear she had no idea what I was talking about. She asked me, "What?"

I said, "The pig snout, it was really good."

"Pig snout?"

I said, "Yeah, you know the pig's nose in the soup," and I pointed to my nose and snorted like a pig. She blushed and put her hand to her mouth like Asian girls do and started laughing. I said, "What's so funny?"

She was dying laughing with tears running down her face and it took her an extended minute to tell me it

wasn't a pig snout; it was a lotus root. I blushed and I started laughing at myself.

The CEO across the table had no idea what was so funny and looked a little worried and left out so she started to translate in Chinese. It took a long time for her to do this, including in her interpretation a little pig snorting sound while pointing at her little nose. When he finally understood, he burst out laughing. I mean full-on guffawing. The two of them laughed for ten minutes every time they looked at each other and they burst out laughing again and had tears streaming from their eyes that they daubed with their napkins. I was pretty embarrassed and laughed at myself right along with them. It really was funny. As it turned out, it was a hugely endearing moment for us and the negotiation after lunch went very smoothly. Chinese men can be so serious. I think it made him happy to have a funny moment to break the seriousness with a round-eye for a change. They probably never forgot that moment. I sure didn't.

- Carrie: That's a great story. Hey Dad, I need to pee.
Me: Okay, there's a convenience mart about eight miles ahead.
Carrie: Okay, I really need to go.
Me: I am getting there as fast as I can. There's no other place to stop between here and there. Eight miles to go. Or, as I used to say when you guys were kids, "just five more minutes."
Vera: Oh Lord.
Puff: Okay, everybody it's time to mask up.
Me: Snort!

I snorted making a pig snort sound.

Puff: Not funny. Masks on!

Me: Son, you sit back there like the Puffing Professor who knows everything. And you've bought into the whole absurd Covid narrative from one end to the other. It's enervating.

Puff: Do you have any idea how hard it is to tolerate your ignorance?

Carrie: Guys. Just five more minutes. Oh, do I remember that. We could have one hundred miles to go, and you'd say, "Just five more minutes!"

Me: You have to admit it was funny.

Carrie: Not funny. It used to drive me and Lili crazy.

Me: Not as crazy as you made us by asking every five minutes how much further we had to go.

I was beginning to enjoy having these grownup kids captive in the cab of that pickup truck. It afforded us an opportunity to discuss all the topics they could normally avoid by simply leaving or being engrossed in their devices. There was silence for a while.

Me: Okay, we're here. Everyone make a head call.

As soon as I pulled off the ramp and into the Exxon convenience store, Carrie got out of the truck and lit a cigarette, one of the usual sticks from the two to three packs of Marlboro Reds she smoked every day. She pulled on it with a ferocity that put a one-inch glowing coal on the end of it. It didn't last long. She lit another. Tried to pull it inside out too. Longest tobacco coal you've ever seen. Then she lit another.

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Me: I thought you had to go to the bathroom.

Carrie: I do.

Me: Then why are you standing out here smoking?

No answer.

Addicts, You Don't Understand

If you've never had an addict in your life, it's probably best not to give advice to those who do have them. You can never understand their experience. You can never understand the abject despondence, the feeling of despair, the bewilderment, the overwhelming sense of futility and dread. You can never understand what it feels like to watch and experience the devolution of a person you love with all your heart and all your mind, and all your soul as they destroy themselves and their future and try to take you with them. You will never understand what it feels like to watch your loved one permanently damage their brain and their body and their psyche to the point that they'll never be able to have a loving, civilized relationship with another human being as long as they live. You'll never understand what it feels like to know their life will be cut short and there is nothing in the world you can do about it. You will never understand what it feels like to watch them spend endless days, weeks, months, years in hospitals, ERs, ICUs, rehab, jail, prison, mental institutions, in self-imposed isolation, and see no improvement. You'll never understand the feeling of helplessness when you encounter medical and legal people who refuse to share important information with you that might save your loved one's life because of government Privacy Act and HIPAA regulations. Make no mistake, those laws are in place not to protect the patient or their loved ones; they are in place to protect the Medical Industrial Complex and nothing and no one else. You will never understand the constant feeling of impending doom. You will never understand the heartache, the commitment, the time, the money, the fear of them being hurt and you being hurt by them physically, emotionally, mentally. You will never understand what it feels like to see the person you nurtured as an infant, reared as a child, the person you devoted yourself to, the one you spent so much time with and whom you loved

and who loved you unconditionally, the one you taught good from bad, right from wrong, hate from love, become a monster driven by only one thing that has nothing to do with what you taught them, nothing to do with how you raised them, and nothing to do with you.

You may think an addict is just a symptom of poor parenting, or that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree and a dozen other stupid sayings. I hear it all the time. You don't know what you're talking about. You will never understand how an addict will extract every last scintilla of compassion, love, money, time, and hope from you because they have lost theirs and they want yours too. You will never understand how they get violent when you tamper with their addictive material of choice. You will never understand the depth and intensity of their outrage and what they will do to anyone or anything that gets between them and their substance. You will never understand what it feels like when they cut their wrists, take full bottles of pills, drink a fifth of Captain Morgan, or get airlifted to a hospital in another county that can handle their mode of self-harm because the one closest to you doesn't have the skills or facilities. You will never understand what they can do to you, how they corrode you, how they destroy your faith in humanity—in God. You will never understand how they will use you up, how they will steal from you, lie to you, threaten you, denigrate you, hurt you, backstab you. You will never understand how they will betray you beyond your ability to forgive. You will never understand what it feels like to know they may even kill you.

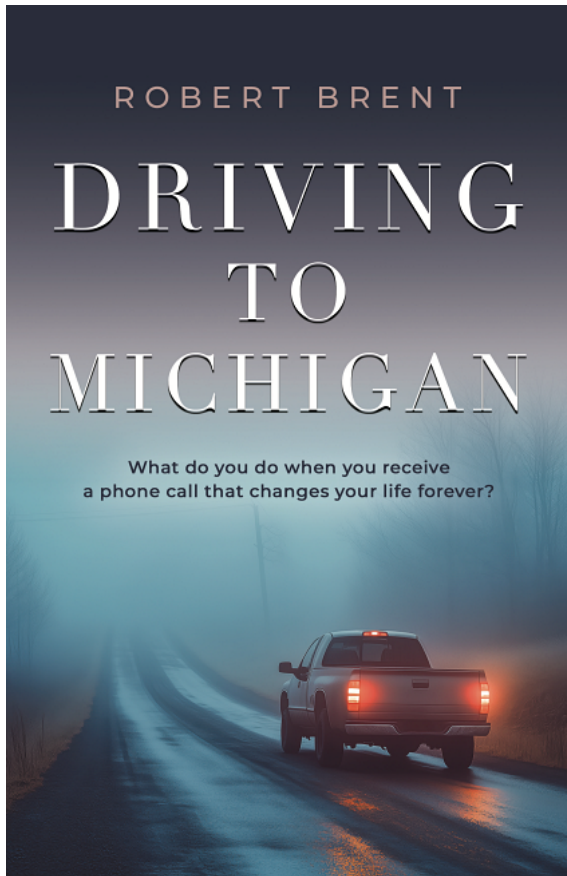
On that last point one thing you should know is that if they do threaten to hurt you or kill you, you'd better believe them. They will blame you as much as they blame themselves and if they're willing to hurt or kill themselves, they are willing to hurt or kill you.

You should know that an addict will obliterate all the fond memories of a lifetime. You should know that an addict will extract all the joy from your life. You should know that an addict will become

a consumptive parasite that sucks every last drop of blood from your body, dollar from your bank account, and every last glimmer of hope from your psyche and your soul. You should know that an addict can kill your belief in God and your belief in the inherent goodness of man. You should know that an addict's hell will become your hell. You should know an addict will cause you to exceed your saturation point. You should know an addict will titrate you with the same evil that causes their fall and you will struggle to prevent your own. You should know, if you are dealing with an addict, what it feels like to perch on the abyss and look down into it with them and feel the gravity and inescapable pull of death. You should know that an addict will make you feel like an immovable, permanent observer of all things hellish, hideous, and heinous as though you've been painted into a Hieronymus Bosch montage and you can't get out. You should know, as a caretaker to an addict, that your loved one will be like a black hole with an addiction so strong it can bend light, and it will bend the light right out of your eyes. You should know, if you are trying to help an addict, that you'll reach a point where you just want to run away from their hell, run away from the drugs, the alcohol, the scatological nightmares, the victimhood, the personal attacks. You should know you will live in a constant state of dread until they die or you do.

If you've ever been committed to an addict, at some point you'll want to step away and pick up the shards from your shattered life and try to put them back together. It's impossible but necessary for your survival. Eventually you'll come to the realization that you cannot control the behavior of others. You can only control yourself and that's nigh impossible because the addict, even from afar, even in death, will make sure there is a confluence of swirling emotional factors influencing you all the time. At some point you'll try to escape the bonds of slavery to someone else's addiction and you'll realize if they live or they die that bondage is permanent.

You'll learn that you have to cope with condescension, supercilious judgment, and occasional sympathy of your family, your friends, the law, the hospital staffs. You'll have to bear the comments in your absence when they say things like, "If that was my kid... I'd put them out on the street... I have a solution, cut off all funding..." or a dozen other imbecilic, ignorant, dispassionate, and mindless platitudes. You'll have to cope with the thoughts of what could have been, how life could have been so different for that person you loved so much, how different life could have been for you. You'll have to go through endless soul searching, trying to understand where you went wrong. What could I have done differently? Why did this personal holocaust happen? Why him, why her, why us? Of course, you'll have to get used to the fact that there is no answer to anything. Addiction is a fact of life. You have to learn to live with it and to know that some have to die with it. It is an enslaver, a killer, a torturer, a destroyer. It's the devil at his worst. He takes a perfectly good person and turns them into a perfectly dreadful one.



Driving to Michigan is a story about a family that experiences the death of a loved one due to addiction. They launch out on a cross-country odyssey to get their family member and bring them home. It's a story about coping with addiction.

Driving to Michigan

By Robert Brent

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