

Out Of Gas

I first saw Jenny while delivering newspapers on Cornhill sometime in the winter of 1957 when I took over another kid's paper route. Though only a year behind me in school, she looked like a twelve year old in her parka as she walked up from the bus on James Street with her little sister in tow.

When spring and then the summer of 1958 came along and she shed her heavy coat, scarves and boots, trading them in for a pair of shorts and a brief top, I began to take more notice.

I was 15 and although I had no idea what I might expect to find beneath a girl's clothing, a million years of evolution prompted me to find out. It would take longer than I hoped.

Jenny and her mother were not ready for her to date and anyway I was too shy to ask. By the time all the kids in my class moved up to such a level of socialization, I had fallen for an Irish lass who I dated through most of high school. Mary Immaculata O'Shaughnessy was also shy, but when we met and I walked her home from a dance at our Catholic high school, I was no longer reticent about declaring my undying love to a girl. I'd done so several times that year, starting with a young nurse in the emergency room who helped stitch up my leg after my last childhood bicycle ride ... straight down the ski tow on Utica's Parkway. She may have been five or more years older than me, but that only gave me more license.

"I could go for a girl like you," I told the young nurse as she cleaned up the scrapes on my leg. She had cut away the lower half of my pant leg to get at the wound on my knee.

"Hold still," she said., pushing the torn fabric farther up my leg.

"I can take my pants off," I said. "No problem."

“That won’t be necessary,” she said, obviously flustered.

“I wouldn’t be embarrassed,” I said. “I’m wearing underwear.”

“That’s good to know,” she responded.

I reached for my belt buckle. “Really, I can just –“

“Listen, kid,” she said, “I can clean your knee or I can clean your clock if you even try to get funny with me.”

I was only trying to be helpful.

Mary Immy seemed agreeable to my company, if not thrilled. I probably bored her. I doubt if the girl ever felt that much affection for me, but I was a steady date for her to plan on and her parents evidently believed I was safe. Unfortunately, they were right. We never became the torrid affair I imagined, like Bogey and Bacall. On the many occasions I asked if she loved me, Immy answered, "Huh? Oh, sure, yeah." I suppose it was just her style, but it wasn't very cuddly. I can imagine if we stayed together and had someday married. At the altar when asked if she took me to be her lawful wedded husband, she might answer, "Huh? Oh, sure, yeah."

Over the years I wondered about Mary Immy and hoped she had a good life. I also wondered why I could not remember much about the girl, her tastes or opinions for example. I had no idea what might have been her favorite color, or music group, or car or TV program or ... anything. It finally occurred to me that I never knew much about Immy because I never asked. I was too busy talking about myself or a host of topics she had little interest in, such as the possibility of space travel and the various configurations of half wave dipole antennas.

In those high school years I seldom left the attic, so fascinated was I with short wave radio. My aerie up above the rest of the house was cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Plus it was dingy with the dust of over 50 years. To make it more hospitable I brought home 3 or 4 refrigerator shipping boxes from an appliance store near my high school. The cardboard panels made walls to cut the breeze that blew through the attic in the winter and gave me vertical surfaces on which to mount weather maps and short wave radio posters. Without the walls there was only the sloping roof. The end wall of the attic was mostly windows.

All my paper route earnings went into my radio hobby. Immy didn't hear from me for weeks at a time. I neglected my studies, stayed up all night and took full advantage of the peak in the sun spot cycle. Each night, into the early morning, I sent and received Morse code over the Atlantic, exchanging signal reports and weather data with fellow Hams in Europe. I learned a lot about signal propagation, the grey line, the ionosphere and 10 meter atmospheric ducting. I threw my antenna wire higher and higher for lower radiation launch angles to increase distance, and installed loading coils for better standing wave ratios. I became conversant with meteorological patterns in Spain and Romania. I become so enamored of everything taking place a third of the globe distant that I forgot about where my feet were planted. I flunked Geometry and had to take it again in summer school.

I had no study habits to speak of, but I had a terrific memory and remembered what took place in class. It sustained my mediocre high school record while I spent my spare time day dreaming, fooling with radios and playing in a rock band.

I almost flunked Religion. No one ever flunked Religion. It was rumored that if you started failing the tests, you'd be kept after school and sent over to the church next door each day to pray until either you got the message or God got the message and your study habits miraculously improved.

In Religion class I became upset early in the school year when I discovered we would not be studying Aquinas or Augustine. These were two church Fathers who had contributed much to the philosophy and theology of our church, and I wanted the benefit of a classroom forum in which to air my personal theories and opinions on various theological topics.

"I'm afraid we'll all have to struggle along without your ideas on the Majesterium, Mr. Griffin," Sister Mary Metanoia told me when I marched up to her after our first class and announced my disappointment. "We are instead going to study Our Lord's life on earth, here in this vale of tears," she said. "It will help you to put into perspective His final suffering and the debt he paid on the cross for your sins and mine. Probably more for yours."

"But Aquinas' ideas were always debated in the councils of the Church, Sister,

and I thought we might continue the debates here."

"Here?" she asked. "Debate?" her voice began to rise.

"Yes, here," I said. "In Utica, on John Street, near the banks of the Mohawk."

"I don't think Holy Mother the Church will entertain any more debate on her theology, young man," she said, now on the verge of getting really upset.

"Especially from a *boy* who can't even understand Geometry."

To say I was insulted would be an understatement. After all, I did in fact understand Geometry. I just forgot to memorize the theorems. When our religion studies commenced that year I found to my chagrin we were covering every route Jesus ever took in his walks around the Holy Land. You'd think he was aiming at a certificate to hang on the wall like you get for completing the Appalachian Trail. We even memorized distances. It's 18 miles from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee. Almost 80 miles down to Jerusalem. That's a long walk, and there were no tour buses in 30 A.D. The class was a travelogue of Jesus stopping at one well or another and offering a parable to desert people who would have rather had a tour bus stop. I soon tuned out. I began to fail, but quickly had a miraculous change in my ability to pay attention and study when Sister threatened to call my parents and suggest they make some changes in how I spent my time. That would have been terrible. Until report cards came out, I had my folks convinced I was a model student. A call to Mom and Dad would have shortened my runway.

Mary Immy and I parted at the end of high school. I guess she'd had enough of my immaturity. I started arguments just to see if I could get a rise out of her. I would have tried to win them, but Immy was an Irishwoman in training and I knew better than to waste my time. Our estrangement was no surprise, but it left me crushed.

I began to wonder what Jenny was doing.

Turns out Jenny was growing nicely. She had one of those great girlish shapes that would not survive very far into adulthood. I didn't care much about the future at that age and what I saw was a terrific looking girl who always gave me a cute smile, until I asked her out. She mumbled something about plans with her mother and wondered if I could call her the next day. "Huh? Oh, sure, yeah," I said,

feigning a new-found disinterest as a result of her not throwing her arms around me and saying she'd been waiting for years to date me. I knew better than to expect such a reaction, of course. I was barely handsome. Immy and Jenny were friends and I quickly surmised she wanted to get Immy's OK on our date. Women are funny. As far as I was concerned, Immy and I were finished the night she announced she'd rather watch The Lawrence Welk Show than listen to my bullshit. But Jenny wanted to be sure Immy had crossed me off her list with a permanent marker. I was sure she had, and no doubt destroyed ... with reverence, one hopes ... the Miraculous Medal I gave her on her last birthday. I wondered at the time if I should have given her that special Dominican Rosary I saw in the Utica Catholic Bookstore, the heavy one made entirely of metal she could wrap around her hand for brass knuckles. Or with a small padlock, use as handcuffs in the citizen's arrest of any miscreant who might bother her on the bus. Very practical gift for a young woman, I thought, but the medal was probably safer for everyone who knew her..

And so, evidently with Immy's good wishes, but more likely with her studied indifference, Jenny accepted a date with me. I was about to begin my second year at a local community college and Jenny was thinking of going to live with an aunt in Syracuse. That city was just fifty miles away and close enough to get home on weekends, or every night if necessary. Syracuse represented the Big Town to young Uticans who didn't want to go too far away. The city was distant enough to justify renting your own apartment and getting away from your parents' eternal quest to see you through to maturity as a virgin or a eunuch. And it was a new place where you could start fresh and leave behind high school friends who knew everything about you from the date of your first period to the time you threw up in Biology class when Petey Sardini pretended to eat the frog he was dissecting.

In 1962 there wasn't much to do in Utica, or maybe I was cursed with a limited imagination. A typical date at our age was to go to a bar for a few beers and dance to music on the jukebox. I suggested we drive out to the Blue Note on the Oriskany road, but Jenny said she didn't like the place. Ditto for McGuirl's on Eagle Street. I began to suspect she either didn't want to run into Immy or she

didn't want to be seen with me. I couldn't believe the latter, but meeting up with Immy would indeed be awkward. I didn't want to see her new boyfriend, if she had one. I wondered what she was doing, but I knew nothing of her plans.

One night just before my date with Jenny, my mother asked me about Immy and why I wasn't seeing her anymore. After dating her for three years, I breezily dismissed the girl as just a passing fancy of my high school years. Concern clouded Mom's face. She knew I'd been hurt, but I wouldn't admit it. She probably guessed the girl had dumped me.

"I always treated her well," I said, announcing my innocence. But Mom looked doubtful and rolled her eyes.

In my second year of college, I lived at home, still mostly in the attic, checking out the weather in Finland or Bulgaria in the middle of most nights and interfering with my neighbors' televisions when I transmitted. I popped up on a well known Utica eye doctor's stereo, calling "come in, Yugoslavia," the night he had friends over to play them a new recording of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. He lived a half mile away and his letter to the FCC in Washington resulted in my second official offense for interference.

Turns out that at eighteen Jenny was in great shape, the effects of a sedentary job and child bearing still in the future. On our first and only date we headed up to Old Forge and I forgot to check the gas in the tank of my father's car.

Jenny and I drove up the new Arterial, which ended with a sigh half way up Deerfield Hill, as if it couldn't wait for the new addition of highway that would stretch over the top of the hill and connect it to the old four-lane at South Trenton. On to Forestport and then to Thendara, over smooth new road since Route 28 had been rebuilt in the late 1950s.

By the way, having watched my older brother buy the only car he could afford and see it break down all the time, often in embarrassing places, and then spend weeks earning money for repairs, I couldn't for the life of me understand why any teenage boy would want his own vehicle when he could borrow his father's showroom-fresh late model chariot. Dad didn't quite see it that way, but I

managed to use his car evenings fairly often.

On that Friday night there must have been a terrific party going on in a secret location, because we stopped in three bars normally full of kids on the weekend and each place was empty. I asked Jenny twice if she could think of any place to stop that I had missed. Her shrug told me she didn't care very much and she said, "Whatever you think." We pushed on past Old Forge and finally sat down at a sticky table in a quiet dive somewhere south of Inlet, near Eagle Bay. We ordered a beer.

"So," I said, "you're thinking of moving to Syracuse."

"Maybe," she said. "I have to decide whether I'll go to college or get a job, but Syracuse might be a good place for either of those."

"Have you ever thought of going into business for yourself?" I asked.

"No," she laughed, "what would I do?"

"Sell hot dogs," I said. "I got talking to a guy in Yorkville the other day and he makes a good living at it. The cart isn't that expensive, and you can take out a payment plan."

"I don't think I'd be good at selling hot dogs," she said, her smile now gone.

"Sure you would," I replied.

"I think I will probably find something better to do in life," she said.

"You could sell them wearing a bikini." I said.

She didn't answer.

"For a few years, anyway." I said.

I found it difficult to have a conversation with Jenny. I wasn't so much tongue tied as I was unable to find any common ground. Of course, without asking very much about how her life was going, I launched into *The Story of Dave* in 3D and Technicolor, conveniently served up with my own reviews and a self-supplied laugh track. That this approach never worked on any girl didn't stop me. It was my Magnum Opus at the time and I was sure it deserved an audience.

Jenny was polite, but unimpressed. She didn't have the wherewithal of the young woman I dated the next year, who one night at the Blue Note in the middle of my lengthy monologue reached across the table and grabbed the front of my

sweater. She roughly pulled me toward her as the ash tray went flying and said, "If you don't shut up, I'm going to break this beer bottle over your head." A slight young woman, but impressive nonetheless. I always wondered if she wound up killing her husband in the ensuing years.

When Jenny and I got in the car to drive back to Utica, she fell asleep over against the far door, possibly as a self defense against the onslaught of more chatter. Of course, she may have been faking, but a gentleman doesn't inquire. Besides, if it got too quiet I could always talk to myself, an easy task for someone who spent most of his life in his head. I didn't try to wake her until I checked the gas gauge. It sat just above Empty. How the heck did that happen? I had put two dollars worth of gas in the night before. And how did I not notice it on our way up from Utica?

"I think we're running out of gas," I said.

She said nothing, but stopped breathing.

Finally, she said, "That's not funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny and I didn't arrange this. The tank must be leaking. Don't you smell gas?"

"No," she replied.

"I do," I said.

"We're not spending the night in the car," she said.

"Well, if we have to, we have to," I replied. "You can sleep in the back seat and I'll stay up front."

"You can sleep in the trunk," she said.

"I think my father has a load of stuff in there for St. Vincent de Paul's."

She didn't respond. A moment later she pulled her coat over her shoulder, turned away from me and did everything but snore to indicate she was asleep.

I watched the gas gauge very closely, hoping it would stay on the safe side of "E." There was an all-night gas station on Deerfield Corners in North Utica and I hoped I'd make it there. But by the time we passed through Forestport and turned down Route 12 at Alder Creek, I was sure we'd run out of gas before reaching Utica.

That's when the tiny NY State Trooper station loomed up on the left. For years I'd seen the little ranch house perched on a rise by the side of Route 12. I remembered a gas pump outside the garage doors beneath the house. I braked and turned left into the driveway. I told Jenny I was going to try to get some gas. There were no other vehicles around. I got out of the car, leaving it running because I'd read that starting a car takes as much gas as driving for fifteen minutes. I climbed the hill to the front door. It was locked and I peered through the little window in the door. No one was inside. What the hell, I thought. Back down in the driveway, I inspected the pump as best I could by the weak light of a floodlight mounted on a utility pole. The nozzle wasn't locked to the side of the stanchion as I'd once seen on a farm. When I backed the car around and tried to pump gas, I found the electricity to the pump was not turned on.

I really did not want to run out of gas. I didn't know what would happen if we were stranded. I could wish for a friendly Trooper to see us later by the side of the road... maybe the guy who should have been upstairs in the barracks. He might carry a full gas can for just such emergencies. But I doubted it. It was more likely he'd call a tow truck and I'd have to pay a service fee for a man to bring us gas, or even pay for a tow. Either way, it could cost \$25. It might cost more. I was just a poor student.

The \$25 would have to be taken out of the \$100 I had saved so far for a new radio transmitter I had my heart set on, a new rig that would triple my output power. Of course, I could use it only very late at night or blot out every radio and television within a six block radius. I pictured myself throwing the big switch, the house lights dimming, and the power surging through my antenna. Any of those damned birds perched on the wire would go straight to the hereafter with their feathers sticking out in all directions. It would be just my luck to find someday when I got to those pearly gates that St. Peter was a bird lover.

If no rescuer showed up and we never got any gas, Jenny would be forced to spend the night with me. She would hate me. Her mother would probably have me arrested. Well, we were not likely to fall in love and get married anyway, but I have never wanted any woman to hate me. I always felt I was a nice guy. A little

self absorbed, maybe. But I had come through my teens and no one had seriously tried to kill me. So I think I was somewhat likeable. My inflated opinion of myself happily leveled off as I reached age twenty. Had it followed a natural arc of ascending absurdity, I would have been impossible to live with. As it was, I was only annoying.

I kept staring at the pump as if I could wish it to turn on and fill up the car with hi-test. Jenny was awake. Through the open window of the car she said, "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to get some gas from the New York State Police," I said, "because you won't sleep with me." I was exasperated with her pretending to sleep.

My sarcasm was met by silence. I'd call it a cold, stony silence.

I could hear trickling when I stuck the gas nozzle into the car's filler tube and I hoped at least a tiny amount of gas was flowing into the tank. A kind of siphoning action may have been happening. If I first held the nozzle up in the air and then brought it down and inserted it into the filler tube, a small amount of gas could be heard leaking down the hose and into the tank. I repeated the procedure numerous times while my mind floated to nowhere in particular. I wondered if any part of this technique of raising the hose high in the air before inserting the nozzle into the filler might lend itself to making the act of conception more fruitful. I might be able to patent something here and sell the idea to childless couples. Television was the way to sell an item that promised results and I tried to imagine the artwork, thinking of the TV commercials that sold kitchen devices for \$19.95. I'd have to get around the FCC's ban on prurient advertising, of course, but I might be on to something that could lead to millions in sales and royalties. My fame would certainly embarrass that nun who flunked me in Geometry.

Gassing up by this method would take a while, so I reached in the car and turned the ignition off. Jenny was sitting ramrod stiff in her seat, staring straight ahead. Her eyes were wide open, like a deer just before it gets run down by a Peterbilt. My heart melted and I knew her derision was in fact fear. I felt awful that she might be afraid of me.

"Jenny," I said, "don't worry. I'm a dope who forgets to put gas in the tank, not

someone who would try to take advantage of you. If we have to stay out all night I'll sleep outside on the ground. You can lock yourself in the car. I'll explain everything to your mother and offer to compensate her for her worry."

She turned her head slowly toward me and said, "Compensate her?"

"Well, uh, yes," I said. I'll offer to mow her lawn for a couple of weeks, or maybe ..."

"My brother does the lawn," she said.

"You have a sister, Jenny, not a brother," I said.

"My *older* brother," she said. "He's married and lives in New Hartford. And he's gonna kill you!"

I repeated the lift and fill procedure a couple of dozen times, all the while worrying that a Trooper would return to the station while I was stealing his gas. With the engine now off, I couldn't tell if the gas gauge was ever so slightly heading up away from "E."

A constant swishing of tires out on Route 12 was interrupted by the sound of a car slowing down and soon it could be seen at the end of the driveway. The headlights described a wide arc as the car turned in. I froze. I heard Jenny say, "What'll my *mother* say?"

The car came to a stop just off the road. It could not have sat there for more than five seconds. Then it backed out. The transmission clunked into Drive and the car continued on its way north. I have no idea who it was or why they decided to momentarily stop in the driveway. I could see nothing but headlights out near the road. If it was a Trooper, he almost certainly would have seen our car, but maybe not me since I was standing on the far side of the vehicle. He may have gotten a call on the radio and decided to ignore my car in the driveway until he could check it out later.

In any case, I decided I'd had enough. I'd pumped out only a trickle of gas and risked getting arrested. I held the nozzle up in the air and this time brought it down aimed at the ground and squeezed the handle. Nothing came out. I'd gotten all the free gas I deserved.

"I didn't do this on purpose," I told Jenny again as we headed south.

“Immy said you did things like this all the time,” she said with a sting in her voice.

“Well, not on purpose,” I said. “We all make mistakes.”

“Yes, we certainly do,” she said witheringly.

The gas gauge needle had moved up slightly, or maybe it was my imagination. Soon it was moving downward past E. As we crested Deerfield Hill, I switched off the ignition, convinced I could coast down the long hill to North Utica. Today the steering lock on most cars would prevent that while the car is in motion. Soon afterward I began to think I should have just put the car in neutral. Starting the car again would probably take more gas than I saved by turning off the engine. With the engine dead, there was no power steering or power brakes. No alternator, either, and the headlights began to dim. Oh, great. I might make it to the gas station, but my battery would be dead on arrival. Just as I approached a leveling out of Trenton Road where the firehouse is today, at 40 miles per hour I turned the key back on. Instead of using the starter, I slammed the automatic transmission into Drive. It worked and the car started. I probably saved 4 cents worth of gas. A week later my father paid \$200 to have the transmission repaired. He gave me that look when he came home from the repair shop, but he knew I would respond to any inquiry with a well practiced countenance of innocence mixed with puzzlement. I'd been working on it for years.

Finally Jenny and I arrived at Deerfield Corners. I left the engine running to charge the battery while I put two dollars in the tank.

By this time Jenny's mood had improved and she seemed to join in the adventure. Once we were fueled up, she relaxed and laughed about it. You'd have thought we were an old married couple as we discussed one thing or another as I drove up John Street and then on to Cornhill. She laughed at my jokes and I asked her about her life and we got along famously.

I parked the car in front of her house and we sat on her steps, continuing to enjoy our conversation. By then we'd had a terrific evening.

I never saw her again.

I truly cannot remember exactly why we did not go out again. I think I did call her for a second date, but maybe she was not able to arrange her schedule. I would have gotten the point and not asked again. And soon I left to live in New York City. I was home for the weekend a few years later when Mom showed me a newspaper clipping of Jenny's marriage. Mom always saved clippings about my friends, but not if they were arrested. No older brother was mentioned in the write-up. Immy and her husband were in the wedding party.

The night of the gas heist Jenny and I parted friends after an evening of only slightly getting to know each other. We sat outside her house late on that moonlit evening until she had to go inside. I leaned toward her and she put her face up and we kissed. She was a lousy kisser. She may have thought the same of me.

I've never been sure of what a good kisser is anyway. Short of drooling, I suppose any kiss is a good kiss when you have the right person in your arms. I never knew if I was good kisser until I met my wife. It's a good thing she loves me and never thought I was all that annoying, except on our first date when I tried to sum up Aquinas' teaching for her. At least she's never threatened to break a beer bottle over my head. Not in quite a while anyway.

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