Ours But to Do or Die

by Anne Emerson, November 19, 2026

"Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die;" Alfred Lord Tennyson

I am an old lady, er, Senior Citizen, and it will not be too terrible for me if I should pass away soon. I prefer to go peacefully, of natural causes, but I have been trying to warn the rest of you what happens if we don't listen to the folks who have been there and done that. Some things we do need to learn for ourselves. Some things it might be wiser NOT to learn for ourselves. For example – what happens if we jump off a cliff?

Some of us are trained to handle tough situations. It would be unusual, but not impossible, for a young adult to survive something really difficult. Some of us are not trained to the highest levels. It's hard enough for those of us who are, to do our jobs without other people pushing our buttons or sabotaging our efforts. What follows is an email that I sent about. There are many of my acquaintance who don't like my emails, so I am putting it on this website instead. You are, therefore, free to read it or not – as my family and neighbors are, but they have still thought it fitting to attempt to censor what I write.

PS - About the siren on the River Kent in Arnside, Westmoreland, England. WE called it a Hooter. But a warning sign by any other name is still a warning sign.

Where I wrote, below, "Now you are dead," I forgot to add, "and so is your father, because he jumped in to save you."

So let me tell you THAT story, as an adult looking back. All that I understood at the time was that a boy had gotten caught in the tidal bore and that his father had jumped in after him. When the bodies were found, the whole village went into shock. There were, perhaps, a few days when everyone hoped they would be found alive.

I don't remember WHEN the siren was installed. I don't think it was present when we first started going up to Arnside. I suspect that my father might have been the person to suggest that it BE installed. I assume that it was installed (whomever thought of it) after that happened. It's one thing for teenagers to lark about and get in trouble. It's another for a loving father to jump in after a small child.

ARE WE THERE YET?

Annie

On Wednesday, November 18, 2026 at 06:09:03 AM EST, caemerson6 wrote:

Dear All -

Forwarding to you. What I didn't say, in the below, was that my Jewish friends, Joan Stiebel and Nannette Hoffman, stuck by me when others abandoned me after life got to be too much for me. Eventually Nannette got dementia. I phoned her one day from Northern Virginia, just because, and she wanted me to come for dinner that evening. I don't remember what I said, but it must have been already late in the afternoon, and it was about three hours from there to Newport News so I couldn't come.

I didn't want to keep having conversations like that, so I didn't call anymore. Then, I wasn't told when she passed. Of course, I regret how that turned out, and it got me thinking about dementia and how important it is for the people around someone to be able to support them. That is one reason I took the dementia training here where I live. Why that didn't work out is a whole other story, but you all should know that I am well known in the Williamsburg/Newport News area. I am not sure what is being said, and to whom, but I get too many smiles from strangers to think it is bad.

Annie

Rivers can be ENORMOUS. I am told the Mississippi is two miles wide in places. I don't doubt it. Even around here, the James and York Rivers are huge. They might compare more with the Severn or the Thames as they approach the sea, than with the River Kent in Arnside, for example. They are also tidal that way! (I have been pondering the relationship between flash floods and tidal bores, although the one comes down the river and the other goes up the river. In Arnside, a siren was installed. But if you didn't know what it meant, you might ignore it. Ooops! Now you are dead.)

I signed on to say something in particular, but I got distracted by yours about the Surrey police!

1) The biggest shock for a Brit coming over here is how BIG everything is. Distances considered reasonable to travel are farther and take longer. It's easy to drive an hour for a dinner party. It's easy to drive eight hours to a wedding. I will sometimes tell the story of how we were going to a wedding in Indiana, and we had underestimated the time it would take. We were going to be late for a wedding we had taken two days to get to! We spared no effort and arrived at the church, hoping to sneak in, in the middle of the service. Nope! The church was empty. (Ooops! Must have been a very short wedding. NOPE. We had crossed a time zone and we were half an hour early instead of half an hour late. Saved by our own ignorance!)

   Rail gauges are bigger; trains are longer; I have a photo, taken out in California on Route 50: "Ocean City, Maryland 3000 miles." Well, it's not exactly 3000 miles, but I expect you get the idea. Rivers can be ENORMOUS. I am told the Mississippi is two miles wide in places. I don't doubt it. Even around here, the James and York Rivers are huge. They might compare more with the Severn or the Thames as they approach the sea, than with the River Kent in Arnside, for example. They are also tidal that way! (I have been pondering the relationship between flash floods and tidal bores, although the one comes down the river and the other goes up the river. In Arnside, a siren was installed. But if you didn't know what it meant, you might ignore it. Ooops! Now you are dead.)

2) The next biggest shock is the traffic. Roads into the big city are about eight lanes wide, with six lanes going INTO the city in the morning, and six lanes coming OUT of the city in the evening. So, the lanes are labeled with red Xs if you shouldn't be using them "at this time of day." Express lanes were eventually built, and it's the same for them - in the morning they are reserved for commuters going into the city, and in the late afternoon they are reserved for commuters going home from the city. Even so, it's not uncommon to

encounter gridlock on these special commuter roads. In the beginning, I was a bit shocked. These days, I find it exciting - all sorts of little clues like that tell me when we are approaching a big city, where there is bound to be lots going on.

3) *The next biggest shock is the violence. I was told there are some parts of Washington DC where white people don't go. I have not always taken that seriously, and I have had stones thrown at my car for the privilege; plus, of course, one has to be told WHICH parts of town are not safe. Not everyone is going to warn one about that. I was recommended to a shop called the 5-7-9 shop (clothing for small people). I chose to walk rather than drive. The people sitting outside shops and houses looked really sullen. I thought they resented my presence on their street.*

   THEN I realized that I was the only white person on the street! If I got on a Metrobus in DC, even in a "safe" part of town, there were pockmarks in the windows which I assumed were evidence that the bus had experienced gunfire. I once got on a bus in DC and asked the driver whether he went to Hunters Woods. He snapped at me extremely nastily, "It says on the front where we are going." So, I got off. It said on the front of the bus that it was going to South Reston. Hunters Woods is indeed in South Reston. In New York City, on Grand Central Station, there were some bandy-legged looking people strolling around in black outfits twirling truncheons as though they meant business. After a while I realized they were police! (Etcetera.)

4) The next biggest shock is the acceptance of what I would consider "free sex." It's as though people don't understand the dangers of this - there's a sort-of "to each his own" attitude, and young women are not warned that some men act friendly to them for sex, not love! Up to a point, it's natural for young people to explore their sexuality, but it seems as though there's no adult sense of their own responsibility to try to put the brakes on this. I looked at the curriculum for sex ed at my children's school and it looked okay to me; it was more than what we had; but I do suspect it taught people this rather "liberated" attitude.

5) We used to think in England, that America was about "sex, drugs, and violence," based on the movies that came out of the USA. I soon realized that the USA is at least as diverse (probably much more so) as England, in terms of little subcultures, regional differences, and cultural behaviors. But drugs was indeed another challenge, and it has got much worse, especially among the disadvantaged, but not exclusively so. Another thing that is really bad over here is the drinking culture, particularly in fraternity houses (college "societies").

Well - back to what I was going to say. Not top of mind anymore. Trying to remind myself. It had something to do with London. Well - this is a good one for starters. London taxi drivers had to pass a test, so that they knew how to get anywhere within Greater London. Here in Washington DC, the taxi drivers would expect to be given directions where to go. Most recently, we were in DC and the taxi driver said he was from Ethiopia and had been in the DC area for many years. He had no trouble finding the Omni Shoreham where we were staying, and on the way, he told us about a hydroelectric dam that has recently been built in Ethiopia that is messing up the Nile downriver, specifically in Egypt. Now that I think about it, I suppose it's going to mess up the Sudan as well. But when I questioned him further, he did not know more.

Ah! Now I remember. I interviewed for a job at the American University in Cairo. (Reason I did is that one of the Americans who had been at the Oriental Institute had worked there and I met him in Reston for something.) I had the impression I would be offered the job if I said I could go. So, my husband and I were discussing it. Then someone phoned from over there, but they got our answering machine, and I am sure they didn't realize it was an answering machine. Long story short, they eventually connected with me and I was going to tell them I couldn't go, but my husband seemed to imply that I could, so I said I would let them know. THEN my husband made it clear that he did not intend to come with me, but he would be okay with my going on my own. I didn't think that was reasonable. What were we going to do about the children? What was I going to do among Middle Eastern colleagues who thought it mighty odd for me to be there without my husband? So, I called them back a few days later. Professor Mikhail was now in New York at a conference and not available.

So, I called the conference in New York. No-one could put me through to him, so I left a message and figured I had done the best I could. Many years later, my boss was going to a conference in New York. I had to arrange to get the supplies there. I suppose they were panels; a large flyer for the front of the table - that sort of thing. I forget the exact details, but basically, I was promised one thing and given another. It was way more expensive than was reasonable for moving those supplies from the station to the conference. "Union rules," they said. My boss was livid. He chewed me out. He chewed me out for a lot of things that weren't my fault; he did the same for other employees. Eventually I decided to leave. I couldn't get another job. Folks were suspicious of me, for some reason. I have, eventually, concluded that there must have been an informal network telling people that I was mentally ill. It's almost like being a criminal over here. Doctors and employers have treated me like there's something wrong with me for a very long time.

If I had to guess at WHO got this information going, I would guess at someone who was a medical doctor in India but couldn't get a job as a doctor over here. It's a guess. There's another possibility – the man who told me to "get out" while I was training for a job that required a Security clearance, for which I had to declare my private and personal medical history, of that nature. The Indian doctor lady couldn't get a job as a doctor over here. So, she became the nurse for the doctor that my husband chose for us when he decided that it wasn't cool for us to go to a HMO in Georgetown, because I had thought a HMO was a good idea. I didn't complain, because one of the doctors at the HMO in Georgetown enjoyed the "internal exam" a little too much! But I didn't like that doctor, at all.

Well, the point of all that - although I got off the subject a bit - was that I think it's possible that some of what I have just described was better known among what we might call the Underground Networks than I had thought. If doctors were telling one another that I was a nutcase, perhaps nurses were noticing that I stopped going to places where I was mistreated! If academics were blackballing me, perhaps administrative assistants were talking among themselves. After a little while, I had the impression that I was being tested. I found a very good dentist. He was English. But for some reason, his black receptionist "could not" help me. I changed dentists. It wasn't just the black women, though. My wealthy bridge partners "set me up." Etcetera. LOTS more there.