

'55 BEL AIRE

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WHEN I FIRST STARTED IN RUNNING RIVERS I lived in the Bay Area and drove up to the Stanislaus or Tuolumne on Friday evenings. Put in Saturday morning. Take out Sunday afternoon. Drive home that night. Repeat next week.

It was a commute that I accomplished in a 1958 MGA that I'd bought in high school. It was a deeply unreliable car that died that first summer just outside of Oakdale, where I left it by the side of the road with a broken piston and few regrets.

For the rest of the season I counted on friends or my thumb to get me up and back from the river. Neither of them turned out to be dramatically more reliable than the MG but my life at the time included large margins of flexible time.

Sometimes I would hitchhike up to Martinez, in the North Bay, on Friday afternoons and catch a ride with Bob Melville, who had to drive the company truck up to the put-in. From there, it was a 3 or 4-hour night drive through the valley to Angel's Camp. Sitting in the dark cab of the stake-side truck we'd spend the time swapping lies and near-lies. If I'd gotten a particularly bizarre ride that day, we would use that to launch into a general discussion on the whole topic of hitchhiking and the strange people you met in the practice thereof.

Purely as a means of reliable, efficient transportation, hitchhiking is on the bottom rung; but for meeting the odd, the comic and occasionally the terrifying, it rivals Shakespeare. As we drove through the valley, the two of us would engage in a few competitive rounds of hitchhiking story slam.

I would throw down a bit about a leering, creepy driver with (“I swear to God!”) dried blood under his fingernails. Melville would counter with the guy whose car had no working doors. You got in through the trunk. I’d come back with one about a Grandma Barker lookalike who stopped for me in her tow-truck and offered me a swig of her vodka and Coke as we lurched back onto the freeway. I’d be feeling pretty good about that one and then back he’d come with a story about the time he’d fallen asleep on the passenger side in the cab of an 18-wheeler when something startled him awake; “... I opened my eyes and this guy is leaning over me. Had these huge eyes and a screwdriver pointed right at my throat!” Melville would pause at that dramatic juncture to let the visuals of that scene sink in. “Turns out he’d just finished a driver’s first-aid course. I was snoring funny, he said, and he thought I was going to need a ‘trake-e-oughta-be’.

Back and forth it went. Melville had a rich vein of this material, plus — I was certain — he paid little attention to the point in the story where the facts ran out and he was forced to keep right on going. A speed bump is all that was.

I don’t know how many rounds of this we’d played, on how many trips, before he told me the story that I’ll try to re-tell below. Like a lot of real life, the ending isn’t very tidy since it leaves you hanging, but it’s on that fine line between tragedy and comedy and I’ve always counted it among my favorite Melville stories. As close as I can do it, here is how he told it to me.

“I once got a ride out in the middle of Utah somewhere. Middle of the night too. I was coming back from a trip on the Green River and I was supposed to catch a ride from one of the other boatmen. But he got held up and I had to get home so I stuck out my thumb. After a couple of rides, I was dropped off way out in the middle of nowhere — a

nightmare spot with no place for a driver to pull over and cars going by at a hundred miles an hour. I stood there for hours and watched the sun finally set and the hot day turn into a cold desert night. I hung in as long as I could stand it, but around midnight I started thinking it was give-it-up time. Standing along the freeway in the pitch dark where no one could see me or pull over... It was hopeless. I figured I'd just sleep out in the desert somewhere and try again in the morning. But just as I was getting my pack on, this panel truck slows down and comes to a stop a couple hundred feet down from me.

I wasn't even positive he was stopping for me, but I hustled down there anyway. It was a rental van and as I got nearer to it I could see he was dragging a couple of chains. That seemed a little weird. But I didn't give it a lot of thought. A freeway ride out in the middle of a freezing desert night is a major miracle and it wouldn't have mattered to me if he were dragging a grand piano — so long as he was getting me out of there.

I opened the door and the guy gestured to me. "We are rolling, brother. Close that thing and let's get outahere."

He might have been 40. He was paunchy, bearded, wore a tractor cap and suspenders. But it's his eyes that I remember — bulging and lots of white showing all around. But he wasn't scary, and as I listened to him jabber and watched him beat on the steering wheel, I realized he was probably flying on speed or something. He wasn't weaving though, or crazy speeding. And I didn't smell any booze on him. He just needed someone to listen to him while he pounded whites and drove through the night.

Then came the good news...

"Where ya goin?" he finally said, in a pause.

"California."

"This is your lucky night, Jack. So am I."

A through-ride! In a warm cab with a sober driver. I couldn't believe it. From the pits to the peaks in one minute. Hitchhiking, I thought: I love ya!

He was from Tennessee... "Just outside of Knoxville," he said, in a non-stop jacked-up monologue. "Lived there my whole life, or nearly.

But I'm moving. No more Tennessee for me. I'm headed for my brother's place near Redding. In California. He's got a shop out there, does cabinetwork and stuff. I'm a metalworker, though, so I'll help him for a while but I figure I'll get set up myself somehow. I'll make it work. It's just me now and I don't need much. Not now. Left it all behind. My wife—ex-wife soon enough—took it all and good riddance. She got the doublewide and all that stuff. But I'm done with all that. She can keep it. Except that '55 Chevy you saw back there on the hitch. She wasn't getting that. Worth more than the whole goddamn trailer anyway, not that she would have known. Too dumb..."

I was clapping and nodding along with his whole speech, loving it all. If listening to this guy talking to himself for 14 hours was the price of a warm ride to California, I was thrilled to pay it.

Until he got to the part about the Chevy. On the hitch.

"Chevy?" I said.

"Yup," he said, "55 Bel Air, straight 6. Got it from the guy I used to work for. He sold it to me for parts but I spent the last year and a half on it. Straightened out the frame. New panels. Overhauled the whole thing basically. Everything but the interior. I'm going to sell it in California. Brother tells me it'll get 15 grand out there, easy..."

"...on the hitch?" I said.

"Yeah," he said, "tow-bar. You saw it. Behind the truck." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

The chains.

"Behind the truck?" I said, not liking where this was going. Not at all. He looked at me and for the first time was quiet.

How do I say this? And then I thought. DO I say this?

"There's nothing behind this truck," I finally told him. "Except a couple of chains you're dragging." More silence. I didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

He took the next exit, spun a U, and left me by the side of the road. The whole experience hadn't lasted ten minutes. I went out into the desert and slept until morning.

I didn't get back to California for another two days.