



In the PINES

By T. Lee Brown

Plank Dude & the Aggro Pass

One Friday morning eight years ago I gave an Aggro Pass to a stranger. “Aggro” is short for aggressive, aggravated—you know, being a thoughtless jerk. Little did I know that soon I would need many a pass myself, from friends, family, and strangers.

My husband biked off to work that morning, turning figure-8s in the road while our toddler son waved out the window, just like every weekday. Toddlers love things that repeat in predictable patterns.

He and I had a Friday ritual: our weekly bus ride to the diner, a journey chock full of satisfying samenesses. We’d walk down Taylor Street. He’d holler “City bus!” when it roared up to our stop. At the coin box, my son always relished the metallic sliding sound each quarter made on its way down.

The servers at the diner knew our names. They knew we’d order eggs and bacon, scones and jam. My son and I would reliably fight over the packets of butter in their brassy, printed foil; he wanted to stack them up and let them melt over his hands and scones and clothes. I preferred alternative activities, such as hiding the packets under a napkin and hustling them onto someone else’s table.

After breakfast, we’d stroll by the apartment building with all the motorcycles, and whether or not any were parked outside that day, my son would note sagely, “Motorcycle.” Eventually the bus would come and we’d head home.

On that Friday we set out on our usual journey. Our smooth pattern was interrupted on Taylor Street, where a house was being remodeled. As we walked by, two construction workers — one thin, one stocky, like in an old vaudeville routine — stood on the porch. The big, pink-faced, bald-headed one held a substantial plank of wood about 12 feet long. The thin, pale, hippie-looking guy watched languidly on.

Beefy guy paused, watching us. Suddenly he chucked the giant plank toward the street just beyond us. The board crashed to the sidewalk, narrowly missing me and my toddler companion.

“Whooah!” I heard the

thin worker gasp. I also heard myself muttering, “What the %^%\$#!?” over an inner hum of shock that rapidly gave way to fury. I began to turn, to march up the porch steps and confront this jerk.

It would not be the first time my son had witnessed his mama confronting an entitled guy on the street who’d overstepped his bounds. But this situation was different from those.

Plank-heaving jerk dude might be seriously off the rails, for one thing. A confrontation could be dangerous for me and stressful for my son. For another, my adorable child’s safety was my reason for getting so steamed, and he was unharmed.

And so — as I had done before, as many a woman has done in many a situation — I walked on, without saying anything.

The skinny construction worker apologized after us, then hollered to his larger colleague, “Man, what is wrong with you?!”

The question struck me with great resonance. What is wrong with him? Why, it could be anything. This guy’s wife could be at home dying

of cancer. His dad could’ve just died. He could be kicking meth or fighting a migraine.

“Just keep walking,” I told myself. “Give the guy an Aggro Pass.” An image popped into my mind: a middle-school hall pass meeting a Get Out of Jail Free card from a Monopoly game.

Pass holders get to cut you off in traffic now and then, or use the Express Line when they should be in the regular line. Maybe even heave a plank. You don’t have to freak out about every iota of Aggro Jerkery you encounter, I told myself. You get to choose when to mentally hand out passes from your internal cache.

The concept cheered me. The theory wasn’t rock-solid — would everyone give most of their passes to the same handful of aggressive types, who would then keep acting like jerks? — but I appreciated its simplicity.

I felt sorry for the guy, actually. Whatever my issues — and there were plenty — I had accomplished what he could not. I’d subdued my inner jerk-with-a-plank, at least for one morning. By the time we boarded the city bus,

coins clinking, my blood had cooled.

Toddlers sure love repetition. They love vehicles, too: trains, buses, cars. They also love music.

On the bus, we belted out a classic tune as the sights rolled by. “The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round,” we sang in a trifecta of toddler bliss, probably driving the other passengers nuts.

No one confronted us. Maybe in their minds, they just handed us an Annoying Kiddie Song pass and let it slide.

As we continue on to the diner, will our Friday routine be interrupted? Perhaps by something greater than The Plank Incident? Tune in next week for more.

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