

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 was he able to 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 up, 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 Bill's almost 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. They let the top down and then popped the telescope and tripod into the rumble seat. Satisfied with their labor, they lit their cigars and off they went.

They 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 cars containing lovers showed up for a night of spooning and mooning, to use an earlier meaning of the word. Incoming headlights could easily ruin one's night vision.

Looking for a planet and forgetting Bill for the moment, Dad lined up Venus in the eyepiece, then straightened up and turned to his companion. The older man was laying flat on the ground, arms outspread. 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 should get Bill started on the way to his final resting place. He thought first of getting down the hill, back to 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 figured that you took a dead person to a funeral home, but he wasn't sure how he would get there, assuming he found one open at this time of night. My father had never driven a car,

although he had watched other men do it, shifting the gear lever and pumping the clutch pedal and stepping down on the accelerator.

Finally 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 front car seat. Bill's sphincter muscle had relaxed and he stank awful, making Dad even more queasy than he



had been from just the proximity of death. Having the reeking body next to him while he attempted his maiden voyage behind the

wheel of an automobile would be impossible. So, he lugged Bill into the rumble seat, an open-air padded bench in the back where ordinarily the trunk would be. Rumble seats are quite tiny, and my father didn't want the body to flop over and fall out. He propped the body upright, folded the tripod and jammed it between the old man's legs. He tied Bill to this contrivance with a belt, as if a troublesome sailor was being bound to the mast.

When he got the engine started, Dad found a gear and eased out the clutch, but stalled the engine. 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 along at a sedate ten miles per hour. Bill took his first and last ride in a rumble seat.

The John Paisley Funeral Parlor eventually loomed up among the other darkened homes on Steuben Street. Dad pulled the car over to the curb, turned off the engine and marched to the door. He began to repeatedly press 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, sometimes." 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, explaining 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.

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 again and after a few lunges, succeeded in getting it to roll along in low gear. Bill moaned again.

Possibly thinking he'd spotted a couple of drunks inching their way home, Officer Cardamone pulled the Model A over on South Street, less than a mile from the hospital.

“What’s the matter with your friend back there?” asked the policeman.

“He’s had a hell of a night, Officer.”

The cop turned to Bill.

“Sir? Are you OK? Are you alive? Are you ... tied to that 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 ... now I don’t know for sure,” said Dad, “but I think we’d better get him to the hospital.”

My father was now beside himself with confusion and worry. He 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, Old Bill 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 and frustrated by the Model A’s top speed of ten miles an hour. 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 that 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, while Bill was being untied from the tripod. The policeman couldn’t find a personal contact number, but he saw the deceased was an employee of the newspaper. He called the night editor’s desk and reported my father’s death.

Dad was late for work the next morning, after having looked all over for his wallet. When he got to the newspaper offices, 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, and so it didn’t appear in the newspaper for another 53 years.

“Old Bill seemed the picture of health when he picked me up in his car that night,” my father told me many years later. “Up at the Eagle, I was playing with my telescope and I really wasn’t listening, but he said he was tired and he was going to sit down. Then I heard this Wump, like he’d tripped in the dark. I said, ‘You OK, Bill?’ He made this funny snuffling noise and I thought, ‘I’ll bet he’s lost his teeth!’ Wouldn’t a mattered, I guess.”

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