

## ***A DAY'S RIDE, 2008***

**By Michael Ventura**

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Some months ago I was startled by hard knocks at my door. I knew by the knock that I didn't like whomever was knocking. Opened the door to a nervy guy in expensive duds. "The apartment manager told me that's your car." He pointed to my '69 Chevy Malibu. I nodded yes and said, "Never." "What?" "You want to buy it. I'll never sell it." "I'll pay well." "Never." "Never say never. You may change your mind; take my card." "I don't need your card." He wasn't used to taking no for an answer from one he judged a social inferior. He held out his card. I just let him stand there like that. When he realized my no meant no, he walked off without another word. I thought: Never say never? That can't be right. "Never" is an important word. Each of us should have some things we'll say "never" to, and we'd best know well what they are.

(Told Danny the episode, with my concluding thought, and he said something I liked: "*Never* exists in this world.")

My Chevy draws all kinds. I was packing the car for a day's ride to Austin to see old friends and go to the *Chronicle's* Christmas bash. Three young men and one older, Latinos, gathered. "Hey," I greeted, smiling a little. The elder said, "We're just waiting till you start 'er. We wanna hear the engine. Still got the 307?" "No, when they switched to unleaded the additives fucked up the 307. This engine's a 350." We talked of this and that, then I started her up. They smiled wide when they heard that engine. There's nothing like a 350 in good shape. I headed for Austin.

Not long ago a petulant reader chastised me for my "most prideful possession," my "damn stupid car." I sympathize with his crankiness. We're all cranky about something or other. But everywhere I go – and I go everywhere – people who wouldn't otherwise speak to me are drawn to the car. We talk about the car and cars in general, then sometimes we talk of other stuff. Sometimes we go for coffee and exchange life stories. That's not why I'll never sell the car. You don't sell something you love. But the car is kind of my passport to America. People who might want nothing to do with me look at that car and know there's something about America we agree on – something embodied in a '69 Chevy Malibu – so we talk. In my profession, that's very helpful.

There's a yellow legal pad on the seat. I scribbled notes as I drove Route 84: 2008 – its most remarkable event was that the American system failed so completely that right-wing Republicans quasi-nationalized housing, banking, insurance, and (as we speak) auto manufacturing. A centrist Democrat will quasi-nationalize health care and do a 21<sup>st</sup> Century New Deal to employ thousands. For a year, the stock market's gone up only when the government acts, which means this market isn't the market that was. What to call all this? It's certainly not capitalism, and it's not how dictionaries define socialism. But the rules of the American game have changed utterly, a fundamental reorganization has begun, and nobody really knows what the new rules are or if they'll work or if they're even rules.

I stopped at dark in Coleman, Texas. Gassed up at the Allsup's. Four young laborers climbed out of their beat-up pick-up to talk about my Chevy. Two had smart eyes. Two

had most of their teeth; one, just a few; another, none I could see. My street-sense didn't trust one. The others I liked. The world I call "the world" is not the world they call "the world." With their manual skills, tattered clothes, rural accents and laborer's manners, their world is the only world that will have them. But they're vigorous. Laugh readily. And dig the sound of a 350. (A friend's family reunions are near here. He says most local youth do drugs. Lots.)

I checked into a motel and went to a steak house down the road. At the next table, two clean-cut, soft-spoken guys, roughly the age of the four I'd just met, spoke of their fraternity. The violence of hazing. The guy "who beat me up." The kid hadn't protested. Said no one does. Said the university knows of the bullying and allows it. The lesson these frat boys seem to be learning is how to take shit. The frat bullies are learning how to dish it. Both lessons are important in an education for the corporate world they spoke of joining. They're home for the holidays. Coleman no doubt considers them the best of Coleman. But in their faces was a brokenness – as though already they'd accepted that they would not be the men they'd hoped to be.

Those four laborers with missing teeth – they did not look beaten down and certainly didn't look like guys who'd accept bullying. Who knows but that they might do well, by their lights, in Obama's new New Deal? And who knows but that the frat boys won't? The old rules are gone, the new rules don't yet exist, and it's anybody's ballgame.

Back at the Allsup's, I bought a six-pack for the motel room. (The friendly cashier didn't have all his teeth either.) In the parking lot, a guy in hunting garb, cigarette hanging from his lips, was at the payphone. You don't see people at payphones much anymore. Finishing his call, snapping his butt stub onto the tarmac, he went to his car, parked beside mine: a small tin can, its entire right side stoved in, duct-tape covering the cracks.

He said, "Looks bad, don't it?" Smiled. Missing some teeth. I nodded yeah, smiling. "Looks so bad, people wave when they pass me now. They didn't used to wave. Guess there's some good in anything," he grinned, very knowingly. We got in our cars. He started his. It made a tinny sound, like, "Do we hafta?" I started mine, and I couldn't help that a V-8 350 just naturally roars. The guy and I looked at each other from behind our wheels, and he cracked up, laughing so hard he couldn't light his cigarette. There are traditions of secret Hasids, secret Buddhas, secret Sufis. I felt I'd met a man who might qualify. His laughter was genuine. A man well worth knowing.

My motel room stank of a strange sweetness. On the desk (not, as is usual, in a drawer) was a Gideons Bible. I opened it to see if it was a King James, a New King James, a Revised Standard – the translation makes all the difference. Opened it, and that sickly sweet scent blasted from its pages. A perfumed Bible! My first. I raised my beer in a toast to whomever thought of doing that. America – you can ruin it, but you can't tame it.

Further on, next morning, I stopped for an orange juice and an Egg McMuffin (my one fast-food weakness). The cashier was a very thin, slight woman, about 30, blond, smart eyes. No Texas accent. Long fingers – blunt, not tapered. A wedding ring, simple, thin, gold. Two interesting rings on her right hand. Not from around here. What's her story in 2008? What will it be in 2009? How did her smart eyes find their way to a MacDonald's on the early shift in the middle of Texas? (I think she'd relate to a song I heard in Austin by that remarkable 20-year-old Sahara Smith: "There's a quiet hunger I have curled myself inside/And it's a thousand secrets wide.")

I was in Austin five days, during which three different kinds of people offered to buy my car. "Never." The big news was that some wag threw his shoes at the president of the United States while the world laughed. I didn't. It pains me to see the country of the Bill of Rights a laughingstock and pains me more to know that, these days, mockery is the least we deserve.

My last night in town I went to the Armadillo Christmas Bazaar to hear Marcia Ball's Pianorama. You've never heard anything like it. And I've rarely seen so many people grinning and unable to keep still. Six piano players, each uniquely superb, played five pianos, all at the same time, extemporizing boogie woogie and blues, rhythms a century old and ever fresh, templates capable of infinite variation, irresistibly and incorruptibly funky.

I never heard a better embodiment of what we used to call "the American spirit." Can we, the people, again embody and enact that spirit? I won't say "no," I can't say "yes," so I'll just say "maybe" and let the dice roll.

2009 promises to be quite a ride.

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