

MILESTONES

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I got called “Pop” for the first time yesterday. I finished gassing up at the Valero station and went inside to use the bathroom. I always go to the Valero station in Morro Bay because they have the cheapest prices around. The twenty-something guy behind the counter greeted me with a cheery, “Hi, Pop.” Or, it could have been, “Bub.” My hearing’s not what it used to be, but it was two hard consonants and one short vowel. Washing my hands in the bathroom, I saw my reflection in the mirror. I definitely looked more Bub than Pop. Of course, inside, my hair looks darker, more “pepper.” Outdoors in the sun, it looks more “salt.” As I left, the young guy said, “Have a nice day.” I lingered at the door to see if he added “Pop” or “Bub,” but no such luck.

Outside, I thought maybe it was my twenty-year old car. When I was in my twenties, old guys – the age I am now – drove enormous Buicks and Cadillacs that they’d bought before they retired. Those guys kept their relics for decades, clinging to the status they once possessed. Their cars were almost always dark blue. Maybe the gas station guy sees me and my car the same way, even though my car is white and half the size.

I remember the first time I got called “Mister.” I was 17, and was spending the afternoon at a motel pool with my girlfriend. You could do that in Chicago in those days – just pay a few dollars to swim and sun at a motel pool for a day. A little kid, maybe 6 or 7, in the shallow end had lost his beach ball in the deep end. I was about to dive into the deep end. “Hey, Mister,” the kid called to me, “will you throw me my ball?” At first, I thought, “He can’t be talking to me.” But, there wasn’t anyone else standing at the deep end, so it had to be me. I threw him his ball. Later, I realized that I must’ve looked like a “Mister” to a seven-year-old.

I was “Sir” for a long time. After I started wearing a suit and tie because of my job, people started calling me “Sir.” I never minded it from a bank teller or a deli-girl, but it really bothered me when a young hostess at a restaurant called me “Sir.” Now, they don’t call me anything. Just, “How many in your party?”

I'm OK with "You Guys." I don't mind it from a young waiter or waitress or salesclerk 'cause it sounds contemporary, and like we've bonded. The checkout girls at Whole Foods always greet my wife and me with "Hi, you guys. How are you?" They even called us "You Guys" when we used to ask for the senior discount on Tuesday or Thursday. We always went to Whole Foods on Tuesday or Thursday because of the discount. Now, we go whenever, and buy less. Of course, we don't get old people's groceries, like prune juice or cream of wheat or flannel bread. Maybe that helps us look more like "You Guys" than "Sir and Ma'am."

It's been the blink of an eye from "Hey, Mister" to "Hey, Pop." Or, "Bub." I'd rather be "Sir," but I'll take "Pop" if I have to. I dread the day when it becomes "Hey, Grandpa." There is something worse, however. That'll be the day when some young millennial, without malice or understanding, concludes that my wife and I have crossed the threshold into true old age, and labels us a "cute" old couple.