

The Long Way Home

The sun was just setting as the snappy new 1931 Model A Ford labored up the dirt road to The Eagle, a monument overlooking the City of Utica on the Mohawk River. A beautiful June evening beckoned in upstate New York as my father and his friend from the Knights of Columbus, Old Bill, drew on their Cuban cigars and looked forward to a night of amateur astronomy. Dad's big purchase that summer was a refractor telescope. He hadn't met and married Mom yet, and only because he was single could he afford the instrument. His meager pay as an apprentice pressman at the local newspaper didn't allow much of the high life.

The hill on which the Eagle stood provided an excellent spot for photographers by day and amateur astronomers at night. Dad often shouldered his telescope like a blunderbuss and walked up to the monument from his flat on Howard Avenue. On the way there, he'd cut through the City Zoo grounds and often stop to have a grunting contest with the zoo's lonely lion. Then he would continue his climb up to the top of the hill. It was quite a hike, even for a 25 year old, so tonight he was happy Old Bill had asked to come along and provide a ride in the man's new Model A Ford. The convertible top provided fresh air and the rumble seat in back was a great place to put a small person or the week's groceries. The seat was an open-air padded bench in the back, where ordinarily the trunk would be. Before starting their short journey, they let the car top down and then popped the telescope and tripod into the rumble seat. Satisfied with their labor, they had lit their cigars and off they went.

The two astromers arrived around 10:00 pm and Dad busied himself setting up the scope,

adjusting the lenses and trying to find an interesting stellar object to impress his companion. He hurried right along, because the star gazing would be over at midnight, when lovers showed up in their cars for a night of spooning and mooning, to use an earlier meaning of the word. The incoming headlights could easily ruin one's night vision, something only my father and Bill cared about.

So Dad set up the scope while Bill raised his binoculars and scanned the night sky.

"I'm feeling a little tired, John," said Bill.

"Sit down there on the grass," Dad said. "I'll have the scope set up in a second." Looking for a planet and forgetting Bill for the moment, Dad lined up Venus in the eyepiece. Just as he brought it into focus, he heard a sound behind him ... Wump ... as though Bill had fallen to the ground.

'You OK, Bill?'

My father was answered by a strange snuffling sound and he thought, "Damn, the man's lost his teeth here in the dark!"

"Don't try to talk, Bill," he said. "We'll find your teeth in just a second. You won't need them for a while."

Dad straightened up, about to signal to Bill.

The older man was laying flat on the ground, arms outspread. Dad felt for a pulse, first at on the man's wrist, then on his neck, as he'd seen a nurse do when

his mother died. Bill was dead. Heart attack, apoplexy ... who could tell? Dad was stunned. He'd never had a person just drop dead on him before. He sat down wearily on a nearby rock and tried to think this out.



My father knew he had to get Bill enroute to his final resting place. He thought first of getting down the hill to the city and finding a phone. But who to call? Old Bill was known to his fellow Knights as a bachelor, a retired railroad worker with no family and few friends. Dad supposed you took a dead person to a funeral

home, but he wasn't sure how he would get the body there, assuming he found an undertaker open at this time of night. Also, rather importantly, my father had never driven a car, although he had watched other men do it. He guessed you shifted the gear lever and pumped the clutch pedal and stepped down on the accelerator.

Coming to a decision, Dad stood and walked over to Bill. He grabbed the man by the feet, dragged him to the Ford, and began to haul the



body up into the car's front seat. Bill's sphincter muscle had relaxed and he stank awful, making Dad even more queasy than he'd been from

just the proximity of death. He knew it would be impossible to have the reeking body next to him while he attempted his maiden voyage behind the wheel of an automobile. So, he lugged Bill up into the rumble seat,. The seat was tiny and not very deep. My father didn't want the body to flop over and fall out. So he propped Old Bill upright, folded up the tripod and jammed it between the man's legs. He tied Bill to this contrivance with his belt, lashing it around the man so that he looked like a troublesome sailor bound to the mast.

Dad turned the key and started the engine, then found a gear and eased out the clutch. The motor stalled. He pushed and shoved the gear shift and tried another, lower gear. This time he got the car moving. Not wanting to tempt fate, Dad decided this would be the only gear needed tonight, speed be damned. The car moved off away from the Eagle at a sedate ten miles per hour, just as an early-arriving couple of lovers drove past them slowly and tooted the horn.

Navigating his way through the darkened streets of Cornhill, the John Paisley Funeral Parlor eventually loomed up among the other homes on Steuben Street. He pulled the car over to the curb, turned off the engine and marched to the door. He repeatedly pressed on the bell button,

and after a few minutes lights appeared in the windows. Mr. Paisley finally opened the front door.

"I have a dead man in the rumble seat," my father began.

"Did you kill him?" the undertaker asked, as he leaned out the front door of the establishment.

"No, of course not."

"I always ask that," said the man. "Gets a laugh. Even from grieving widows." My father wasn't laughing.

Mr. Paisley was a large man and filled the door frame. He listened with no obvious reaction, as my father stood on the stoop and explained his plight. The undertaker didn't ask Dad to come in and he didn't appear anxious to help with the body. Abruptly, an audible sigh came from Bill as he sat anchored in the car's rumble seat by the curb. The undertaker laughed gently.

"Just gas escaping up the windpipe."

"Wonderful news," my father must have thought.

"I can't take him," said Mr. Paisley. "He has to be certified by a doctor. Natural causes, that stuff."

Dad cleared his throat to speak, but the undertaker began to close the door and interrupted him.

"Take him to the hospital. Over to City General. And for God's sake, take him out of that rumble seat and put him inside the car where he won't be seen."

Mr. Paisley stepped back in the doorway.

"Don't get caught with that body or you'll spend the rest of your life answering questions and filling out paperwork, even if they believe you didn't kill him." With that he said Good Night and closed the heavy door in Dad's face.

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Since he couldn't stomach the idea of prying stinky Bill out of the Rumble Seat and putting him up front, Dad decided to take his chances. He got the car started and after a few lunges, the Ford

was again rolling along in low gear. Bill moaned a second time. Dad saw a flashing red

light behind him.

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Officer Pete Cardamone pulled the Model A over on South Street, less than a mile from the hospital. The policeman may have thought he'd spotted a couple of drunks inching their way home.

"What's the matter with your friend back there?" asked the policeman.

"He's had a hell of a night, Officer."

The cop turned toward Bill.

"Sir? Are you OK? Are you alive? Are you ... uh ... tied to a post?"

The officer moved toward Bill, but stopped abruptly.

"Oh-h-h God! You smell plain awful, sir!"

"It might be contagious," said my father. "Don't get too close to him."

The policeman took a giant step backward.

"What in blue blazes is wrong with him?"

Bill made another gasping sound.

"Well ... at this point I'm not sure," said Dad, "but I think we'd better get him to the hospital."

Now beside himself with confusion, my father very much wanted to have Bill examined by a doctor.

So, with siren blaring and the lights of the squad car shining through the night, the procession started again for the Utica City Hospital. Out in front, the cop sped up and slowed down numerous times, waiting for Dad to catch up. Officer Cardamone didn't think ten miles an hour appropriate for an emergency run. Bill tipped and bobbed at every bump, but lashed to the wooden tripod, he sailed along steadily, dead upright.

Two orderlies stood smoking outside when the small circus arrived in the emergency room's parking lot. Stubbing out their cigarettes, they helped my Dad pull Bill from the rumble seat and flop him on to a gurney. Everyone went inside, trying not to breathe too deeply. A doctor put a stethoscope on Bill's chest and the old man gurgled one more time. The physician looked up at Officer Cardamone, then at my father, then back down at the patient. He

motioned to the orderlies, "He's dead. Take him downstairs."

The policeman wandered off to find a phone. My father had had enough for one evening. "I'm going home," Dad said to no one in particular. "Tell the cop the car belongs to the dead man, my friend Bill."

Outside at the stinking car, Dad took his telescope out of the rumble seat, but left the wooden tripod. He began the long walk home to Howard Avenue.

Inside the hospital, Officer Cardamone searched through the wallet he'd found on the front seat of the Model A. The policeman couldn't find a personal contact phone number, but a card described the owner as an employee of the local newspaper. He called the night editor's desk and reported my father's death.

Dad was late for work the next morning, delayed by his search around the flat for his wallet. When he walked through the newspaper offices on his way to the pressroom, one woman screamed and fainted, or so the story went by the time I heard it years later. Luckily, Dad's obituary notice had not been ready in time for the morning edition. It was quickly pulled and didn't appear in the newspaper for another 53 years.

Dad and "Pete the Cop" became friends, partly because my father went to bat for the policeman when his sergeant attempted to use the incident to cause trouble. Myself and my brothers loved to hear Pete tell the story we dramatically called, "The Night at The Eagle." When Pete would come in the house, we'd all gleefully gather around him and shout, "Uncle Pete, Uncle Pete ... tell us about the night you killed our Daddy!" My mother would pull her rosary out of her apron pocket and bless herself.

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