

Jack-in-the-Box U-Haul

by Paula Ray

"When I was six years old, Dad came home from Vietnam and picked me and Mama up from her sister's house in Boston. We packed a U-Haul with everything we owned from T.V. to toothbrush. Dad hitched the trailer to the Rambler and drove us South, back home to Carolina. A few miles outside of Boston, we fishtailed on an overpass and my mother burst into song. "Mama's Gonna Buy You a Mockingbird." Maybe she meant to calm my nerves, but the sound of her shaking voice and expression of panic was like an eerie jack-in-the-box; she scared me. I expected the springs in the car seat to eject her through the rusty roof when she hit the high note. Instead, a suitcase strapped to the hardtop went flying through the air and I remember watching Dad's underwear land on the windshield of a Chevy passing in the opposite direction. I whispered, "I spy", but decided it wasn't the right time for games.

We pulled onto the muddy soft shoulder as soon as we could, but it wasn't soon enough. Our trailer came unhitched and rolled down into the ditch. The doors sprang open and our belongings were spat out like fishbones. Dad slid downhill to the wreckage and Mama changed her tune and started singing hymns, but her singing couldn't drown out the sound of Dad taking the Lord's name in vain. I crawled out of the backseat—barefooted and curious. Mama hollered for me to get back in the car, but I kept running straight for my Dad's arms. He picked me up and we looked at the trailer, helpless, like we were curbside, watching our house burn down. The traffic kept whipping by. Guess folks thought we weren't worth helping. Maybe if Dad had tried to flag somebody down, they would have stopped.

"Don't worry, Baby." That's all Dad said before he took the gas can out of the trunk and doused the trailer, then set it on fire with his zippo Navy lighter, souvenir from Vietnam.

Mama screamed, "What the hell are you doing?"? Then she went back to singing her hymns at a faster tempo an octave higher.

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Dad said, "We got fire insurance when we rented the U-Haul, but they won't replace broken things."

Mama jumped out of the car and screamed, "You didnt even go through the stuff first. You didn't even get the pictures. Why didnt you warn me?"

Dad looked at her and then at me. With a calm voice, like seeing everything we own turn to ash was normal, he said, "We can always take more pictures."

Even as a kid, I knew they wouldn't be the same.

