

## Making a Living

Orville and Gladys had fallen on hard times. For the past eight years they had been living in their camp trailer, moving from one RV park to another, trying to stay ahead of bill collectors. They hadn't always lived like that. For most of their married life they had lived in a modest, but neat, home in Midland. Orville had worked, first as a laborer, but then after several years of experience, as a carpenter for the Mid-State Construction Company. Gladys stayed home and cared for their children.

They had lived in the small but comfortable home on Juniper St. until the last child left home. Their children found jobs nearby in the factories that made paper cups, sugar, mobile homes, boat trailers and other staples of the American economy. By the time the last child was gone Orville and Gladys owned their home free and clear. But they had made sacrifices over the years, and so when the children had all gone, and with them the noise and clutter and cost of family life, when they had settled into the quietness and comfort, they began to think about the possibilities that their sunset years might hold for them.

Orville told Gladys about the Lund Pro-V XS bass boat he had for years dreamed of owning. He showed her a picture of it in BassMaster Magazine.

“I don't know Orville. \$42,000 for a fishing boat? And that's before taxes. My dad used to catch bass out of an old row boat he bought at a garage sale.”

“Bass fishin' has evolved Gladys. There's a lot more to it than you could understand. Speed for one thing. You need a fast boat to have any chance at finding them.” Orville thought it best to wait to tell her that \$42,000 only bought a 150 horsepower motor; he had his eye on the 200 HP model.

“Just how fast can a fish swim? I may not know much about it, Orville, but I'm pretty sure you don't need to go forty miles an hour to catch a fish.”

“That's what I'm talkin' 'bout, Gladys. It's not how fast the fish swim that matters, it's how fast the other boats go.”

“What other boats? Don't you want to fish where other people aren't fishing?”

“The other boats in the tournament.”

“What tournament?”

Orville scratched his head, sighed deeply, and put the magazine away. It was only a dream of his, after all, and he had had many dreams over the years. They had kept him going, helped him get up in the morning and make it through the day. But deep down he knew that they were just dreams.

“That boat doesn't look like it has a place for me in it. Wouldn't it be better to spend our money on something we can do together? We used to talk about getting a RV, travel around the country a bit. Maybe we oughta check out how much they cost.”

“Yeah, we did used to talk about that, didn't we?” Neither one of them had seen the Grand Canyon. Or been to Vegas. It seemed like all of their friends had been to Vegas. They all bragged about the all you can eat buffets. Orville thought that wouldn't be such a bad thing, getting an RV, or maybe a fifth wheel.

Orville and Gladys spent the next few months looking at RVs and camp trailers, but they realized that was all they could do: look and dream. RVs were an expensive proposition, way more than they could afford. Then one day a letter came in the mail from Midland City Bank. “Make Your Dreams Come

True” it said. “Unleash the Power of Home Equity.”

“What's that mean, home equity?” Gladys asked.

“Maybe we should find out,” Orville said.

The woman at the bank seemed vaguely familiar to them. Of course Midland wasn't a big city. Orville and Gladys had probably seen everyone in town at some time or other. “I think you'll be surprised at what we can do for you,” she said.

“Your home should appraise at over one hundred and fifty thousand. We can, being conservative, loan you one hundred thousand. How does that sound?”

Orville and Gladys looked at each other, their eyes grown large and watery. “A hundred fifty thousand! How could that be? We only paid twenty-eight for it.”

“Over thirty years ago,” the bank lady said. “Home values have gone up.”

“A hundred thousand's enough for a thirty-two foot Jayco and a truck to pull it!” Orville blurted, “with money left over. Just think of the trips we could take!”

“Maybe I could get that sewing machine I've been wanting!” Gladys said. Her quilts had won ribbons at the Midland County Fair.

“I'll draw up the papers,” the bank lady said.

Within a month Orville and Gladys were on the road to Vegas in their new F-250 pulling a Jayco thirty-tywo footer. Orville calculated that they spent almost 250 dollars on fuel to get there. “That's 500 dollars round trip,” Gladys said.

“Irma says they fly down for 300 dollars.” “One way,” Orville said. “No, that's round trip,” Gladys said.

Orville tried to think why it was better to take their trailer than to fly.

“But they have the cost of the hotel room,” he said. He calculated how many nights they would have to stay to come out ahead of Bill and Irma.

They parked behind Circus Circus. The first day they walked up and down the strip identifying all the casinos so they could talk about them with Bill and Irma when they got back. By the time they returned to their RV park Gladys' arthritis

was so bad she didn't feel like going out to dinner, so they stayed in their trailer. They spent the next two days in Circus Circus where they bought the all day buffet pass.

“I don't see what's so special about it,” Orville told Gladys. “For this much we could eat all day at the Golden Corral.”

“Golden Corral isn't Vegas,” Gladys said. “Let's go try the slot machines.”

They each went through twenty dollars and decided that was enough. “My God, Orville, how many hours do you have to work to make forty dollars?”

“Take home, almost half a day.”

Gladys felt bad for using up Orville's time in such a foolish way. She thought about all the money they had spent getting to Las Vegas and how much of Orville's life had been used up to pay for it, calculated the hours and days.

“Maybe we shouldn't have come down here,” she said. “Maybe we shouldn't have done any of it. The trailer, the truck, the sewing machine.”

“Come on Gladys, you only live once. This is our chance!”

“Chance for what, Orville.?”

“To live. Isn't that what we came here for? Let's live it up! Come on, Gladys. I've always wanted to play blackjack in Vegas. Put my chips on the table, rub my fingers across that green felt and take on the house. You're my good luck charm, Honey.”

Orville found a ten dollar table and bought two hundred dollars worth of chips. An hour later the chips were gone. He staggered away from the table and Gladys grabbed him by the arm, steadied him.

“Let's find a chair where you can rest a minute, Orville. You don't look too good.” Another two days of Orville's hard work had been squandered in a few minutes. “Maybe we should find the buffet, enjoy some food and take it easy for awhile.”

“Not really feeling hungry, Gladys. Let's go back home.”

“You mean to the RV park?”

“I mean home, Gladys.”

Two days later they were back in Midland. The following Monday Orville went to the Mid-State Construction office to be put back to work. The general manager called him into his office. “I've got some bad news, Orville. We haven't got any work for you right now.”

“You firing me, Boss? After thirty years?”

“No, it's not like that, Orville. It's the market. Never seen anything like it. Can't give a house away, public works has dried up. There's just nothing out there.”

“We just took out a loan on our house, Boss. I got bills to pay. I gotta work or we're in real trouble.”

“Don't know what to tell you, Orville. There's a few things out there we're looking at. Something's bound to turn up. Can't go on like this much longer.”

But it did. The months dragged by without work. Gladys got a job at the old folks home and Orville filed for unemployment and spent months sitting on the bench at the union hall. They managed to get by until the unemployment ran out and Orville got behind on his union dues. Orville signed up at Labor Supply and got day jobs two or three days a week, but it still wasn't enough to cover their bills. Once a month they sat at the kitchen table and decided which bills to pay. Then a notice came from Midland State Bank: they were four months behind on their loan; the bank was foreclosing. Orville stopped by the Mid-State Construction Company offices to plead for his job back but found them empty, the sign on the front of the building taken down.

The Jayco sat like an albatross next to their bungalow. It had been idle since their trip to Vegas. It made each of them sick to think that they had traded their

home for such foolishness, but it was a sickness they never talked about, each of them carrying their guilt silently. It was too momentous a failing to confess to.

One day Gladys came home from the nursing home and found Orville moving supplies into the Jayco.

“Planning a trip?” she asked, incredulous that Orville could think that they could afford such a thing.

“Something like that, only permanent,” Orville said.

“Permanent?”

“We're losing the house aren't we?”

Gladys dropped her head. All of their memories were in that house. It's where their children were born, had learned to walk. Every birthday and Christmas since they were first married was in that house. “We don't owe anything on the truck or the trailer. They can't take them away from us, so I guess we'll just have to live in the trailer til we get back on our feet.”

Eight years later they were still living in the Jayco. Gladys' arthritis had gotten so bad she couldn't work. Orville signed up for Social Security and worked occasionally as a day laborer, which he could do anywhere. Their children and grandchildren were spread across southern Idaho, so they fell into a pattern of moving from town to town. After a few months in Midland they would pick up and leave for Rupert or Pocatello or Rexburg, then retrace their path back to Midland a few months later.

Gladys wondered what it would be like when they got old, too old to travel from town to town, too old to work day jobs, so old they were sick and infirm. She was almost the age her mother was when she had a stroke and Orville had already outlived his dad. Time was running out on them, she told Orville.

“Whatever is going to become of us?”

Orville didn't respond, looked stoically at the road ahead, knuckles whitening on the wheel. He had always taken care of her, provided for her and the children. But that was a different time. He'd built a life for them with not much more than his sweat. Any man who had the desire could do it, but he didn't see that these days. Honest sweat wasn't worth what it once was. And he had passed the age when he would even be considered for a real job; he had long since given up walking onto job sites looking for the foreman, inquiring about work. He could see it in their eyes, the exasperation and even worse, the pity. It seemed that the result of a lifetime of work was self doubt, loathing.

Somehow people made it in this new world. He saw them in the RV parks, retired couples younger than him and Gladys in their Class A motor homes, pulling jeeps behind them, moving south in winter and north in summer. But he didn't really know any such people. The men he had worked with at Mid-State were all scrambling, making half what they used to make.

Orville couldn't make any sense of it, couldn't figure out how to fit into this world. All he knew was that he was tired. Gladys was right, they were running out of time. He wished he had an answer for her, that he could tell her it was all going to be OK.

Orville turned off the interstate toward Twin Falls, then east on Shoshone Falls Road and the state land where they could park their RV for free. Gladys fidgeted with her phone while Orville levelled the RV. When he was done they walked down the dirt road to where they could see the falls.

“A view like this would cost a million bucks,” Orville bragged.

“View of what?” Gladys said.

“Just look at it!”

“That's what I'm saying. Not much to look at.”

The dark basalt bluffs of the canyon rim gave way to sagebrush slopes, which

in turn gave way to ancient water smoothed lava beds. In the spring, when the water was flowing, the falls were a roaring two hundred foot drop, a thousand foot wall of white lathering roil. But it was September and the water wasn't flowing. A few algae stained trickles leaked over the stolid rock face like an old man peeing.

“What? Too much? Five hundred thousand then. Not goin' for a penny less, Gladys.”

“It's worth just what we're payin' for it.”

“Nuthin'?”

“You said it, Orville. We're getting our money's worth today, that's for sure. Now help me get back to the trailer before I get bit by a rattler.”

The path back was uphill and Gladys had to stop and rest several times. “Why don't you go on ahead, Orville, and freshen up a bit. You could use a shave. Best not to let your son see you lookin' like that. It'd set a bad example.”

By the time Orville was ready Gladys was sitting in her recliner with her feet up.

“Can't go to Bobby's, Orville. He's run off the rails again. Lissa left with the kids, gone to her mother's in Rupert.

“How do you know all that?”

“She just pm'd me.”

“What's that mean, pm'd?”

“I'm on FaceBook.”

Orville scratched his head. There were things Gladys understood that would always be a mystery to him

“Sounds like maybe he needs us Gladys. Shouldn't we oughtta go help him out?”

Not sure I want to go over there right now, Orville. Might be better in the



morning. People don't generally get riled up in the morning.”

“Can't hardly blame him for goin' off the rails once in a while, makin' next to nothin', wrappin' plastic forks and spoons in plastic bags all day long.”

“You mean runnin' the machine....”

“What machine?”

“The machine that wrapped the plastic tableware.”

“What kind of a life is that, Gladys? Sittin' there all day long watchin' that machine. And for next to nuthin'. When I was carpentering I got to move around and think and actually build stuff.”

“What are you talking about? Bobby just got a raise. He was makin' as much as you ever made.”

“He's makin' \$14.25 an hour, \$30,000 a year. Houses cost five times as much as they used to. How's he supposed to raise up a family on that?”

“You know there's more goin' on with Bobby than that. He's almost 40 years old and he's still messin' around like a kid.”

“What are you sayin' Gladys? What did you mean he *was* makin'?”

“I mean he got let go. He failed his drug test. You know what he's like when he's been on the stuff.

Orville was quiet for a while, thinking about his youngest child, how sensitive and quiet he had been as a boy. His drawings had hung on their wall back when they had a wall to hang pictures on.

“I suppose it doesn't make a difference if we wait til morning. Still, he must be mighty lonely. Hate to think of him that way, all alone. Abandoned at home and at work. God amighty Gladys. You remember what a sweet kid he was? How did things get so twisted?”

“Some things is just too big for us mere mortals to understand, Orville. Make yourself miserable just thinkin' about it. Like I say, best just to keep movin'

forward. Might not be getting' anywhere, but it's better than sittin' and stewin'."

Orville was up at six o'clock the next morning. He didn't want to wake Gladys. Let her sleep, he thought. When she's sleeping she doesn't have to deal with all their problems. He went for a walk along the road, just two dusty tracks through the sagebrush and basalt. Interspersed throughout the bleak landscape were other RVs and camp trailers, mostly old and run down, kept running by hope and prayers. Orville wondered what their story was, the human occupants huddled inside each dwelling. It reminded him of pictures he had seen of yurts on the steppes of Mongolia, portable canvas homes clustered on the grasslands. But the pictures he had seen implied a social cohesion and nomadic movement with a common purpose. The scattering of trailers in the sagebrush almost looked like a community, but it was a community where he, and everyone in it, was mostly anonymous. Their common trait was poverty, although Orville took some pride in the fact that the Jayco was bigger and newer than most of the others. Camping here in the scrub land, boondocking, was free. Occasionally he and Gladys would strike up a conversation with another couple, and they even learned some of their names. They all seemed to be on a circuit, moving from place to place, then repeating their movement so that over the years Orville and Gladys came to recognize many of the RV's. But mostly they passed by silently, surreptitiously sizing up each dwelling, gleaning what impressions they could of their fellow travelers.

When he returned Gladys was in her robe busying herself in the kitchen. She pored him a cup of coffee and stirred the oatmeal. Orville sat at the table, blowing into his coffee while he watched Gladys occupied in a routine she had followed every morning for the past forty-five years. She looked old and worn-out to him. He imagined he looked the same to her, but he didn't feel that way

inside. A little tired maybe, he couldn't do as much as he once could, but not worn out. Her elbows showed through her terry cloth wrap and the heels of her slippers had collapsed revealing thick arthritic ankles. The hands that stirred his oatmeal, once delicate and graceful, had grown crooked and swollen. The flesh of her cheeks, grayish and sagging, jiggled as she moved about the kitchen. But her voice was still warm and light and she smiled from time to time, looking at him with cheer. There were times when that was all that kept him going, her encouragement.

“I suppose after breakfast we can head over to Bobby's.”

“I messaged him a few minutes ago but I haven't heard back. I just don't know what to expect. But yes, that's why we're here, so I guess we'll go over and see what's up.”

After eating their breakfast Gladys changed her clothes and did her make up while Orville snoozed in his recliner. It was nine o'clock by the time they were in the truck and headed into town. The morning air was calm as they crossed the Perrine Bridge. It spanned the Snake River Gorge from rim to rim. Fifteen hundred feet long and five hundred feet high, it was popular with base jumpers and suicides. The wind often howled down the canyon and a sudden blast could catch an RV and push it dangerously close to the edge, so if they had to take the Jayco into Twin Falls or south to Jackpot, Nevada, Orville would drive the extra miles to cross the river at Hagerman or Hansen.

At the far end of the bridge lay Blue Lakes Boulevard, a promising stretch of asphalt and concrete flanked by brightly modern chain motels (Comfort Inn, Motel 6) and big box stores (Costco, Walmart). Every sampling of American Cuisine was present, from the prosaic (MacDonald's, Burger King, Kentucky Fried) to ethnic (Taco Bell, Pizza Hut) and fine dining (Appleby's, Red Robin). It held the promise of a good life for the complaisant citizens of Twin Falls, but for

Orville and Gladys it was only a passageway to the far end of the city, through the old worn out downtown and adjacent arterials that were home to nail salons, pawn shops and tattoo parlors. They pulled up in front of a humble bungalow on Second Avenue, just behind the long vacant Montgomery Ward store. They climbed the deteriorating steps of the porch to the front door, grimy from decades of unwashed hands pushing and pulling, and rang the bell.

Nothing happened. After standing there for a few minutes Orville tried the door. It was unlocked.

“Should we go in?” Gladys asked. “We don't want to startle him. Anything could happen.”

“Like what?”

“Like anything. Like the stuff you see on the news.”

“For goodness sake, Gladys. He's not going to shoot us,” Orville said as he stepped cautiously into the darkened livingroom and called out Bobby's name. Gladys followed him in cautiously.

“His car's in the driveway. Must be here,” she whispered.

They stood silently, alert, listening for sounds of their son.

“I hear something in the basement, Orville,” she whispered again. They moved toward the basement door where they could see light filtering up from below. Orville snuck slowly down the stairs with Gladys clutching his shirt. The stairway opened into a large partially finished room. Bobby was seated at a far wall, wearing earphones in front of a computer screen propped on a makeshift desk, a door slab set on sawhorses. There was a large mirror on the wall in front of him through which he gave a perfunctory nod acknowledging their presence. He leaned intently toward the monitor which displayed silent cartoonish military figures carrying machine guns, moving stealthily through the rooms of a medieval castle. A surreptitious figure dashes across an opening and Bobby,

gripping a bat shaped device reacts to the action on the screen by furiously pressing buttons and one of the soldiers opens fire. Red splatters of blood appear on the fallen character.

“He isn't even going to say hello?” Orville muttered.

“Can't you see he's busy?”

“Busy? Looks like a waste of time to me. Stuff kids do when they should be doing homework.”

“Goodness, Orville, where you been the last twenty years?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about making a living. Can't you see that's what he's doing?”

Orville stood awkwardly. All he could see was his son alone in a shabby basement shutting out the world in favor of some fabricated alternate reality. He wanted to ask how Bobby could possibly be earning a living doing this, but he wanted even more to avoid exposing his ignorance to Gladys. There had been a time when he explained the workings of the world to her, how concrete was poured and lumber was fashioned into houses. But that was long ago and those things no longer seemed to hold any importance.

“We should go. We don't want to throw him off his game,” Gladys said, as if Bobby was playing baseball or golf.

They drove silently along Blue Lakes Boulevard, back toward the Perrine Bridge and the scablands where the Jayco sat waiting for them. Orville felt the emptiness that seemed to encompass his son's life. He had a glimmering of understanding that this was what life was becoming, that what Bobby was doing was the new reality. For a moment he could hear the symphonic rattle of spring's first load of concrete sliding down the chute, smell the acrid sweetness of sawdust on his skin. He remembered how it had filled him. What sensations did Bobby experience? Did they make him feel a part of the world? It seemed a

soulless place, Bobby's basement.

“What's that on the Bridge? Some kind of trouble,” Gladys said, leaning forward. “Oh my God!”

There were police cars with lights flashing, fire engines and a giant tow truck backed up to where they could see a trailer on its side, still hitched to a pickup truck that had gone over the railing of the bridge. It hung nose down, suspended five hundred feet above the rocks and water below, held only by a two and five sixteenths inch ball connection to the trailer.

“Can you imagine?”

“That could be us, Gladys. It's no wonder the way the wind's blowing.”

They rode quietly for a while, moving forward bit by bit as the flagman controlled the single lane of traffic. Orville thought what it would be like to be hanging above the canyon, knowing the manner of your death, terrified of the fall. At least their problems would be over. No more scrambling around the state, visiting children and relatives more often than anyone wanted, endlessly in motion. He felt guilty having these thoughts, feared that Gladys might discern them. They shared an unspoken commitment to the denial of their circumstance.

“It's the folks we camped next to outside Pocatello! Wilkinsons's their name. Bernice and Walter!” Gladys blurted out.

“How do you know that?” all Orville could see was the belly of the trailer and the tailgate of the truck hanging over the rail.

“FaceBook. Everybody's talkin' 'bout it. It's even on the national news.” Gladys eyes were fixed on her phone. She was nibbling her bottom lip, intently swiping and tapping, learning more than Orville could by observing the scene.

“Her sister's started a GoFundMe. Jesus, Orville, they already raised twenty thousand. Can't be more than a few minutes. Some people have all the luck”

“I guess you could call it luck, one way or the other. Seems more bad than good.”

“Just went up to twenty-one thousand. No, twenty-two! Money's comin' in from all over, far away as New York.”

“Still, don't think I'd want to trade places with them.”

“What's your cut-off line, Orville? Thirty Thousand? Forty? Bet they get there before we get back to the Jayco. Almost said before we get home, but we haven't got a home. Haven't had for longer than I can remember.”

By the time they got back the Go FundMe was closing in on fifty thousand dollars. Every network news show had a piece on the dramatic rescue of the Wilkinsons.

“Hook it up, Orville.”

“What....”

“Hook the Jayco up. We're headed back to the bridge.”

“But Gladys...”

“Hurry Orville! They're gonna beat us to it.” It was then that Orville noticed that scattered throughout the sagebrush people were rolling up canopies, stowing lawn chairs and propane tanks, hitching fifth wheels and trailers. “Look, one of them's already on the road!”

Within minutes they, too, were headed back to the Perrine Bridge, one in an unorderly caravan of RV's. Horns were honking, threatening fists aggressively displayed, voices yelling as trucks and trailers sped over sagebrush and rocks around more timid drivers. Soon the Perrine bridge was filled with a menagerie of trailers. One skillful driver had managed to lay his trailer over on its side, although the wind had settled to a gentle breeze.

“Don't think they'll get anything for that,” Gladys mumbled. “Got to get your rig over the edge to create the necessary drama. What do you think, Orville?”

“Not enough wind, Gladys. And no room to maneuver. Got to get some speed up to get it over.”

It took hours to clear the bridge. By the time they made it across to Blue Lakes boulevard it was getting dark. There was a sea of headlights behind them so they took the long way around. They were so tired and discouraged that they crawled into bed without dinner.

“At least Bobby did OK today,” Gladys said. “Made almost five hundred dollars last night.”

“What's going to become of us, Gladys?”

“We'll be fine. If you want we can leave for BethAnne's tomorrow.”

“I don't just mean us us, Gladys. I mean all of us.”

But she had drifted into sleep, and he was left alone. He didn't want to, but he couldn't help but think about the house on Elm Street where he had a lawn to mow and a swing set in the back yard. Sure there were times in winter when he was unemployed, but he could go to the union hall and sit with the other men, safe in the knowledge that winter would give way to spring and life would rise up within him. Now it was always winter and he had no bench to sit on, no men to visit with, no hope of spring.

Outside the wind gusted, rocking the trailer. Conditions were ideal and the bridge was likely cleared of traffic by now; there would be room to maneuver. Orville thought about how he would do it, how he would get his speed up and then, just as he felt a gust of wind push the trailer toward the railing, he'd jerk the wheel to the left. If he did it just right the trailer would go over on its side and, like cracking a whip, fling them over the edge. In the end it was all a matter of luck. He knew he had some, he just didn't know which kind it was.