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Let's All Hop in a Ryder Truck

SINCE MAKING *Roger & Me* in 1989, I've listened to a lot of stories from people, strangers in the street, who want to buy me a beer or a burger and tell me what happened to their American Dream. *Roger & Me* chronicled how the world's richest corporation, General Motors, destroyed my hometown of Flint, Michigan, by firing 30,000 workers during a time when the company was making record profits. I filmed my search to find the chairman of GM, Roger Smith, and tried to convince him to come to Flint so he could see what he had done to the people there.

Although Roger never made it to Flint, a lot of other people have. These days everyone, it seems, lives in their own Flint, Michigan.

The stories I hear are pretty much the same, with a few variations to allow for the pink-slipped brother who committed suicide, or the mother who lost her life savings when the pension fund went belly-up. I have heard so many of these stories that I can fill in the blanks before the sentences are finished. I find myself doing this to keep from sinking into a deep despair.

It is not pleasant when a homeless person actually *knows* you and calls out, "Hey, Mike!" as you are trying to walk quickly past him and his shopping cart. This happened to me on 46th Street in New York City in front of the Paramount Hotel. I was with a vice president of NBC and the producers of my show "TV Nation." The homeless man grabbed my hand for a shake and told me he, too, was from Flint, Michigan, but now lives here on the street.

He wanted to describe his favorite part of *Roger & Me*, which he had seen three years ago when he had a job. The NBC executive couldn't believe what he was watching. And I'm thinking ... I know this guy!

"You remember me, don't you?" he asked. "I used to deliver your newspaper, the *Flint Voice*."

Why was it him standing there like that? Why not me? But for the grace of Warner Bros. and NBC? I emptied my pockets and gave him everything I had. We left him on the street and went inside, where I had a \$30 steak. The NBC suit had a salad. My buddy from Flint was probably already guzzling his aptly named Colt .45.



As I write this I am on a plane to Ames, Iowa, to speak to a group of students and farmers who, like the strangers in the street, are angry and depressed that the America they once believed in has all but told them where to get off. When I arrive, the auditorium is overflowing. I begin to

hear the same stories of betrayal and bewilderment and, always, the Big Question. Why is it that if they worked so hard for so long, and played by the rules, and voted for the Republicans, their reward has been foreclosure and divorce, bankruptcy and “the bottle”?

As I sit offstage listening to the introduction, I think about how I, too, was raised to believe in an America where everyone had the opportunity to achieve a decent life. I was the all-American boy, an Eagle Scout. I won my Marksman certificate from the NRA. I was religious, attending the seminary in high school to become a Catholic priest. I obeyed all the rules (to this day, I have yet to smoke a joint) and worked within our political system (at the age of eighteen, I was elected to public office in Michigan). Until the 1990s, I never earned more than \$15,000 a year. I have stood in the unemployment line at least three different times in my life and was collecting \$98 a week in “benefits” when I decided to make *Roger & Me*.

Now, after years of living when I barely had enough money to even go to the movies, I find myself suddenly blessed with the opportunity to *make* them. I feel truly privileged to be able to speak to so many people. But tonight, I can’t stop thinking about the two people I met on my way here to Ames.

“Bill” is what the name read on his shirt, as he stood under the big Delta logo (YOU’LL LOVE THE WAY WE FLY) behind the airline counter. He took my ticket, looked at the name, looked up at me (one of those “you look so much thinner on TV” looks), and smiled.

“I just saw your movie for the third time,” he said, his face turning red because he thinks he’s meeting a movie star or something. “I just want to thank you for what you did.”

I thanked him for thanking me and then he told me his story.

“I’m fifty years old. Worked here at Delta for twenty-one years. Two years ago, they announced they were downsizing the company and told me I was being laid off. I went into shock. Almost twenty years with the company. Where was I going to get a job at fifty years old? They told us they were bringing in outside part-time contractors to do our jobs. Temps. We were welcome to apply for those jobs if we wanted to—at half our former wage. I just couldn’t do it.”

“So,” I interrupted, “how many prescriptions did you eventually go on?”

“Six,” he replied, without missing a beat. “Prozac, Xanax, Pepcid, Lasix, Clonidine for my blood pressure. . .”

“. . . And something to help you sleep at night.”

“Yeah, Ambien, how’d you guess?”

“I get stopped a lot. People who have lost their jobs want to show me their portable pill cases—you know, a little compartment for each day of the week or—”

“Or each pill compartment divided by color,” he said, finishing my sentence as he pulled out his plastic medicine chest to show me.

“You’re not flying this plane I’m taking, are you?” I asked half-seriously.

He told me that the only way he got to come back to work was because someone had died and he was highest on the seniority list. “I’m down to three pills a day,” Bill said, mustering a little pride. “Things are looking up.”



The cabbie on the way to the airport had also seen *Roger & Me*.

“Hey, you’re that guy, Roger Moore,” he said as he turned around.

“Yeah.” I don’t tell him my name is Michael. I probably should. Michael Moore, son of Frank and Veronica, brother to Anne and Veronica, no relation to 007.

“I have two master’s degrees,” he began. “I’ve been laid off from two different jobs in the last five years. Nobody wants a guy with this much education. So now I’m driving a cab.”

“I’m supposed to be in Flint building Buicks,” I tell him, “but I quit the day I was to start. Many years ago.”

The cabbie glanced at me in the rearview mirror, probably glad I wasn’t the one who had built *his* Buick. “I’ve got a question for you, Mr. Moore. Why is it that Al D’Amato and the rest of Congress have spent TWO YEARS and TEN MILLION DOLLARS investigating why seven—*seven*, mind you—SEVEN people lost their jobs in the White House travel office and not a single dime or day has been spent investigating why THIRTY MILLION *other* Americans have lost *their* jobs? WHY IS THAT?”

“I’ve got a few ideas,” I reply, but before I can offer them, he answers the question.

“Because the Big Guys who threw us out of work are the same ones paying these politicians to keep the country distracted with some phony Whitewater issue. Any fool can see that.”



We are a bunch of fools, aren’t we? Today, we’re actually earning *less* than we earned, in real dollars, in 1979! Millions of people officially are out of work—7,266,000. But the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau estimate another 5,378,000 are also unemployed but *uncounted*. Another 4,500,000 more are working *part-time* but looking for a full-time job. And then there are the 2,520,000 Americans who are working full-time and earning a wage that is *below the poverty line*.

That’s nearly 20 million people who cannot make the bare minimum they need to survive!

Meanwhile, the chief executive officers, the CEOs of our top 300 companies, are earning *212 times* what their average worker is earning. As these CEOs fire thousands of employees, they, in turn, become even wealthier. AT&T chairman Robert Allen lays off 40,000 workers while making \$16 million. Louis Gerstner of IBM fires 60,000 workers, then takes home \$2.6 million. Scott Paper fires 11,000 people, merges with Kimberly-Clark, and CEO Albert Dunlap bags \$100 million!

These corporations then go on to post record profits. And how do they celebrate their success? By firing even more people! General Motors made \$34 billion in profits over the past fifteen years—and eliminated over 240,000 jobs.

Yet, with every round of firings, the societal problems we must deal with rise at a corresponding rate. According to a study conducted by economists at the University of Utah, for every 1 percent rise in the jobless rate, homicides increase by 6.7 percent, violent crimes by 3.4 percent, crimes against property go up 2.4 percent, and deaths by heart disease and stroke rise by 5.6 and 3.1 percent, respectively.

No matter how rosy Washington tries to paint the news about the economy (“The lowest rates of unemployment and inflation in years!”), the average American *knows* that the jig is up. No one, these days, can remember what job security used to feel like because everyone lives in total fear that he or she could be next. No one is safe. So you learn not to complain as you are forced to work longer hours for lower pay. Health benefits? Paid vacations? You’ve already kissed them good-bye.

Remember the American Dream? For those of you too young to have ever experienced it, this is what it used to be:

If you work hard, and your company prospers, you, too, shall prosper.

That dream has gone up in smoke. It has been turned into the American *Bad* Dream:

If you work hard, and the company prospers—you lose your job!

There is no more telling sign about the state of the union than this one simple fact: Manpower, Inc.—the nationwide temp agency—has surpassed General Motors as the number one employer in America. More people now work for a company that guarantees you employment only for a day at a time than the company that once proclaimed “What’s good for General Motors is good for the country.”

We all know it’s over, this way of life we once had, or thought we could have if we did well for ourselves. Now we must fight each other for whatever scraps are left, leaving the rich to enjoy the greatest wealth this country has ever seen.

From the look of things as I’ve described them, you’d think the whole country would be up in arms over how the well-to-do have gotten away with bloody murder. You would think that we’d

have mass political movements organizing the working poor. You would think new political parties would be forming to stop this destruction of the American Dream.

You would think that, but you would be wrong. Instead, the majority of Americans have decided that the best statement they can make is no statement at all. In the 1994 election, more than 60 percent of all voting-age Americans—118,535,278 people, or the equivalent of the voting-age population of 42 states—chose to stay home and *not participate*. They did so not because they are apathetic or ignorant or careless. *They didn't vote because they have had their fill of it*. The candidates and the two political parties no longer have anything to say to the citizens of this country. The Democrats and Republicans are so much alike, obediently supporting the very system that has brought ruin to so many families, that the average American couldn't care less what any of them have to say. They know that *voting* will *not* improve their lives, not one single bit.

It is significant to note that, in the 1992 presidential election, nearly 20 percent of those who did vote actually took the time to drive to the polls and stand in line to cast their ballot for a man most of them knew was a certified fruitcake—Ross Perot. That's how intense the level of anger is in this country. Millions threw away their vote simply because they thought it would send a message! Perot, as nutty as he is, was saying a lot of the things that no one else was saying about the American worker—a real irony considering the billions he owns and the fact that his Democratic opponent, Bill Clinton (raised by a single mother, at times impoverished), said little or nothing.

It is even more surprising that in 1996 a majority of Americans said that if they had the chance, they would elect Colin Powell as president. That these downsized Americans would be able to push through their own personal racism just so they could send a message about how angry they were over their plight was a powerful signal that all is not well in the U.S. of A. Did you ever think things would get this bad in America that you would live to see the day when a majority of white voters pleaded for a *black* guy to run for president? They would never want him to move next door or marry their daughter—but they would put him in the highest office in the land! Wow.

In my home state of Michigan, the situation has sunk so low that only *12 percent* of the voters went to the polls in the March primary, even though at that time there was a bitterly contested race between Bob Dole and Pat Buchanan. Buchanan knew firsthand just how bad things have gotten for the country—in part because he had spent most of his life in the Nixon and Reagan White Houses *making* it bad! But now he had transformed himself overnight into The Great White Workers' Hope. Like a man who had preceded him on the political scene over sixty years ago (albeit in Germany), Buchanan knew just what to say to the disenfranchised, abused American worker: HATE! FEAR! MORE HATE! BLAME THE IMMIGRANTS!

He almost pulled it off, getting about a third of the Republican vote, even winning a few states. It speaks well of the goodness of the American people that they did not fall for his ruse. It is very easy to manipulate people when they are down on their luck. Very easy to plug in to their psyche with all the “right” answers to “Who did this to you?”

Many citizens, though, are not just sitting idly by watching their country go down the drain. In October 1995, one million African-American men marched on Washington, D.C., to let America know they had had it. It did not matter to most of them that the march was led by a weirdo. What mattered was *making the statement*. And did they. One out of every ten black men in this country found a way to get to Washington, D.C., that day (the equivalent of 8 million white guys holding a demonstration). It made a powerful impression on an already frightened white America.

Just how frightened is evidenced by the growing militia movement. Tens of thousands of men and women are training, with weapons, for what they believe will be the ultimate confrontation with the government. Although most of them are motivated by racist beliefs, a lot of their sympathizers are just the average Joes who live next door to *you*. But not for long. The bank has foreclosed on their house and repossessed their car and the money they had put away to send the kids to college is now used to buy food, clothes, and maybe someday a few semi-automatic weapons. They have, in essence, snapped. It's one thing to have always been poor and never possessed those niceties of middleclass life. It's a whole 'nother thing to have enjoyed those privileges and then have them taken away from you—by the very people you voted for!

When that happens, many individuals who are already on the edge and can't figure out how to respond politically are going to do one of two things: (a) Take it out on themselves (sit in the dark and drink), or (b) Take it out on *you*. In Michigan alone, the birthplace of downsizing, there are over fifty militia groups, the most in the country.



My parents called yesterday to tell me that GM has announced two more plant closings in Flint (are there any left to close?). Another 3,000 lives will be torn apart.

Many of these people who will lose their jobs are recent arrivals from Oklahoma City. They moved to Flint (a few months after the bombing of their federal building) when GM closed a factory there and told the workers with higher seniority that they could relocate to Flint if they chose. So they rented their Ryder trucks and headed to Michigan with the promise of the company that they would be secure (in Flint!). Now, nine months later, they will be forced to call Ryder Truck and move again. They've been told this time that they can go to Lansing.



What is terrorism? There is no question that, when an individual rents a Ryder Truck, loads it with explosives, and blows up a building, it is an act of terrorism and should be severely punished.

But what do you call it when a *company* destroys the lives of thousands of people? Is this terrorism? *Economic* terrorism? The company doesn't use a homemade bomb or a gun. They systematically move out all of the people before they blow up the building. But as I pass by the remnants of that factory there in Flint, Michigan, looking eerily like the remnants of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, I wonder: What will happen to *those*

people? A few will kill themselves, despondent over the loss of their livelihood. Some will be killed by their spouse—an argument over the lack of a new job or the loss of money at the racetrack turns suddenly violent (the woman is the one who usually ends up dead). Others will be killed more slowly through drugs or alcohol, the substances of choice when one needs to ease the pain of his or her life being turned upside down and shoved into an empty, dark hole.

We don't call the company a murderer, and we certainly don't call their actions terrorism, but make no mistake about it, their victims will be just as dead as those poor souls in Oklahoma City, killed off in the name of greed.

There is a rage building throughout the country and, if you're like me, you're scared shitless. Oklahoma City is the extreme extension of this rage. Though most people are somehow able to keep their wits through these hard times, I believe thousands of Americans are only a few figurative steps away from getting into that Ryder Truck. How terrifyingly ironic that the vehicle now chosen for terrorist acts is the same one used by that vast diaspora of working-class Americans who have spent the last decade moving from state to state in the hopes of survival.

This moving van, this symbol of their downsized lives, has become a means to an end. Eighty pounds of fertilizer and a fuse made of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil now fill the trusty Ryder instead of the kids' bunk beds and the dining room set.

Timothy McVeigh couldn't get a decent job in Buffalo, so he joined the army and got the "first kill" of his unit in Iraq during the Gulf War. He was praised and rewarded. The next year, he was unemployed, hanging around Niagara Falls, New York. A photo of him that has been widely published shows him and fellow defendant Terry Nichols horsing around on the ledge at Niagara Falls. I was there at the Falls, writing and prepping my film *Canadian Bacon*, at the time that photo was taken. I, of course, have no recollection of seeing McVeigh there, because who was he then? Just another son of a GM worker who couldn't get a job, not even as a toll-taker on the bridge to Canada (he had scored second highest on the test; there just weren't any openings). In the first scene we filmed a few months later at the Falls, the character Roy-Boy is a laid-off worker (also a veteran of the Gulf War) and is on that same ledge, preparing to jump and end it all.

How was it that Timothy McVeigh became so confused and filled with so much anger? What struck me most about his alleged act was that he had decided to *kill his own people* to make his point. This was a strange twist for those on the extreme Right who had always used their violence against blacks, Jews, and immigrants. But McVeigh is not accused of taking that Ryder Truck to the place where his "enemies" were—the Capitol Building, the World Trade Center, a Jewish temple, the headquarters of the NAACP, or other potential targets of his hate. No. He blows up his own people! In mostly white, Christian conservative, Republican-voting, redneck-lovin' Oklahoma City! Talk about the final insanity.

I do not like guns. I am a pacifist at heart. As a member of that minority of Americans who are unarmed, I have to find another way to combat the downsizing tide that seems to be rising against us. So I have written this book. I have no college degree, so take what I say with that in mind. I'm not even supposed to be writing this book right now, because I'm under contract to

produce a sitcom I've been hired to write for Fox. A sitcom! Hell, I still owe Mr. Ricketts an English paper from twelfth-grade Shakespeare! How did I ever get here from Flint?

Oh, yeah. In a Ryder Truck.