

Adventures with Aaron

A non-fiction piece of work

By Pete McGinty

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The invitation

I wasn't naïve enough to think that going out of town with Aaron was going to be all fun and games. Traveling in a car with him for two 12-hour trips there and back to Hilton Head was enough to give caution. Not knowing exactly what the plans were, where we would be sleeping, where we would be eating, wondering if, or how many times I might be stranded somewhere were just some of my casual concerns. I likened my attitude to the open explorations I made back in college, cramming in a station wagon with a bunch of buddies, heading south with a couple hundred bucks in my pocket, hoping I would occasionally sleep in a bed.

It was an odd match from the start. I had never been on a golf trip in my life. I had not even played golf in over five years. Inviting myself into a well-crafted foursome was not a typical thing for me. I'd never been to Hilton Head. And I'd never traveled with Aaron.

But I was tired, having worked hard for weeks and weeks in preparation for the Experience Columbus annual meeting. And there were other stresses and factors that tugged on me, that told me to get away from it all for a bit. I didn't feel as though I was in much of a position to be picky.

When I first heard Beth say that Aaron and Will were heading to Hilton Head with some other guys on a golf trip, I kidded that maybe I should go too. Beth said that I should. She told me to call Aaron and ask him. She said, "You never know, maybe it could work. She tries not to speak for Aaron. As if she could. "What the hell?" I asked myself. So I called him.

It was a Monday morning. "Aaron, it's Pete. Hey, Beth was telling me that you and Will are going down to Hilton Head in a couple weeks. Any chance I could tag along?"

"Yes, absolutely. We would love to have you."

"Are you absolutely sure? I don't want to screw anything up for anyone. I don't even have to play golf, so I won't screw up your foursome. And I don't want to take a bed away from anyone. So I only want to come if you promise me I won't screw anything up."

"You won't screw anything up. It would be great! I would love it if you come. You'll have my car to use. You can play golf if you want. But you don't have to. And we even have an extra room for you in the condo!"

Damn, this was sounding pretty good. I will have total freedom. I can hang with the guys if I want. I can go to the beach. I can sleep. Oh, I need some sleep. Just to get away and throw my suitcase on a floor and camp out for a few days with nothing to do. This could work.

"Wow! That sounds awesome. I need to figure some things out to make sure I can go, but I would really love to. When can I let you know?"

"Take your time. Just let me know by this Friday. No hurry. It's yours if you want it."

I decide I've got to go. Too good to be true. And the price was right. The Leventhal discount...if there is such a thing. I make the necessary phone calls, and I'm nearly good to go.

Tuesday morning, my phone rings. "Pete, it's Aaron."

“Hey there partner, vacation planner, ticket to ride...”

“Listen, I need to know by noon today if you want to go or not. Will has a fourth. He’s a golfer. He rounds out our foursome. It would be fine if you decide you can’t go. That gives us the four we need. I need to know by noon. Will has to let his friend know today. You know, he’s got this friend. Will does. He’s a golfer. We’re holding the spot for you, but he’s a golfer, so if you can’t go, everything will work out just fine on our end. It’s not too late to back out.”

In other words, “Hey, Pete, take this little fantasy vacation you have and shove it up your butt, you non-golfing loser.”

“Well Aaron, why don’t you just count me out? No problem.”

“Fine.” Click.

Damn. It felt like a hot chick was breaking a date with me.

But a week goes by and I’m still thinking how great it would have been to go down south and get some sun. For the hell of it, I say to Beth that I would still love to go, wondering if something may have changed on Aaron’s end. Maybe somebody died, or at least sprained their ankle. She encourages me to call Aaron. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“Aaron, it’s Pete. Hey, I’m just wondering if anything has changed and if, by chance, I could still tag along?”

“Yes, absolutely! They all ditched me. They all decided to fly, and I’m not flying. I have to drive. They left me on my own. Those bastards. I need your help driving. I can’t drive it by myself. Of course you can come. I’d love to have you. I could use your help. I need you to help drive! I still have a room for you. It’s yours for the taking.”

Trip on.

The phone call

“I have your first assignment.” Aaron commands, as though he has hired me to do a job for him.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“I need you to call the Charleston CVB, tell them who you are, tell them that you are coming to visit their city and you are bringing a travel writer with you, and that he’s going to write a story about your visit, and that you want the media rate on a good hotel for Wednesday night.”

More than perplexed, and a bit amused, I ask, “What in the hell are you talking about?”

“Just what I said. It’s your first assignment.”

I’m not overly enthused at the notion of Aaron giving me an “assignment.” This is supposed to be a vacation for me. A well-deserved bask in the sun, on the beach, with a book and my ipod. With time to do nothing but escape any responsibility that would be waiting for me upon my return to Ohio. And why do we need to find a hotel room? I thought this was already taken care of.

“I’m not going to be doing any ‘assignment,’” I firmly state. “This is my vacation. I’m not going to work on it. Besides, if the VP of Marketing of the Charleston CVB called me and told me that, I’d laugh.”

“You don’t know how the game is played,” Aaron blurts back, raising his voice, becoming agitated. “I do it all the time. Beth does it all the time. I’ve done it millions of times. Just call them up and tell them what I told you to tell them!”

“Then you do it Aaron. If you’ve done it a million times, then do it a million and one!”

“No, you do it”, Aaron shouts back.

“No”, I say sternly.

“Fine”, Aaron more sternly answers as he hangs up without a goodbye.

The departure

Waking up the morning of March 12 is a bit difficult. We had successfully survived the previous day, our annual meeting, and the post-party.

Aaron is to pick me up at 7:00 a.m. for an early start. I’m not ready and I see the headlights in my drive. It’s 6:48 a.m.. I poke my head out and ask Aaron to come inside.

“No!” comes his firm response.

“I need five minutes,” I say.

“You’ve got 12,” is the answer.

6:59 a.m.. My front door opens. It’s Aaron. “Let’s go! Now! It’s time to go!” he shouts.

Why am I already anxious?

Aaron begins the drive. We enjoy very pleasant conversation on the way down. We share thoughts of the day before, how the meeting went, what the response from the crowd was. It was a good way to start the drive. After about an hour on the road however, I begin to want to distance myself from work. Every mile that clicks off, I am a mile further from those responsibilities.

But Aaron has other thoughts. It is obvious that he sees our time together as an opportunity for him to share his ideas with me about how I should be doing my job. “If you were smart...”, is the start of most of his sentences. Or, “I keep telling Beth...”
Damn, it was annoying.

“Knock it off! I’m on vacation! I don’t want to talk about work!”

“Does Beth tell you what I do to her? Every morning, when she’s brushing her teeth? I am always giving her ideas on what you guys should be doing and she always gets pissed off at me and tells me she doesn’t want to talk about work. He, he, he, he.”

Aaron doesn’t drive in a straight line. I emailed Beth on my Blackberry. You’re paying too much attention. It will drive you crazy. Close your eyes, was her response.

I never thought it was going to be an easy drive. I knew I’d have a lot of adjusting to do. I knew it was going to be an adventure. Try to be mindful. Try to smell the roses along the way.

The confession

As we approach lunchtime Aaron tells me he's going to buy me lunch because he's got a "confession" to make. What in the hell does he mean by "a confession to make"? I'm thinking, "Oh shit. This is probably not going to be a good thing."

We stop in Portsmouth at Luigi's Pizzeria. "The best Pizza in Portsmouth," the sign declares. It's right next to the Chinese Buffet, which I'm sure has the best Chinese in Portsmouth.

As we await our food, Aaron starts to smile.

"It's time for my confession. You know, about a year and a half ago, Beth and I were at an auction. One of the items was a condo for a week in Hilton Head valued at \$2,500. I didn't really want it, but I told Beth, 'I'm going to get this thing started.' '\$1,000,' I yelled. And then silence. No one else bids! Going once, twice, three times...sold for \$1,000. So I won the damn thing. So Beth and I had to come down last year to stay in the condo.

"I wrote a story about it. Look." He showed me the *High Street Neighborhood Guide* with the spread on Hilton Head. "While we were down there, I put together a golf package. I was working with this guy named Bobby and told him that I'm going to bring a bunch of guys down with me next year and I worked out golf lessons, rounds of golf and condos. I told him I'm going to bring a *bunch* of guys down.

"So last week, I call up the woman at Spinnaker, the property management company, to confirm the condos, and guess what she tells me? She tells me..."

I interrupt, "She tells you that you only have one condo..."

"Right! Do you believe that? This bozo only fixes me up with one condo. I told him, 'I'm bringing a *bunch* of guys down with me.' What kind of idiot would think that a *bunch* of guys would only need *one* condo?!?!? I can't believe this jerk. So I kept arguing with the lady and she wouldn't budge. She just held her ground telling me that we only had one three-bedroom condo reserved as part of the package. And there aren't any other condos available. They're all sold out. Bullshit...all sold out. It's not even in-season yet.

"I was so pissed. I had Beth read through the paperwork, and you know what she says? She says, 'Aaron, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but you're wrong on this one. It clearly says here in the paperwork, that you only have one three-bedroom condo.' Do you believe this jerk? I tell him I'm bringing a *bunch* of guys down and he only reserves us one three bedroom condo!!!"

"So what you're telling me Aaron is that we don't have a place to stay."

"That's what I'm telling you."

"Well that's just fucking great," I tell him.

He's smiling, more of a smirk, seemingly amused as if he feels like this is a good lesson for me.

“Hey, that’s what traveling is all about,” he says. “Don’t you know where the word ‘travel’ comes from? It comes from the word ‘travail.’ We’re *travailing*,” he smirks, then laughs. And as my look becomes more concerned, he laughs harder.

“Travail,” I mutter, remembering my 9th grade English class, *Travail: painfully difficult or burdensome work; toil: pain, anguish or suffering resulting from mental or physical hardship; the pain of childbirth...* I remember. Damned, wish I could remember the definition of “vacation.”

Aaron’s laughter increases. His belly is jiggling, bouncing back and forth off the table, causing our refilled drinks to spill. He laughed harder. People are starting to stare.

“Have faith,” he exclaims. “You’re a man of little faith.”

“It’s not lack of faith you see in my face, Aaron. It’s annoyance mixed with some amusement and a touch of anger.”

“He, he, he, ha, ha,” he laughs harder. I long for snow and freezing rain.

I’m driving to Hilton Head with a 65-year-old man, a man who has traveled the world many times over...a *travel writer* for God’s sake...and we don’t have anywhere to stay. And he thinks it’s funny.

“Are you surprised?” Aaron asks.

“No, I’m not surprised Aaron. The only thing that would surprise me on this trip is if there were no surprises.”

“Ha, ha, ha. That’s funny, ‘the only thing that would surprise you on this trip is if there were no surprises,’ That’s funny. I’ve got to remember that. Don’t worry, we’re staying with my friend Avi tonight. And I’m going to cash in my VIP pass at the Red Roof tomorrow night. There has to be availability in the condos this week. Don’t worry.”

“Not worried,” I again remind him. “Just annoyed.”

“He, he, he, ha, ha, ha, chuckle, chuckle, chuckle,” came his smug response.

Continuing on

We need to get some gas before moving on. We pull into the BP and Aaron gives me a \$20 bill and tells me to go in and prepay for pump #4.

“Why only \$20? Why don’t we fill it up?” I ask.

“Nope. Only \$20 at a time. That’s how I do it. That forces us to stretch our legs. Make sure you get a receipt!”

It would mark the first of 14 stops for gas.

I drive the next stint. Finally some control. I’m thinking maybe I should wait until Aaron falls asleep and turn around. Will he fall asleep? Beth says he’ll fall asleep. She promises he will. But, no. He just wants to talk. Talk about work. My work. Reminding me again all the things I would do if I were smart. I remind him once again that I am on vacation. I’m not talking about work. He respects that. For ten minute stretches. As I drive, I write Beth again. *Do you have any earplugs hidden in this car?* She writes back,

No, but you can tell him to soften his voice. I usually do it by using a hand gesture, motioning my hand downward as if to signal a dog to sit. It doesn't work.

We take a break in Charlotte. Stop at McDonalds. He brings his "kit" in. He's going to demonstrate to me how he is going to be able to use his "pitch" to secure condos for us for the rest of the week.

Kit: That which Aaron uses to secure his deals. It consists of a three-ring binder full of stuff, a High Street Neighborhood Guide and a Travelhost Magazine.

Pitch: His performance; his spiel; his sales story. It goes something like this: "Hi, I am Aaron Leventhal. I'm a travel writer and magazine publisher from Columbus, Ohio. I write stories about the destinations I go to and I place them in these two magazines. Here, look at this one I did on Costa Rica last year. See, see, see. Look at this. See. Look at this. See. See. See. Look. Look. See. That's what I do. I write stories about places. Here, look at this one I did on Hilton Head last year. See, see, see. Look at this. Look. Look. And look at this. See. See. My magazines are distributed in 15,000 hotel rooms. Over 150,000 readers see my stories. Here, look at this one. See. That's what I do. See. Now, here is what I need....."

Sitting in McDonalds over a fruit cup and a sundae, I say, "Aaron, I just don't know how you do it. I really don't. I don't like to have to work on my vacations."

"It's not work. It's easy. Let's role play," he says. "I'm going to walk you through it and whenever I ask you a question, just say, 'no.'"

"Ok, here goes, 'Hi, I'm Aaron Leventhal. I'm a travel writer and magazine publisher from Columbus, Ohio. I write stories about the destinations I go to and I place them in these two magazines. Here, look at this one I did on Costa Rica last year. See, see, see. Look at this. See. Look at this. See. See. See. Look. Look. See. That's what I do. I write stories about places. Here, look at this one I did on Hilton Head last year. See, see, see. Look at this. Look. Look. And look at this. See. See. My magazines are distributed in 15,000 hotel rooms. Over 150,000 readers see my stories. Here, look at this one. See. That's what I do. See. Now, here is what I need..."

"No!" I remark.

"That's it. Then I just go on to the next one, that's how easy it is," he remarks.

"Wait a minute, I thought I was going to get to say 'no' like 6 or 7 times."

"Nope, it's that easy. Then I just go on to the next one. I don't have time to screw around. I'm a busy man. He, he, he, ha, ha, ha. The greatest hitter who ever lived only got a hit four out of every ten times he batted. Michael Jordon missed most of the shots he ever took. Joe Montana only completed 50% of his passes."

Oh, God.

Driving again. I'm trying to settle into a grove of acceptance and peace. I finally get Aaron engaged in a conversation about something interesting other than work. We're bantering back and forth, and I ask him a question. As I await his response, I look over and he's sleeping. So, I decide to tell him how that makes me feel...how it makes me feel that he fell asleep in the middle of me talking, "You bastard. You've got a lot of nerve. Finally it's my turn to talk and you just fall asleep on me. You don't even care what I have to say, do you? You're not even listening are you?"

"I'm listening," he says. "I have this uncanny ability to sleep and listen at the same time."

I then remain quiet, practice some deep breathing exercises, meditate for a bit, and enjoy drive to Charleston.

Avi

It is so cool to approach Charleston. I am looking forward to meeting Avi. Aaron told me so much about him on the way down, how they met decades ago and their history since. Lots of stories. Really good stories. Stories I promised not to share with anyone.

When we are about an hour away, Aaron calls Avi to check in and arrange where to meet for dinner.

During the call, I realize that Aaron has quite a relationship with his cell phone. I think it's a love-hate kind of thing...and I believe that the phone feels the same way. It is pure entertainment. Unknown to Aaron, the phone is always on speaker, so I can hear both sides of every conversation Aaron is having. And when Aaron is done with a call, he simply closes the phone without turning it off. He closes the phone and puts it down in the console beside him, without properly hanging it up.

We estimate that we will arrive in Charleston around 7:00 p.m. Avi told Aaron to call once we arrived in the city and he will guide us to the restaurant. The call is ending and Aaron closes the phone and sets it down. From the phone, nestled in the console, I can hear Avi, "Aaron, hello, hello, Aaron, Aaron, are you there?..." Aaron is oblivious to this. Doesn't even hear it. I pick the phone up, hand it to him, and explain that he hadn't actually turned the phone off yet. I tell him Avi is still on the line talking to him. He says he doesn't know how to hang it up, so I show him where the red "end" button is, and he turns it off. Turns it off right in the middle of Avi saying, "Hel..."

We reach the city and Aaron again calls Avi for the directions to the restaurant where we will meet.

“We’re going across the bridge now,” Aaron says.

“Ok, look for Foley Road,” Avi replies.

“I’m looking, I’m looking, OK, Foley Road, which way do I go?”

“Left.”

“What?”

“Left!”

“West?”

“No left!!”

“There is a gas station on my right.”

“Go over the bridge and look for Macon Avenue.”

“Bacon Avenue, OK.”

“No, it’s Macon Avenue!”

“I got it, there is a drycleaner on my left. I’m at Landor Road. Is that where I’m supposed to be? I don’t see the bridge.”

“Go past the bridge.”

“Where’s the bridge? There’s no bridge. There is a bar on my right. There is a Kentucky Fried Chicken on my left. There’s Smith and Barnes Insurance. OK, here is a Key Bank. Wait a minute, here is a road, Flemston Road.”

“Fleming Road.”

“What?”

“It’s Fleming Road. Never mind, keep going. Look for the restaurant on your right. It’s called Mustard Seeds.”

“Mister Meat? That’s the name, OK, I’m looking.”

“No. Mustard Seeds.”

“Mister Beads, OK. There is another bank. There is a McDonalds on my left. A Burger King. OK, I just passed Riverland Drive.”

“Aaron...”

“Riverland Drive, OK, there is a Blockbuster...”

“Aaron...”

“I’m looking for Mister Beads....”

“AARON!!! You’ve gone too far....”

“I don’t see it. Now I’m in a neighborhood...”

“Aaron, you went too far. Turn around and look for the bridge.”

“I’ve been looking for the damned bridge. There is no bridge.”

“Turn right on Maybank Highway.”

“Baybank Highway? OK.”

“No. Aaron. Turn on Maybank Highway.”

“OK. I see it. I’m turning on it now. There is a Target on my right...”

“Aaron, you...”

“There’s a Toyota Dealership on my left, John’s Toyota...”

“AARON, you turned the wrong way. Go back. I’m standing in front of the restaurant.”

“Ok, I’m turning around, OK, OK, Oh, there’s the bridge. What’s the name of the restaurant?”

“MUSTARD SEEDS!!!!”

“OK, OK. There is a grocery store on my left...”

“Keep going. I am standing in front of the restaurant...”

“A BP station on my right. OK.”

“I’m on the right, look for me.”

“What side of the street is the restaurant on?”

“I just told you. It’s on the right!”

“On the right... oh, there you are. Oh, Mustard Seeds! I see you. Ha ha. Shalom, my friend. We made it. Alright! We made it!!”

We proceed to have a lovely dinner and afterwards follow Avi back to his place and visit for a while. Avi leaves for the night so Aaron and I will both have beds to sleep on. My first night of the adventure is spent on a very comfortable futon in Avi’s living room.

When I awake the next morning, I go upstairs to use the bathroom, which is just off of Avi’s bedroom. Aaron is still in bed, still half asleep. I go to use the toilet. It is totally clogged, toilet water cresting the rim.

“Holy shit, Aaron, did you clog the toilet?”

A half asleep Aaron mutters, “Yes.”

I email Beth, *Aaron clogged Avi’s toilet*. Her response, *Welcome to my world*.

A visitor and a travel writer in Charleston

I have never been to Charleston and Aaron is more than gracious in his intent to help me experience the city. We drive around downtown and venture into the Historic District. We park near the harbor and walk around for a bit. We are curious about how to catch a tour and approach a trolley bus parked on the side of the road. There is a woman, the driver, standing outside of the bus talking on her cell phone.

“Hi miss,” Aaron begins. “We’re from Columbus, Ohio. Are you a tour bus? We’re trying to find a tour bus? Which way do we go to find a tour bus? Will you give us a ride to the place we should go to find a tour bus? We’re from out of town, Columbus,

Ohio. Can you help us?”

It quickly becomes obvious that the woman’s phone call is much more important than trying to help us. When she raises her hand and motions it as a stop sign, and turns her back to us, Aaron understands it is time to move on.

We find our way to the Charleston Visitor Center. There is so much we could do, but we only have the day. I get in line at the ticket counter to see what our options are and perhaps buy tickets to a tour or a ferry ride out to Fort Sumter.

Aaron is talking with a person at the information counter. While I’m in line, he comes over to me and says, “You can either stay here in line and buy your tickets, or you can come with me. I’m going to get us VIP passes to see everything for free! It’s your choice.”

Aaron has his kit with him. I really have no choice, so we find our way a few blocks over to the Charleston CVB. We walk into the office and approach the receptionist.

“Hello, I’m Aaron Leventhal. I’m a travel writer and magazine publisher from Columbus, Ohio. I need to speak with your media person.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but you don’t understand. I need to speak with your media person. I’m a travel writer. I publish magazines. Look. I wrote this story on Hilton Head. See, see. Look. See. I need to speak with your media relations person, because I’m going to write a story on my visit here in Charleston.”

She picks up the phone and, poof, the media relations person, Liz, greets us and takes us back into her office.

“Thank you so much for seeing us. I’m a travel writer and magazine publisher from Columbus, Ohio. This is Pete McGinty. Pete’s the Vice President of Marketing with the Columbus, Ohio Convention & Visitors Bureau. I write stories about the destinations I go to and I place them in these two magazines. Here, look at this one I did on Costa Rica last year. See, see, see. Look at this. See. Look at this. See. See. See. That’s what I do. I write stories about places. Here, look at this one I did on Hilton Head last year. See, see, see. Look at this. Look. See. My magazines are distributed in 15,000 hotel rooms. Over 150,000 readers see my stories. Here, look at this one. See. That’s what I do. See. Now, here is what I need. Can you give us VIP passes to your attractions so we can visit them? And I need you to pass this information on to your marketing person, because if you buy an ad in my magazine I’ll write a story about my visit. I put packages together and I’ll put a Charleston package together if you buy an ad. That’s all I need. It’s that simple...”

During Aaron’s pitch, I write Beth, *I just realized I’m not on vacation. I’m working. I’m in the Charleston CVB office.*

“Sure,” Liz says, “I can give you a VIP pass. Here you go.”

“Thank you. Now all I ask is that you pass my information on to your marketing person. That’s all you need to do. See, it’s that simple. All you have to do is buy an ad in my magazine.”

“OK,” Liz says, “I’m not sure what I’m agreeing to do...”

“What do you mean, ‘you’re not sure what you’re agreeing to do?’” Aaron asks, getting very close to her with a big smile on his face, “It’s simple. All you have to do is pass the information on...oh, you’re just kidding...he, he, he, ha, ha, ha. You’ve got beautiful eyes.”

And just like that, we leave with a VIP pass allowing us free admission to any and all of Charleston’s finest attractions.

“He he, ha ha, chuckle, chuckle.”

Off we go. And we have a wonderful time.

On to Hilton Head

Back on the road to Hilton Head and getting close.

Aaron flips through his 3-ring binder and finds the business card of Bill, the owner of The Jazz Corner. “I’m going to take you guys to this fabulous Jazz Club. It’s unbelievable. Beth and I went there last year. We met the owner, Bill. I’m going to call Bill. He’ll take care of us. We had a ball with this guy. You’ll love him. He’s a good friend of mine. You guys will love him.”

“Hello, my name is Aaron Leventhal, I’m a travel writer and magazine publisher from Columbus, Ohio. I was at your place last year and I wrote an article about my trip. My wife and I sat with Bill and had some wine with him. I have a group of guys with me. We are here on a golf trip. I want to bring them to your club. It’s Aaron Leventhal. Bill will remember me. I’m a travel writer from Columbus, Ohio. He’ll know who I am. I wanted to see if you can take care of me and my friends so we can come to your club.”

“Certainly. It’s a \$15 cover charge. Which night would you like to come, Friday or Saturday? I’ll make reservations for you.”

“You don’t understand. Bill will remember me. I sat with him at his table with my wife Beth. We had wine with him...I’m a travel writer from Columbus, Ohio. I wrote a story about The Jazz Corner on my trip last year.”

“Hold on a second.” The woman says. Upon returning she says, “We can’t waive the cover charge, but we can maybe comp your deserts...”

“No. You don’t understand. Bill will know me. When will he be in? You need to

have him call me. When will he be in? Ask him to call me. My number is 614-506-9666. He'll remember me. Have him call me."

"Mr. Leventhal, he should be in tomorrow afternoon sometime if you'd like to call him then..."

"You don't understand. I'm down here with four other guys. We are on a golf trip. I need HIM to call ME! He'll remember me. Tell him my wife Beth and I had wine with him last year. He'll remember me. Thank you."

Aaron closes the phone.

"Mr. Leventhal? Mr. Leventhal? Hello, hello, Mr. Leventhal..."

"Aaron," I say, "You didn't turn your phone off."

"I don't know how to do that..."

"Just press the red button."

We approach Hilton Head just as it's getting dark. We take 278 towards the bridge to the Island. Aaron calls the Red Roof Inn.

"Hi, I'm Aaron Leventhal from Columbus, Ohio. I've got a reservation with you for tonight. I'm trying to find your hotel. Who am I speaking with?"

"My name is Kellie, Mr. Leventhal..."

"I'm on 278. I'm trying to find your hotel."

"Mr. Leventhal..."

"I'm coming over the bridge."

"Mr. Leventhal, you are still a ways away from our hotel. But just stay on 278 onto the Island..."

"I'm over the bridge now..."

"Mr. Leventhal, just stay on 278 and call me in a little bit when you're closer..."

Aaron ends the call by closing the phone. The voice of Kellie is present. "Mr. Leventhal? Sir? Mr. Leventhal..."

"Aaron," I said, "you still have to hang up the phone."

"I don't know how to do that."

"Just press the red button."

Ten minutes later...

"Hi. This is Aaron Leventhal. I just talked with you. I'm trying to find your hotel. I'm on 278. There is a Lowes on my right. Lowes, L, O, S, I see a sign for a grocery store. There is a Wendy's on my left..."

"Mr. Leventhal..."

"I see a restaurant...there is a restaurant on my right...it's Barnacles..."

"Mr. Leventhal..."

"There is a Target on my right. I'm approaching a road. It's Dunes Road..."

"Mr. Leventhal...our hotel is coming up on your right..."

“There’s a golf course on my right...”

“Mr. Leventhal...”

“There is a Hilton on my left...I see another restaurant on my right...”

“Mr. Leventhal. Our hotel is coming up on your right, just past the Motel Six...”

“I see a Motel Six on my right...Alright! There you are, baby! Yeah!! Red Roof Inn baby!! Ha ha! We made it!!”

We park and walk into the lobby. As Aaron sees Kellie behind the counter, he loudly exclaims, “Your directions were perfect!!”

“Is your manager here?” he asks.

“Yes, this is our manager, Robert.”

“Hi Robert, my name is Aaron Leventhal, I’m a travel writer and magazine publisher from Columbus, Ohio. I write stories about the destinations I go to and I place them in these two magazines. Here, look at this one I did on Costa Rica last year. See, see, see. Look at this. See. Look at this. See. See. See. That’s what I do. I write stories about places. Here, look at this one I did on Hilton Head last year. See, see, see. Look at this. Look. See. My magazines are distributed in 15,000 hotel rooms. Over 150,000 readers see my stories. Here, look at this one. See. That’s what I do. See. Now, here is what I need... yadda, yadda, yadda...”

By now, I’ve tuned it out and have been talking with Kellie about where the public beaches are. She is showing them to me on the map.

Aaron is done with whatever he was doing and we leave the lobby to get the car and drive around back to find our rooms.

“Ha, ha, ha, it worked again, you’re a man of little faith...he he he...”

“What are you talking about? What worked again?”

“I just got us a second room.”

“I thought we already had two rooms.”

“No, we only had one! I just got us another one for free!! Ha, ha, ha, he, he!”

I just want my room. I just need to lie down for a few minutes. Breathe. Meditate. Breathe. Meditate.

Settling in

Things start to become a bit sane when we hook up with Will, Larry and Lloyd. We have a very nice dinner with normal, pleasant conversation. We call it an early night and I get a great night’s sleep.

The next day, we, of course, have to check out of the Red Roof Inn because we

only have the free stay for one night. So far, two nights, two beds, checking out, not knowing where we are going to sleep next.

We meet for breakfast and afterwards the four golfers go their way and I go to the beach. Finally, my real destination. It is wonderful. I walk forever and then leave to find some lunch and then go back. I start to settle nicely in my new beach chair I had just purchased at a local store, and start reading a new book.

As I am starting to get lost in everything, what a wonderful feeling, and thinking that I could do this all day, I notice I have a voice mail message. It is from Aaron.

Pete, it's Aaron. I need you to come to the Golden Sunset, I mean Golden Bear or something resort, something like that...you'll find it. I'll be at the golf course. Meet me at the clubhouse. I need you to pick me up. It's right down the street from the Red Roof. It's past a restaurant. Look for a sign that says Hilton Head Resort Spa, or Hilton Spa and Resort, or something, and turn right, no, left. Look for the Golden resort. Tell the guy at the guard gate you are with the Leventhal group. Tell him you're here for the golf lessons. I need you to come and get me right now because I need to go to the Spinnaker Management Company and get us a condo for tonight. I'll see you soon.

Shit.

He had called from Will's phone so I call Will. "I didn't know that Aaron called you." Will says, "That's strange, because we just started the back nine and he and Lloyd are a hole ahead of us. I'll try to catch up with him and see what he's up to now."

I am so tempted to put my headphones on, listen to my ipod, and pretend that I have no cell phone. But I don't. Ten minutes later Will calls me and tells me that Aaron will meet me at the clubhouse in 15 minutes. He needs the car because he has to go hunt down a room for us for the night.

For the day at least, my vacation has come to an end.

I choose not to go on the "pitch" with him to the Spinnaker office. But, lo and behold, he comes back with a condo. Two nights. Taken care of. So, we move into our third room in three nights. I believe I took a nap.

Another bit of normality. We meet up with Will, Larry and Lloyd to go out for dinner. Aaron had picked out this very nice Italian restaurant for us. A slight problem however, as we don't have reservations, and are told they don't have a table for us until much later in the evening. Aaron asks the four of us to wait outside. About five minutes later, he comes out with a big smile and exclaims, "Come on in boys. I did it again! Ha, ha, ha, he." And we sit down at a five-top by the front door.

A normal day and a half - almost

The next day, I decide to join the group for golf and have a blast. Play pretty well for my standards. Will and Larry choose to play another 18, so Aaron, Lloyd and I go back to the hotel. Aaron and I go to the beach and have a very enjoyable time.

We go back to the condo and then I take the car to pick up Will and Larry at the course. Upon my return, I am walking down the outside balcony heading to our room. Aaron's room faces the walkway and his window is just before the door. His drapes are open. He had just gotten out of the shower. He is naked with one foot up on the bed, drying himself off, for all the world to see. The sight will unfortunately remain in my memory forever.

I go in and take a seat on the couch. Aaron comes out of his room wearing only his Fruit-of-the-Looms, still half-wet, and sits down right next to me on the couch. I'm not sure what to do, but I decide to mind my own business and try not to look.

Sunday is here

The group is playing golf and I have the day to myself. I check us out of the condo because we had used our two nights. Aaron has arranged two more rooms for us back at the Red Roof for Sunday night, so I drive over there and check us in. Sunday night will mark the fourth bed in five nights for us. I go to the beach and have a lovely time.

Ohio State is playing for the Big Ten Championship at 3:30. Will and I had talked about finding a place to meet once they got off the course. I am firmly planted on the beach when he calls around 2:00 to say they are going to be finishing up soon and expect to be back on the Island around 3:30. He wants me to meet them somewhere to watch the game. As he is talking, I hear Aaron in the background guiding the conversation. Aaron is telling Will what to tell me about where to meet. After much confusion and many mispronounced words, we agree to meet at the Bonehead Sports Bar on Squire Pope Road, on the other side of the Island off the Expressway, at 3:30.

About 2:45, I pack up and head that way. I have a map and find where Squire Pope Road is, so it seems likely that the bar will be easy to find. But it isn't. And the reason it isn't is because there is no Bonehead Sports Bar on Squire Pope Road. After driving to and from and stopping every chance I could for directions to the Bonehead

Sports Bar, I learn the only bonehead is me. I make it back to the Red Roof in time to catch most of the second half of the game. Will calls me around 4:30 to say that they had decided to just go back to their condo to watch the rest of the game. And, oh, by the way, Aaron had the name wrong. It was the Boathouse, not the Bonehead. Oh, the Boathouse? I remember driving by that place...about 7 times.

Savannah

After the game, Will picks me up and we go over to Savannah to see our friend Joe. We have such a great time. It is great to see Joe, great to hang out with Will, and the city of Savannah blows me away. It is an absolutely wonderful time.

Monday morning dealing

Aaron and I meet the boys at Stacks Restaurant for breakfast. We are their first customers so we quickly make friends with the waiter and owner. After breakfast, Aaron goes out to the car and grabs his kit. Within five minutes, he sells an ad in the *High Street Neighborhoods Guide*. He works out a trade for \$300 in cash and \$175 in trade. "He, he, ha, ha, ha."

On to the course. After playing golf on Saturday, I realize I'm a better golfer than Aaron, even though he's a 'golf trip organizer,' and I hadn't played in five years. So the choice to play him for money is a no-brainer. Besides, both Will and Larry have their money on me...and these guys know their golf. So we decide on a nine-hole match on Sunday before hitting the road to head back home. "Course management, ha, ha, ha," was something I hear often, as he continues to dribble his balls straight ahead across the fairway 100 yards a pop. "It's all about course management. He, he, ha, ha." I spend most of my time looking for my ball in the woods, hitting shots in the water and trying to chip out of the sand. And, besides that, Aaron is right: I can't putt for shit. He beats me fair and square. And he doesn't rub it in. He takes the victory like a man.

Before checking out of the Red Roof, Aaron asks me to wait in my room while he takes his kit to the office. The manager is in a training session, but she agrees to leave it for 15 minutes to meet with Aaron. Voila! Aaron is able to get our two rooms for the previous night for free, and he also arranges for a trade for three free nights to be used later in the year at the Red Roof.

"What do you think about that?" he asks me. "Ha, ha, ha. On my way out of town

even, I pull off a three nights' stay in the Red Roof with all-you-can-eat pancakes at Stacks next door. I put together a travel package for my magazine...see how easy it is? Ha, ha, ha. He, he."

Monday afternoon, let's go home

The first part of the ride home is rather unspectacular. We have our usual stops for \$20 of gas at a time. We share the driving duties, two-hour shifts at a time. Really all is well, until we approach Bluefield, West Virginia.

The KFC – Bluefield exit

Aaron has been driving for a while and I can tell he is getting tired. It is the swerving all over the road with the speed vacillating between 50 and 70 miles an hour that gives it away. And at times, I could swear he is asleep. And when he doesn't look like he is asleep, he is stretching everything he can stretch. I keep asking him to let me drive. "Please Aaron, let me drive," I plead. "Nope. I'm fine. I am just getting tired of the monotony of the highway."

We have to stop for gas again. By now I have lost track of how many \$20 bills I had taken into gas stations to prepay for pumps 4, 3, 8, 7, 9, 2, and on and on. Once, just to break up his routine a bit, I got \$25 of gas instead of \$20.

The only things visible at the Route 52 and Interstate 77 exit are an old gas station, a Kentucky Fried Chicken and a closed Bowling Alley. The gas station has just one working pump out of eight, but that's all we need. We both had to pee really badly. So after I prepay for the gas, I ask the woman behind the counter if they have a bathroom.

"Yup", she remarks, as I hustle towards it. "But it broke. A lady was in here earlier and done broke off the handle!"

Oh God, I've got to pee. I head back out as Aaron is heading in. I tell him that the bathroom is broken.

"The bathroom's broken?" he yelps.

"Yep," I said. "A woman came in earlier today and done broke off the handle."

We put the \$20 in the tank and drive up the hill a bit to the KFC. Aaron has been wearing shorts all day up till now and it is getting chilly, so he was going to put pants on in the bathroom.

We storm in and walk down the short hall just past the women's room on the right towards the men's. I say, "I know for a fact that I've got to piss worse than you!" He reaches ahead of me and swings the men's room door open, allowing me to go in first. I do, expecting him to follow. But he doesn't. Even though there is a urinal and a stall in it, he chooses to go into the women's rest room! I said to myself, "The only thing better would be if..."

Just then I hear Aaron from the next room exclaim, "Whoops...sorry...my fault!" He bursts into the men's room. I say, "There wasn't a..." He says, "Yes, there was!!"

He carries his pants with him into the stall and says, "Listen, I'm going to stay in here for a while, because I don't want that woman to see me again." I understand. I go back out to the lobby and as I'm waiting, from the women's room, out comes the lady he walked in on. She works at the KFC...behind the counter.

About five minutes later, Aaron finally comes out, goes up to the counter and orders a crispy chicken breast and a water. From her. It is a classic moment.

The mistake – Route 52

On the way down, Aaron had tried to convince me to take a short cut from Huntington to Bluefield. On the map, he noticed that Route 52 looked like a straighter shot than staying on the interstate. I wouldn't let him. Now, on the way home, he tries to convince me again, this time from Bluefield to Huntington. I have no idea why, but I let him.

He is back behind the wheel again. It isn't long before I know that we have made a mistake. We are in the holler. Deep in the holler. And getting deeper by the minute. Turn around? Not a chance. We've been traveling about an hour on our \$20 of gas and it is only getting worse. I am watching the compass on the car. Huntington is in the direction NW. The compass reads anything but NW. It reads S, E, N, S, E, and W. And our average speed because of the mountains and the twists and turns is around 26 MPH.

Aaron finally admits, "I think we made a mistake."

I sarcastically answers, "You think?"

He says, "Yeah, we made a mistake. We screwed up. We made a mistake. We just don't know the magnitude of our mistake yet."

That is nice to hear.

I say, "Well if I end up with Crisco slapped up my butt, bent over a fallen dead tree, with a mountain man behind me, without Burt Reynolds with a bow and arrow to

save my ass, I'm going to have a pretty hard time forgiving you!!"

He laughs.

He asks me to look at the map to see if there is a good way to get back to I-77. I look. There isn't. He asks me how far we have come on Route 52 and how much farther we have to go.

I say, "Well, we've been driving about an hour and a half, and we've gone about 40 miles and it looks like we have another 140 to go."

"Oh shit", he says.

We happen upon a little town called Welch, West Virginia. And we actually find an open convenience-type store. No need to be too brave to not ask for help at this point. We just want to survive.

In the store are two women behind the counter and a male customer. One woman obviously has some decent education, has seen significant civilization and is obviously very out of place. We'll call her Betty. Betty is 40 years old. The other woman has likely spent her life in Welch and might have gotten through fourth grade. She hasn't seen a dentist in a while. Maybe never. We'll call her Maple. Maple has a lovely haircut. Fashioned from an upside down oatmeal bowl. Maple is 67 years old. The gentleman customer is likely Maple's neighbor and maybe sometimes lover. He is on the same dental plan as her, but did not quite match her level of education. Let's call him Leroy. Leroy is wearing an old John Deere cap with a full head of white hair that matches his scraggly beard. Leroy is 73 years old.

So, we enter into the world of Betty, Maple and Leroy. And we need help. We had landed ourselves in a Quentin Tarantino movie.

"We're trying to get from Bluefield to Huntington. How do we get back to 77 from here?" Aaron asks.

"You boys is lost." Betty says.

"I know. We made a mistake." Aaron says.

The old man, Leroy, is stopped in his tracks, watching this most curiously. He looks like he was just handed a Rubik's Cube for the first time. Maple is clearly very confused. Betty says, "Well, you could go up the road about a mile and pick up Route 16 and that will take you to Beckley. That'll git you to 77."

"No, no, no", Maple pipes in. "That would take 'em forever. That road don't go in no straight line. The best way to get to 77 is to go to Bluefield."

"They just come from Bluefield," Betty tells her.

"We just came from Bluefield!!" Aaron loudly reiterates.

"Well, then how the hell you get here?" Maple asks.

"We're trying to get from Bluefield to Huntington!" Aaron shouts.

"Huh?" Leroy pipes in.

“We’re trying to get from Bluefield to Huntington!!!” Aaron shouts louder.

“Well hell”, Leroy states, “If you’re trying to git from Bluefield to Huntington, then why dint you just GO from Bluefield to Huntington?”

Aaron shifts his exasperated attention back to Betty, and in a very calm, precise voice says, “Just please tell me how to get back to 77. I am not going back through Bluefield. I just came from Bluefield. I am not going back there.”

“Well then, you got to take 16. That’s the only other way. That’ll git you to Beckley,” Betty says. “You’re lookin’ at an hour and a half drive.”

“Thank you.” Aaron politely remarks. And we leave.

Back in the car. Aaron graciously gives me the keys. We are now laughing our asses off. Leroy is sitting in the car next to us, just shaking his head. We still don’t know if we’ll make it out alive or not, but we laugh our asses off.

We find Route 16 and we turn right. Should we have turned right...or should we have turned left? Oh crap. We are still in this little town of Welch and we see another old man walking down the street. I tell Aaron to ask the man if we are heading in the right direction to get back to I-77.

Aaron rolls down his window and I stop the car.

“Excuse me, sir, is this the direction we should be going to get to 77?”

The man responds, “Hell, the best way to get to 77 is to go to Bluefield!”

Aaron says thank you and rolls his window up.

We laugh the rest of the way home.

The end