



Filling Up the Empty Tank

by Dan Klass

Apparently, I am one of those people who puts off filling his gas tank. I don't know why. My mother, on the other hand, has always been someone who keeps her tank at least half full, and when I started driving I was instructed to do the same or walk to work. I don't remember if it was her or my father-in-law who had once floated the "fact" that cars gets better mileage if the tank is always half full, but someone once told me that, insisting it was true, with an absolutely straight face.

Nice try.

I'm fairly certain it was this transparent attempted con job (or completely misguided belief in an urban myth) that led me to to never fill the tank before it is absolutely necessary. Either that or it is that I am a procrastinator.

Luckily, my car makes a sound when the gas tank is too low.

PING!

A warning light goes on and the PING! sounds, and I know it's time to switch from passively putting off getting gas to actively putting off getting gas. The kids know this sound, and often wonder if we have enough gas to get them to school. I, of course, brush it off as a petty concern, all the while alternately checking the odometer and the gas gauge.

One Saturday, my wife and the kids and I were piled into the car, headed to a dog shelter. We were bound and determined to "rescue" a dog, which is the trendy thing to do these days (buying a dog is apparently passe). Of course, by "rescue" I don't mean to suggest it would be hanging my a rope above a wood chipper and we'd have to navigate a series of razor-sharp booby-traps in order to save it from an untimely death. Hardly. Basically, to rescue a dog we just had to think he was cute, and sign a check, and drive him

away from the shelter to come and poop on our rugs. But, to think he was cute we had to meet the dog, and to meet the dog we had to go to the shelter, and to go to the shelter we had to have gas in the car, and to have gas in the car we had to *not be with me*.

PING!

“Shit”

“What’s that?” my wife asks.

“We need to get gas,” my son jumps in, not giving me time to think of a way to make it sound like needing gas is a *good* thing.

“Jesus Christ, now?” my wife demands.

She just wants to get to the damned shelter. As do we all. It’s hardly the first shelter or adaption event we’ve been to, and we really want to move the whole process along and get a damned dog back to the house.

“Baby,” I try to reassure, “It’ll take two seconds.”

We live near the airport, so there is no shortage of gas stations. I pull into the first one, about ten feet from where we heard the car PING, and cheerfully gave everyone a “Be right back,” even though I know my wife will be seething in the car the whole time, having to wait for me to fill ‘er up.

As I step from the car and head for the gas cap, I am immediately approached by an attractive blond woman. Now, as you can image, as a middle-age bald man with dark plastic glasses, I am not often approached by attractive younger women, particularly blonds. No matter how young and dashing I may have once thought I was, odds are good that she’s trying to sell me something. Something I don’t want. Something I would be very embarrassed to buy in front of my wife.

“Excuse me...”

I sigh a reply, indicating that whatever she’s selling, I ain’t buying.

“I’m trying to get to the Veteran’s cemetery, and I’m all turned around.”

I see she has a map in her hand and what I assume are directions she’s downloaded from the Internet. She’s clearly not going from car to car at the gas station, selling magazine subscriptions or asking for donations or one of the other dozens of things that attractive girls in parking lots have conned me into giving money for.

“The Veteran’s cemetery? Up in Westwod?”

She smiles, relieved that I know what she’s talking about. I take her directions and squint at them, doing some kind of Daniel Boone routine, like I’m gonna save her from being lost in the forest and succumbing to hypothermia.

“Yeah,” she explains, “I live down in Anaheim, you know, and I thought I should be there by now, so now I’m not even sure which way to go.”

Clearly I don’t get out much, and I rarely interact with anyone who is not the parent of one of my kids’ classmates. I actually find myself enjoying interacting with this woman, helping her on her way. Sure, it helped that she was a tall, pretty twenty-five year-old who probably worked at a cosmetics counter at a galleria near Disneyland. And, yes, if my wife or kids had been paying any attention to my good Samaritan bullshit, it would have surely begun to feel smarmy and self serving. But, standing there in the sunshine on a Saturday afternoon, helping an Orange County girl at a gas station, I felt twenty-five again myself. I remember when I was twenty-five and Saturdays were a day to waste, a day with nothing planned. Maybe I’d call some friends, or just hang around a record store, wishing I could buy my favorite albums again for the very first time. Maybe I’d drive my crappy VW convertible down to my folk’s house on the beach and sit in the sun, feeling sorry for myself that my girlfriend lived in Manhattan and I was wasting away in LA.

I told the girl to take the freeway north, that she'd pass "the 10" and she should keep going, it'd be on the right. "Get off at Wilshire, I think. It's not far but it'll take you a bit longer to get there than you expect." She gave me a sincere smile of thanks, and I looked at my shoes as she walked back to her SUV, assuming that was the best way to guarantee my wife wouldn't catch me looking at the girl's ass.

"Ready to go," I cheered as I got back in the car. My wife gave me the look that says "Duh." I started the car and headed for the freeway, headed south, toward the shelter. We were going downtown to see another Shit zu, then home to get some groceries and do other chores before the long dinner prep-eat-clean cycle and then getting the kids to bed. It was a busy Saturday, but it was ours.

We got on the freeway easily, and quickly up to speed.

PING!

"What's that?" my wife asks.

"Shit..."

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This story first appeared in The Bitterest Pill audio podcast, Feb. 2011.

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