

DRIVING IN SIN

by Michael Ventura

Letters at 3AM – May 13, 2005

The only time I saw my father truly happy and almost free was on a winter night when I was ten. We had driven, for obscure reasons, from New York City to Albany to see a couple whom I would never see again. In those days my parents had nothing but obscure reasons -- some political (they were Communists when it was illegal to be Communist), some psychological (they were kind of nuts). Why was it suddenly important to drive to Albany? Why was I included? Who was that couple? I'll never know. (I hear my mother saying what she often said when I was ten: "*Why* is a crooked letter.") Whatever the "why," suddenly that night an awful weight lifted off my father; it would descend again, and remain all his days, but for this one night it relented. And there we were, on the newly opened New York Thruway, the widest fastest highway built to that date in America, and Pa was speeding and happy -- unguardedly and utterly happy.

On that road we seemed alone -- in those days, when people didn't drive constantly night and day, a highway in the wee hours was a lonely place, distant from daily concerns. Our swift movement alone together in the darkness felt like freedom. Illusory, yes, but sometimes illusion can be enough for a forty-year-old man and a ten-year-old boy to find a moment beyond their lives, a moment that can stand apart from their lives for all their rest of their lives -- a moment to return to in memory, never needing replenishment, always new.

Pa started to sing. It sounded like, "Cheyyyy Ma-rieeee ---" Then he shouted, "HIT 'IM WITH A BRICK!" Then again, "Cheyyyy Ma-rieee... HIT 'IM WITH A BRICK!" Then some melodious lines in Italian, and again, "Cheyyyy Marieeeee... HIT 'IM WITH A BRICK!" And we laughed and laughed as the car sped as fast as it would go.

It was a 1940s Hudson -- fabric covers on the seats, a musty smell mixed with Pa's chain-smoked cigarettes, a smell like a long-closed room in an old house. Sometimes he'd let me work the gas pedal. Sometimes I'd sit on his lap and take the wheel, going fast into the dark. We were free. Anything could happen. Anything might. And anything was enough. What happiness!

No moment like that ever appeared again for us, as father and son. Nor was my father strong enough to create that kind of moment again. For to create happiness, and to dwell in it, takes a strength few possess. We scramble to shape our lives, acquiring what we believe valuable -- knowledge, fame, security, love, a perfect home or family or whatever we fancy, whatever might make us happy sometime in the future. It does little good. The future is always different from what we expect. Despite our efforts, happiness usually catches us unawares, by chance. I am no expert on happiness (what an understatement!). But sometimes I've had the strength not to run from the present moment, whatever that moment offers, and to allow the moment to blossom in such a way that there is no thought of happiness or unhappiness; it's more a matter of grasping the freedom inherent in any instant, where anything (always) can happen -- to join with that freedom, to allow it to shape and change the next moment and the next, to allow life to *be* life, rather than impose my pet notions of what "life" should be... that, for me, has been happiness.

For me, beginning with that night-drive with my father, I would forever associate unbounded happiness with a car and a road. My car, and any road. I have been lucky enough to find many kinds of happiness -- for I've had a *good* time, a really good time. (Often accused of being "a romantic," as though that's a bad thing, my reply is, "I can't help it if I have a better time living my life than you have living yours." Put a better way: I once met a jazz bassist who'd played with greats like Charlie Parker and Lester Young, and I said, "I envy you." He said, "Don't envy me. *Join* me.") Anyway, "happiness" -- for me it always comes back to a car and a road.

Of course, that's left me unsuited for the more settled varieties of happiness. And that, in turn, has caused much unhappiness. But that's another story. This story is: the first happy time I consciously remember was that night with my father when I was ten. Four years later I read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Re-reading it in my late 50s, it's a sloppy, gushy book, overwhelmed by

the influence of a far greater writer, Thomas Wolfe. But at 14 *On the Road* was the book; it clinched my association of freedom and happiness with cars and roads. (What disillusion, later, to learn that Kerouac never learned to drive!) Then, from 1959 to 1964, I watched *Route 66*, a TV show about two guys who drive around the country looking for the meaning of life. That finished me. When asked in high school what I wanted to do, I said I wanted to drive around the country, working here and there, writing, looking for meaning, never stopping. I was told that was immature. I suppose it's still immature, but, immature or not, it's been my life. Underneath it all, even when I've stayed in one place for years, it was always what I was *really* doing -- and few years have passed when I haven't spent some months on the road. All told, I've driven from Tijuana to Bangor, from Seattle to Key West, from Calgary to Tampico, and many a place in between, under the banner of Basho's poem: "The journey itself is the home."

What crap. Not Basho. That Zen monk was right. And not the road -- the road, in so many ways, is all there is, all there ever is. Asphalt or metaphor, the road goes on forever. Dirt road or rail-road or forest trail, the road goes on forever. The crap is: the car. My beloved car. A '69 Chevy that I've driven for thirty years. I know that every one of our miles has cost the world dear. We're screwing up Iraq because of me and my Chevy. We're polluting the environment because of me and my Chevy. Paved an enormous chunk of this fantastic continent because of me and my Chevy. Exhausted our resources, our land, our liberty, and our future, because of me and my Chevy. Blotted the continent with suburbs and malls to accommodate me and my Chevy and Pa's Hudson and every other car that any of us have ever driven.

But there we were, Pa and me, cruising the New York Thruway, speeding and singing and laughing, oblivious to the geopolitics that made our happiness possible. And here I am, still in love with the feel of an open road before me, content to enact an American maxim: Drive on.

But happiness costs. Costs someone. In the case of this particular happiness, it costs everyone. I know better now than to indulge this happiness, but I also don't care -- not really, not where it counts, not in action. I know the cost but I drive on. In this last year I've driven the West, Midwest, East, Northeast, South, West again, Northwest, North Midwest... nearly every state in the continental 48. I can't/won't stop. Somebody or something will have to stop me. Stop us. Because it isn't right that me and my Chevy, and you and your car, eat up the world's resources at the rate we do. We're driving in sin. It's time we paid, and we will. But still I sing my sin, letting others pay the cost. And the song, the poem, goes something like this:

This '69 Chevy Malibu, sweet of line, lime-green, / is the only car / I have ever owned. / She's gone 628,000 miles, and I will do / anything / to keep her going. I need her. I love her. People / joke me about this, but gingerly, gently, they're careful / not to go too far. Because they know: I may be crazy / But I'm not kidding. I love her. So they joke about how / having a relationship with me means having a relationship / with my car -- because if I meet someone I like very much / I will take them to my car, and will say, of my car, / 'This is one of my dearest friends.' Some think / I'm just / trying to charm; these are people / I've been mistaken about. I rarely see them again. / Some criticize me for not being ecologically / sound. Twelve miles to the gallon / is not ecologically sound. / I respect this point of view. / I point out that my Chevy / and I / don't have air conditioners, so as to save the ozone; I ask / about their various / air conditioners. I ask about the relationship between / beauty / and ecology, and whether something as beautiful / as a '69 Malibu Chevelle / can be resented / by the Goddesses / and Gods of the planet. They think I'm being evasive. I'm not, I'm truly not, I really do believe that my '69 Chevy, / with her graceful line and her strong spirit, / is welcomed where we pass / among the spirits of the earth. But let's say / all that's malarkey, let's say / we're sinners, my Chevy and I, driving in sin. / Then we will claim that last refuge of honor: / We have the courage of our sin. The beauty we feel / in each other's company / is better than being / right / or good...

Sin never apologizes. Not really. And being right and good is never really enough.

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