

## The Day I Forgot My Name

*My life was the best omelette you could make with a chainsaw.* – Thomas McGuane

There was a time in this nation when driving while young was against the law. This was during the Vietnam War era, when young people were opposed to the war, demonstrated against it, performed the most outrageous acts to avoid getting killed in it, and egregiously displayed their animosity towards the “conflict.” (Congress never declared war.) The young expressed their opposition with their sartorial choices (the clothes they wore or not), the “funny tobacco” they smoked, the long hair they grew, the wild music to which they listened, the sandals they preferred over the more proper, polished wingtips of the day - their generally rebarbative appearance. In short, the nation’s progeny did everything in their power to piss off their forebears. It worked.

Why were more mature folk not convinced of the dim-witted inanity of the war, while the young saw through the bullshit? Cynics would say that it depended upon whose ox was getting gored. The young have always been cannon fodder for their elders’ grievances. Fatuous American chauvinism taught that the U.S. had won all the good and moral wars, and when called on, the chosen were obliged to force their children to take up the sword.

A young person could quickly determine friend from foe by how many fingers were held up in greeting. You *know* what side the cops were on. Driving a red roadster with my long red hair flowing and bushy red beard inflamed every “peace” officer into a charging bull.

This just goes to say that I got a lot of traffic tickets. I mean a slew of notices of traffic violations. Some were rather serious offenses, like when I was driving barefoot and was ticketed for reckless driving. As a poor student struggling with expenses, I could not possibly pay the fines. At the time, the technology of policing was rudimentary. After tickets piled up, and a cop issuing a ticket would radio in for records, a certain number of outstanding, unpaid infractions resulted in the seizure of one’s license. This, I found, was only a minor inconvenience since I could go down to the driver’s license bureau and say that I lost my license and get a new one.

In the meantime, my good friend Gale Brooks bought a small motorbike from the son of the mayor of St. Louis and promised the \$25 purchase price in cash in a few weeks. He was called out of town before he could pay his debt but got the \$25 together at the last minute and entrusted the money with me, with which I promised to pay the debt. And he told the seller that I would get him the money, which, it turned out, the seller owed to his dad. So, I was walking around with the mayor’s money in my pocket.

The night after I had the payment in hand, I got pulled over by the cops. I was driving the best car I have ever owned, a diminutive nine-foot-nine-inch-long saloon, run by a two-cylinder, air-cooled rear-mounted engine with a 479 cubic centimeter displacement, smaller than that of the motorbike Gale had purchased. The Fiat Cinquecento (five hundred) featured ten-inch wheels, a removable two-and-one-half gallon gas tank under the front bonnet, a slide-back canvas moon roof, and suicide doors that opened to the front, making entry and exit facile but unfashionable for lady folk in skirts. It seated four, and when the passengers emerged, it was like the circus trick with clowns. You had to drive like Mario

Andretti just to keep up with traffic. The goal was ‘pole position’ at every traffic light. I was not the only aficionado (*appassionati*) as the car won the *Compasso d’Oro* award in 1959 for industrial design.

The traffic cops who stopped me radioed in my name, and lo and behold, a judge had seen the accumulated unpaid driving infractions and issued a bench warrant for my arrest. Off I was carted to jail and thrown in the drunk tank. This got old real fast, and towards dawn, I caught the attention of the jailor and asked how much it would cost to make bail. He checked and told me an amount that equaled the mayor’s money and that it would also cover the fine for the ticket that had resulted in the bench warrant. I never looked back, but you can be damn sure that the debt was repaid at the ballot box.

After receiving umpteen replacement licenses, some bureaucrat sleuth caught on and refused to issue a new one until I paid up. This presented a real problem. How was I to drive? Also, unfortunately, my youngest brother Stevie (Noel Steven Conner) was drafted into the Army. It was getting more and more challenging to get a deferment. The elite school (they charged accordingly) I attended was Washington University. Unable and unwilling to afford a mass exodus of male students, the administration responded by requiring that all students see the school psychiatrist.<sup>1</sup> When I complied, the doctor explained that they were doing a routine examination to see how we were all managing the stress and pressures of college. I answered that I was faring just fine, thank you, without explaining that I just stopped attending those classes that were too difficult or that I did not like. He said, “Come on, there’s got to be something troubling you.” Sure, my current girlfriend refused to “go all the way.” “Well,” he concluded, “I do not see how you are a proper candidate for the draft,” and he was going “to write a letter for me to the draft board.” Was I not to concur with a licensed doctor of medicine? This charade was more than a little hypocritical since the University’s Board of Trustees had warmongers, pure and simple, serving in their exalted positions. The likes of Spencer T. Olin, after whom the library was named, owned a company that manufactured bullets. James S. McDonell served as Chairman of the Board of Trustees during the war. The company he founded, McDonell Douglas, designed and manufactured the F-4 Phantom jet fighter aircraft, a prominent killer of the Vietnamese. I could go on.

In the meantime, I had been driving without a license. How does one do that? Like the proverbial porcupine making love. Stevie had a generous thought. Since the Missouri State licenses at that time had no embossed photo of the licensee, and he was only two and one-half years younger than me, how were the cops to know if I used his license? He did not need it since he was going in the Army. This was not so novel a thought because one time I was driving with him and was pulled over by the police. I had no license, and Stevie said, “Quick, use mine.” It did get a little confusing when the cop asked what his name was. (“Oh, what a tangled web we weave...”) But it worked, so I drove on my brother’s license. I still piled up the tickets. But not as many now because I always wore a hoodie to cover my long hair and beard and drove like a chaste nun. (Now that I think about it, it may have been better if I had purchased a second-hand habit and worn the part above the waist. On the other hand, I have to ask myself, was it illegal to impersonate a nun? Could I tell the judge that I was a transgender monk?) I couldn’t skip any more meals to scrape up the bucks necessary to keep up with the fines. And my brother would need his license if he ever got out of the Army. Thank God he was sent to Belgium and not Nam. When he did return from Europe, he talked endlessly about those Belgique girls.

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<sup>1</sup> At least that was what was broadcast, but I never heard of a girl that went in. Maybe there was some embarrassment involved? I suspect that it was only for those eligible for the draft.

My roommate and by now my best friend Gale had some difficulties keeping his grades up, and he cracked. His stepfather doctor came and got him. After a stern family meeting, the rather “square” (in the parlance of the time) M.D. concluded that the only way for Gale to straighten himself out was to join the Army and submit himself to the ensuing discipline. (I suppose he wanted to stop paying tuition for a stepson.) What utterly stupid advice. But since he was footing the bills and made it an ultimatum, Gale had little choice but to go. That is when he left the bail money with me.

I was also rather floundering myself – more accurately, a tad directionless, in school. Deciding the cure may be in the broadest possible education, I enrolled in an art school course that taught figure sculpture from nude models. In this class, I fell in love. Not with the art, mind you, but with the model, who stripped to her birthday suit. We got to pose her for the full-scale torso art that we were to sculpt. This took a while. We needed to consider all the possible angles, don’t you think?

Ask any figure sculptor, and he will tell you that at some point, you beg the model to please wear a robe during breaks. Dishabille entices. Nudity is without mystery, absent allure, off-putting, even repulsive. Nevertheless, there was an unexplained, intriguing mystery about this unclothed woman. After every weekend break, we noticed that our sculpture was off-kilter. It was baffling to regularly change the axis of our sculpture to match what our eyes saw. Towards the end of the class, it became apparent that the model was indeed pregnant. From then on, we had a more abstract hand in our art.

After several classes, the professor thought I had talent and nominated me to The Pennsylvania School of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. I applied and received a full scholarship, but this prospect was spoiled by the draft board in hot pursuit. I fashioned what I thought at the time was a brilliant idea: I would attend art school in Canada, knocking off the proverbial two birds with one stone, evading the draft by emigrating to Canada where I could perfect my art.

Gale was honorably discharged from the infantry after a year of his “tour” of duty. Tourist, he was not. Gale was a mess. The promised benefits of Army discipline proved to be a myth. For the GI, the nightmare was a cauldron of psychological warfare. In the hot and humid country, seven and eight-year-old kids sold ice, hiding live grenades in their customers’ helmets. Mirrors ideal for shaving were hung on jungle trees with a booby-trapped mine below. Prostitutes inserted razor blades into their vaginas. Terror was at every turn. Gale needed to defuse, debrief, and talk it out over an extended road trip with someone he could trust.

When I first saw him, he asked what I was up to. “I’m on to Vancouver by way of Winnipeg.” Captivated, Gale asked how I was traveling there. Gale had saved all his hazardous duty war pay and purchased a brand-new BMW 2002, with money left over. Although not nearly the Cinquecento, it was a revolutionary auto design if there ever was one. I drooled over his race car and suggested that we break it in. No, we were not taking his ride. He wanted to go the way I would have gone without him. Authentic. “No, we are going to do it the hard way.” I now suspect the hard way would give him more time to spill his angst. I confessed I was traveling by thumb. I liked Gale a great deal, and he would make a good companion. How much money was I taking? Forty dollars. He announced that he would join me hitchhiking and bring forty dollars.

Off we went, on Highway 61 revisited, like Bob Dylan’s album. Revisited for me, since, in my childhood, I had traveled up Highway 61 to Hannibal, Missouri many times to see my paternal grandparents. I can’t remember where Gale and I slept or what we ate along the way. I remember that we had knapsacks. We probably just slept on the side of the road in blankets and grabbed a sandwich

whenever we could. For showers and the occasional bed, we stayed at YMCAs. While I registered for small single rooms with a twin bed, Gale crawled on all fours, sneaking between me and the check-in desk, undetected, thus avoiding payment for a second guest. Gale could not sleep on a bed, only on the floor. At the helicopter landing zone (LZ), where he was stationed with a forward artillery unit, the beds were stacked against the wall. It seems that in the dark of night, Viet Cong sappers penetrated the perimeter of the not-so-secure redoubt at night and rolled hand grenades under the beds of sleeping GIs. If a soldier slept on the floor, he could feel the grenade roll against his side. Gale had fitful sleep the entire trip and sometimes nightmares from which he awoke crying. This is what the war did to our generation. Can you blame us for our protests, our draft-dodging defiance?

One night, sentinels of Gale's unit captured a sapper carrying documents that showed the geographic coordinates of the LZ off by a dozen miles. The troops rejoiced in the knowledge that the primitive "gooks" could in no way match the superior technology the US took for granted and that their meager artillery resources would undoubtedly miss the LZ as a target, even though it had taken direct mortar hits recently. However, some curious lieutenant double-checked, and sure enough, the LZ's artillery had been errantly lobbing artillery shells at enemy targets for months. The coordinates were duly changed to the precise lat-longs that the primitive enemy had known. Now the US artillery could more accurately obliterate the meager civilian infrastructure useless to any cogent military strategy. So much for winning the "hearts and minds" of the people.

The early summer trip along the Upper Mississippi was pleasant enough, but as we got closer to the border with Canada, the traffic thinned considerably in northern Minnesota, and an ominous thunderstorm was bearing down on us. There was no shelter or even a tree under which to hide. Out of nowhere came salvation in the form of a ride all the way to Winnipeg.

Devoid of foresight and planning, we had nevertheless timed the trip perfectly. Everywhere we went there was a festival. Winnipeg was celebrating its centennial when we arrived. We got to Calgary for the yearly Stampede and Banff for the Arts Festival. I inspected the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity but was not impressed, as it was mostly a summer program for the performing and only marginally the visual arts, and it was primarily adjunct to the larger University of Calgary. Wandered around a bit, I happened upon a class of 30 young ballerinas dancing in tights and experienced an embarrassing episode of erethic tumescence.

We somehow had enough to pay the fare for an overnight train ride over the Canadian Rockies to Vancouver. As a scenic route, the daylight rate was much more expensive. Arriving early at the station in downtown Vancouver, we trudged groggily over to the local YMCA for some much-needed sleep. As we walked the streets, Gale drew my attention to a placard above a cornerstone of an imposing stone building that read Hudson's Bay Company, Established 1670. This was the department store retail outlet of the legendary fur trading company of the same name. Later that afternoon, we strolled down to English Bay with its fleet of seagoing freighters standing at anchor. We marveled at how our travels had brought us from the fetid backwaters of the Mississippi to the immense possibilities of the Pacific Ocean. The scene on the beach was celebratory with live music, and we were stuck by the long line of sockeye filets grilling down the beach sand, rutilant from the setting sun. Raised on Friday night Icelandic Cod fish fry, ubiquitous in the Roman Catholic Midwest, we had never tasted salmon. We ate bountifully of the free samples offered.

Our scheduled tour of Simon Fraser University was for the following day. The school was named for, of course, this being Canada, a fur trader. It seems that several fur traders became famous explorers,

given their need to continually expand fur trapping territory as the beaver populations were continually exhausted. Some of these trappers traveled great distances, and through their discoveries, they expanded the British Empire and were celebrated for their exploits. The exploits were mere enterprises, for they were, at their base, for gritty economic necessities. The first name for the school was simply Fraser University, but it was changed after the initials FU sounded out an execration. Utilizing the extensive public transportation system of Greater Vancouver, we rode several buses endlessly toward our destination atop the summit of Burnaby Mountain. A brand-new school, the site was chosen for the vista over Burrard Inlet, along which Vancouver city lay. Used to the granitic Collegiate Gothic Washington University, SFU was jarring to me, given the school's all-naked Brutalist concrete modernist architecture. In the designer Arthur Erickson's words, concrete was "the marble of our time." Later, I could appreciate his work on Robson Square in downtown Vancouver, notably the intriguing, super-symmetrical stairway. However, at the time, I concluded that SFU's architecture was not for me, as was the school's focus on abstract and expressionist contemporary arts. Having visited the venerable Pennsylvania Academy, I thought it was more suited to my aesthetic, but it was in the US, and there was that pesky draft board with which to contend.

Somewhat deflated by the disappointing prospects of the two schools I visited, embarrassed for my naivete and low on money, tired and a long way from home, I needed to get back to catch a boat to make a few bucks. There were no worries about finding a job. Experienced riverboat deckhands were always in demand, given the dangerous, grueling, hard manual labor and remoteness of the work. But first, it was Gale's turn. With the resilience of youth, at least on the surface, Gale was talked out of the angst and neuroses from thirteen months in Vietnam. The quiet, civilized influence of Canadian culture certainly helped. We were on the West Coast, and he had made an army buddy to whom he had made a promise: if ever in the proximity of his friend's parents in the Seattle area, he would visit them to assure them that their son was doing fine. Also, Gale wished to visit his grandmother in Los Angeles who had recently lost her husband – Gale's grandfather, to illness.

We hitch-hiked south, Gale's friend's dad picked us up somewhere in the vicinity of the East Side of Seattle, and we spent the evening eating home-cooked American food that we had not enjoyed for weeks. The mood was somber with parental worry, which Gale did his best to relieve. Their home was in the neighborhood of Houghton in the suburb of Kirkland, on a slope above Lake Washington, with Seattle across the water and the snow-capped mountains of the Olympic Peninsula beyond. It was a glorious setting and vista, not the one of dreary rain that the media had us believing about Seattle. I stored this magnificent sunshine view in my memory. I am confident that it greatly influenced my subsequent 29-year (and counting) residence in the Pacific Northwest beginning some quarter century later.

Dropped off on the Interstate a few miles south, late the next morning, we made our way hitchhiking down to Oregon where we stopped for the night at a woodsy campground. Along came the psychedelic-painted bus named *Furthur*, with the famous (or infamous, depending upon your point of view) Merry Pranksters, who lived nearby with novelist Kesey (author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.) These happy people came upon us warmly and, distributing psychedelics, gave us a tab of acid (LSD) for our consumption. And then they were gone. Little could we know of their oncoming fame, chronicled in Tom Wolfe's book "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test" and later in the 2011 documentary "The Magic Trip." The community at one time even included the members of the Grateful Dead band, and overall, they had an enormous influence over American Culture for decades to come. That night, while I was sleeping, Gale threw the LSD in the trash.

Heading south through California to LA, we caught a ride with a generous but illiterate pickup truck driver who needed us to navigate the signage. I drove all night with Gale and our benefactor sleeping in the truck bed, straight to the fabulous Art Deco Los Angeles central train station. Gale called his grandmother, and we waited in the grand rotunda of the station. To Gale's dismay, his uncle came and tried to talk Gale into staying at his brother, Gale's estranged father's home. Gale would have none of it. He despised his father for abandoning Gale's mother when Gale was only one and left the two of them in penury. We stayed with Gale's grandmother for several days. Gale's uncle had influenced Gale's father to come to Southern California to seek fortune. He prospered, brought out his mother and supported her, but shared little or nothing with Gale's mother. Gale's grandmother lent her late husband's car to us to explore LA. This Ford LTD, long enough to be a limousine, had both a trunk *and* a hood longer than my Cinquecento. This monstrosity made us feel like Efrem Zimbalist Jr., who drove the same vehicle in the television series F.B.I., initially sponsored by, of course, the Ford Motor Company. The car clashed with our political sensibilities, and when others of our clan gave us a puzzled look, we could only shrug our shoulders and lift our palms up with a smile.

Overwhelmed several times by the “overflowing public toilet”<sup>2</sup> excess of Los Angeles freeway traffic, we exited to lose ourselves for hours in the maze of streets. With the seemingly block-long turning radius of the LTD, U-turns were unthinkable, lane changes required several car lengths and parallel street parking was unimaginable. However, we did make it up to Santa Barbara, which only took half a day, by which time the smog had not yet burned off. There is truth to a quip in the Western press that California should be divided into three states, with the spot-on rhymed names of Log, Fog and Smog. The LA Times ridiculed San Francisco as “Pittsburgh with bigger bridges,” and the San Francisco Chronicle countered with the mockery that “LA was only Des Moines with palm trees.” I can attest to the truth of the latter.

Now, Gale's kind grandmother begged Gale to at least have lunch with Gale's father. He reluctantly conceded, and we trudged over to the typical L.A., California sprawling ranch with a pool. We were greeted by Gale's aging Playboy Bunny “stepmother,” complete with poorly performed plastic surgery and obviously gelastic tits. On the entry steps, the bimbo tried valiantly to kiss her stepson on the lips, so repugnant to Gale that I thought he might very well slap her. We lunched on tuna salad sandwiches with lemonade on the patio by the pool. When I excused myself to use the bathroom, Gale's father ambushed me, proffering a \$100 bill if I could convince Gale to join us on his cabin cruiser for some deep-sea fishing down to Mexican waters, which sounded pretty exciting to me, especially the prospect of spending the C-Note, as they say in the environs. You see, Gale's father had a great surfeit of guilt for having deserted his infant son and thought he might reconcile with him over a weekend at sea. Gale flatly refused. After lunch, I doubt that Gale ever had any contact with his father again.

It was more than too late to travel home. But how were we to travel? Enterprising Gale studied the classifieds in the LA Times and found a drive-away from the city to Chicago. The Chicago White Sox had traded for a relief pitcher from the Angels; all we had to pay for was the gas. Gale agreed to take the vehicle to its final destination after dropping me in St. Louis. To say that we broke in the new VW Beetle is an understatement. Feeling the loss of the \$100, I was very much in a hurry to get back home and make some money. We agreed on one rule and one rule only: if it was your turn to drive, you had to keep the accelerator pedal pressed to the floor. For this under-powered air-cooled engine, 70 we

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<sup>2</sup> Quote from novelist Jim Harrison

could maintain uphill, 90 down. When passing and hurtling headlong into an oncoming car, I chickened out. Gale would force the other driver into the ditch.

Our goal was to make the drive in less than 48 hours. Everyone knows you have seen enough at some point in a trip when you cannot digest what you have already experienced, so why try to take in more? But there was still so much to see. Late the first night, it was Gale's turn to drive while I slept, but only after exhaustion could one catch a wink in the cramped quarters. He detoured down to the Las Vegas Strip without consulting me because he knew I would protest. The light displays dazzled. But the glitz was melancholy, at the same time overarching excess, an unending parade of materialism gone awry. I felt like an about-to-be-aborted fetus in the fat lady at the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus.

Toward dawn, I finally did sleep but was awakened at the South Rim overlook for the frightful vista across the gaping chasm of the Colorado's deepest, Grand Canyon. What made this abyss? The standard narrative goes like this: for our delectation and inspiration, over the eons the mighty Colorado relentlessly carved the great canyon for us to appreciate the awe-inspiring work of God. Wrong! The first explorer to venture down the river through the gorge, surveyor-geologist John Wesley Powell revealed that contrary to the popular notion, the Colorado did not cut the deep escarpment through the static rock. The river and its bed have always been there; it is the earth that rose up around it. The idea that the earth is static and the river flow is the only agent of change is simply false.

Skirting the Navaho 'Reservation' (as if we have the right to 'reserve' land for the Navaho), we drove US 160 northeast across Arizona from Tuba City.<sup>3</sup> Our goal (or I should say Gale's, as I just wanted to get back) was Teec Nos Pos (sounded out Navaho for Cottonwoods in a Circle) to visit the Four Corners, where Arizona, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico all come together. What we were not prepared for was the eerie geometric topology on the route. The scores of miles of landscapes describe a series of three-quarter-mile-long slightly sloping stair treads punctuated by one to two-hundred-foot-high step risers - kind of a miniature Grand Staircase-Escalante without the tourists. After driving across thirty or forty miles of vistas empty of vegetation and without any structure or habitation, a lone Navaho paralleled our course, walking determinedly along without a care in the world. Gale told me, for this solitary traveler, this land, which appeared desolate to us, was paradise<sup>4</sup>.

Gale tried to impress me with the novelty of the Four Corners monument, clowning as he got on all fours, exclaiming that he was now standing in four states simultaneously. I mocked the surveyor's grand illusion that, somehow, these artificial lines mattered. The lands were always there and would continue to be long after the current civilization. What did this corner mean to the Navaho? The paradox was that for the indigenous, the ownership of lands was ludicrous, denying access unthinkable. How could one not be reminded of the absurdity of it all, best expressed in a New Yorker cartoon of the

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3 English variant of the verb-dominant Hopi word "Tuwvöta" for Cottonwood. Of course, the original Navaho people who lived in this area named the places of their congregations after the dominant plant found there. Cottonwood only grows where there is an abundance of water. In this desert landscape, a stand of Cottonwood means an oasis, a place that supports human life. In fact, Cottonwood drinks so much water (200 to 300 gallons a day) that it is one of the few plants that is carbon-negative; that is, its ecosystem emits more CO<sub>2</sub> than it removes from the atmosphere. The bacteria that eat the highly water-rich cellulose, digest it, then release copious amounts of methane through the miracle we call farting. If one drills a hole in the trunk of a mature tree, one can set alight the discharge. (As an aside, the Cottonwood was the first species to be fully genetically sequenced.)

4 Given their large numbers (today almost 350,000), through a great deal of lobbying of Congress, over more than six decades from 1868 to 1934, the Navaho were able to regain much of their ancestral land.

“caveman” genre, where two animal-skin-clad Stone-Agers squatted over a fire where the caption read, “I just had a capital idea: Why don’t we divide up the earth into tiny parcels and sell them off?” Capital was the correct word to use. What depth of greed could bar others from access to the earth? I know, capitalism may be the most brutish system one could imagine, but it is all we can have, given that with humans, the only motive we can trust is avarice. Tell that to David Graebner, wherein his book, *The Dawn of Everything*, lists and describes innumerable eminent civilizations that prized material equality over private opulence, and this for the great bulk of the years that men have walked the earth.

Driving at night across the endless plateaus of the West got tedious, so we fashioned a game to liven up the grind. On very straight two-lane McAdam, we crested innumerable long slopes, and after each of them were spread thirty to forty-mile-long, almost flat valleys before an inevitable gradual rise to the crest of the next ridge. Given the void, without artificial light pollution, the cumulative illumination from the countless stars of our galaxy lit the valley and the high ground far beyond. Our young corneas enabled us to see the entire route before us and more<sup>5</sup>. Headlamps were superfluous and distracting, so we turned them off. The two-lane was not for trucks and we saw a single oncoming car at most. We fashioned a game, testing the limits of mindreading. The objective was to turn on our lights the very instant, not a moment sooner or some nano-second later than when the oncoming driver saw us and turned on his brights to test what he thought might be another vehicle. With great concentration, perhaps telepathically, we perfected that skill and were able to perform unerringly. This discipline is what got me into trouble.

After arriving in St. Louis and working for a month or two, I found myself driving on some two-lane in western Missouri late at night with a different friend on our way to a bar called “Some Other Place” in Kansas City, Kansas. Why Kansas? The legal age was eighteen for 3.2% alcohol content beer. During my turn to drive, given the abundant moonlight, I demonstrated my telepathic powers. We were stopped by the Pettis County sheriff and ordered to follow him to the police station in the county seat in Sedalia. In the tense meeting that followed, the sheriff wanted to know just what the hell we were doing. I told him that the headlamps came on and off and there must have been an electrical short somewhere in the wiring and, being late at night, there were no garages open and that we planned to seek out a repair at first light. I promised not to drive until the first garage in Sedalia opened. He said, “bullshit,” he had followed us for some time and they had not been flickering and we were just playing around. “I see your long hair and beards and I know that you have marijuana in that car and I could search you and bust you and you would be in a heap of trouble.” It was not true; we had no marijuana, but my friend Jim had secreted away a pouch of hashish hanging from a string in the steering column. They would never find it without a sniffer dog. But the sheriff interjected, “I seen you got fishin’ rods and a tackle box in the back,” which we always carried because we never knew when the occasion – rather the fish, might arise. The constable continued: “I know you boys are alright. You’re fishermen and that’s good enough for me.” He let us go, but not before issuing me, yes, a ticket for reckless driving and confiscating my brother’s license. We continued our journey, but I did not drive for the rest of the trip. The bartender in Kansas did not card me, and we got righteously inebriated, although it took several pitchers given that it was only three-two.

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<sup>5</sup> An astronomer once told me that our night sky is dim because of all the sidereal debris in the Milky Way. If it were that the trash was not there, the sunrise would be a galaxy light set and the sunset a galaxy light rise, and we would sleep when our sun was up and do all our business during the night of our sun.



A month or so later, in St. Louis, my brother returned from Belgium on leave and asked for his license. I showed him the summons I had received from the Pettis County traffic court, and more than a bit annoyed, he said, "Go pay the fine and get my license back!" It was only fair that I hazard the journey, but without a license, I drove with heightened vigilance. Arriving at the court early and exhausted by the red-eye travel across the state, I dozed through the endless cases called, and heard the bailiff calling out "Noel Steven Conner" several times. This did not concern me. Then with increased volume, "Last call before remanding to bench warrant, NOEL STEVEN CONNER." This time, it was loud enough to jar my memory. I had forgotten my name. "Here, sir!" The judge was perturbed for making her wait. She said, "Why didn't you answer the first call?" I stammered, "Sorry, your honor, I must have forgotten my name." At that, the exasperated jurist muttered something about all the stupid people in this world that cluttered her life every day, asked how someone could forget their name, and levied the fine. I paid, retrieved my brother's license, and was free to go.

You probably have gathered from this narrative that I was somewhat of a madman. So was Gale, but more so. He drove with abandon and never got a ticket. He claimed 20/15 vision. When he played 2<sup>nd</sup> base on the college baseball team, the coach painted four quadrants of the baseball in different colors, threw fast spinning curves, and asked Gale to identify the color he hit. He could do it unerringly. He claimed great peripheral vision and a sixth sense. These talents combined to make him aware of any cop close by. If traffic was blocked, he drove on the sidewalk. He carried a big toy six-gun on the dashboard to point at motorists reluctant to let him cut in. He cornered his motorcycle with the inside knee only an inch above the pavement. Once I was playing against him at ping pong and when I won a point, he deliberately smacked the ping pong ball at my face and knocked a lens out of my glasses. I instinctively threw the paddle at him and ran out of the house through the kitchen. Gail followed and before I could get through the door, opened the utensil drawer, grabbed a fork and threw it at me. When it stuck in my back, I cried uncle. Gale always had a knowing little grin about him which he flashed back at me. These are just a few of his antics.

Sad to say, his lack of fear and audacity eventually got the better of him. Over the years, we drifted apart. I started a business and had children. Gale seemed to flail about, not sure of what direction to take. Then he found German literature. He returned to get his degree and entered graduate school. Gale found a partner and was finally happy and on his way to a PhD. The sky was the limit for him.

About then I saw Gale for the last time in 1982, when the Cardinals won the World Series. I had season tickets. Having season tickets signaled that you had arrived in the mad-for-baseball town of St. Louis. I offered Gale a couple of tickets to the playoffs after I attended too many games to make it exciting. I promised Gale tickets if the Cardinals made it to the Series. When the team made it there, Gale called repeatedly for tickets. I feel guilty that I reneged on my promise and never answered his calls.

Unfortunately, his stepfather had had an affair with the nurse who worked for him and divorced Gale's mother. There went all the money to pay Gale's tuition and room and board. Gale's mom lost her home and was destitute. As a result, Gale worked night jobs. Dangerous ones. He drove a cab all night. Fearless, he took fares to dangerous neighborhoods. Ironically, Gale had always worried that he would die young. All his grandparents had lived into their 90s, and Gale made damn certain that he would do the same. If he had as much as a sniffle, he would take to his bed for three days.

One very late night, Gale took a fare to Wellston. Only two and one-half miles from Washington University, Wellston was unfortunately on the wrong side of the apartheid-dividing Delmar-Olive Blvd.

Divide. Anyone white who crossed that line to the north late at night was in peril. St. Louis has been, for a long time, off and on, the murder capital of the U.S., if not the world. Anyone black on the wrong, south side of the line at any time of the day or night was in graver danger.

Nobody knows exactly what happened that night, but Gale, in the words of the county police, was “popped” in the head with a pistol bullet at close range, in his cab. The cops said they knew who did it but lacked sufficient evidence to convict. Their attitude, as usual, was that Gale should have known better – not respecting the color line. Gale was not about to be robbed and resisted by trying to flee. St. Louisans are inured to these tragedies; when they occur, shrug.

At the funeral were, of course, his mom, and not his former stepfather, but his biological dad. Other than relatives, he did not recognize anyone in the room but me. He latched onto me. He had a lost and forlorn look about him that displayed guilt and said, “Had I not abandoned him when he was an infant, this would not have happened.” There was not much I could say. What surprised me were the sobbing women there who had loved Gale and still loved him deeply, even years after their relationship, including wives of our mutual friends.

Around that time, I also lost a couple of other friends to murder. An architect who had worked on some of my historic restoration projects, Jeff Krewson, like Gale, tried to flee a robbery and was killed by would-be carjackers. This time, it happened in the middle of the day and on the correct side of the divide. But this was worse because Jeff’s wife was by his side and his two children in the back seat. Heroically, his wife went on to become mayor of the city. More of the collective shrug. Unfortunately, another woman friend I knew quite well had answered her door to a rapist with a knife. She showed up at Gale’s wedding in tears.

The third murder victim had just finished dinner with me. Over coffee, I hired Elizabeth Cook to become the marketing director of my small homebuilding firm as the head of an unmanageable group of salesmen. She went home and was stabbed 57 times by an intruder. The police knocked on my door around midnight as I was the last person to have seen her alive. How can one forget these things?

The gruesome deaths serve to temper my tolerance for the continuing violence from the legacy of slavery and ongoing caste-based policies. Add to that the maltreatment of and discrimination against the bright young people who saw through the hypocrisy and futility of war. None of this serves to brighten my memories of an albeit wayward youth.

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