



The Fellows

From the left: Monte, Dude, Larry, Greg (Bobby's brother), Chuck, Joe, Me, and Bobby

Chapter 21

Car Trouble

Spring, 1966

Boys, driving a car is a big responsibility. My friends and I didn't always act that way, but we were lucky. We sped, drag raced, and drove recklessly, but we were never caught and amazingly no one got hurt. We should have been arrested and had our licenses suspended—on several occasions. Just because I got away with it doesn't mean you will. Drive Responsibly! Here's what happened.

I pulled up next to Chuck's '59 Chevy convertible at the red light. I raced the motor in my '57 Ford. Chuck looked over at me and gave me a sly smile. He put the Chevy in neutral and raced his motor in return. Joe and Dude were in my car. Monte, Larry, and Bobby were riding with Chuck. KIMN played "*Little Deuce Coupe*" through the AM radio. Riders in both cars shouted encouragement. It was on. Drag race!

My closest high school friends included Joe, Dude, Chuck, Bobby, Monte, and Larry. With the exception of Monte, who arrived in Golden in ninth grade, and Joe, who arrived in third, we had all been friends since kindergarten. Monte, after learning how long the rest of us had been friends, said in his favorite fake English accent, "You fellows have been together for some time." The name "Fellows" stuck. The Fellows were all members of the Key Club, the youth service club associated with the Kiwanis. Key Club met once a week in the evening after dinner to plan good deeds. That night, the Key Club meeting had just ended and we were supposedly heading home, but we had other plans. That was when the fun began.

The light changed, tires screamed, glass-pack mufflers roared, and we were off, racing down Ford, a one-way residential street that ran from the high school to the center of town, one mile away. My three-speed manual transmission gave me an edge off the line, but Chuck's bigger V-8 soon erased my two-car-length lead. He pulled even as both engines roared into the night. I shifted into second and pulled ahead, but the big Chevy pulled even again a second later. Passengers in both cars screamed for more speed.

One by one, porch lights came on as we blasted past house after house. I glanced at the speedometer and it was pushing past 60. The speed limit was 25 and drag racing was a serious crime. Thoughts of good citizens calling the cops and future days in residence at the Lookout Mountain School for Boys flashed through my mind. And that's when Chuck and I saw Officer Hal. House lights reflected off the red light on the top of the patrol car, giving him away. His police cruiser was parked next to the curb a block away. He was waiting for us.

Chuck and I looked at each other and hit the brakes. Tires screeched loudly. Smoke poured from the wheel wells, more lights came on, and people ran to their porches to see what was happening. By the time we rolled by Officer Hal's patrol car we were back to the speed limit. Somehow, he was not out of the car flagging us over. As we cruised past the patrol car, every occupant of both cars stared into the police cruiser's dark interior. A streetlight provided just enough illumination to light Hal's face. He was slumped down, his head tilted back against the seat and his mouth open. A loud snore came to us through the open window. Lucky for us, he was asleep.

A few nights later and encouraged by our good drag-racing fortune we decided it was high time for Ditch 'Em, another favorite yet illegal auto-related past time. Ditch 'Em involved dividing the Fellows between two cars, one in hot pursuit of the other. The objective of Ditch 'Em was to evade and lose the pursuit vehicle. Once the chase car was lost, and a suitable amount of time passed, we met at the Dairy Queen to relive the chase and berate the losers.

I jumped into the back seat of Monte's '53 Pontiac. It was a beat-up, faded-green, four-door sedan and we called it "The Tank." Dude got into the front passenger seat. Everyone else climbed into Joe's dad's '64 Ford wagon. The Tank was the lead vehicle, and we set out to ditch Joe. I was in Monte's car because the speedometer was about to turn over, resetting to all zeros after 100,000 miles. I wanted to see that happen. We raced out of the high school parking lot toward an older neighborhood with dark alleys, small drives, and lots of places to hide. Joe got caught in traffic at a stop sign and we rushed ahead with a five-second lead. Monte took a hard right then another right, down a small alley crowded with the fifty-gallon oil drums that served as trashcans. He hit the lights and killed the engine. We waited. A few seconds later, Joe pulled behind Monte and flashed his lights.

"Did you have your foot on the brake?" I asked.

"Shit," Monte answered. The brake lights had given us away.

Monte started The Tank, roared down the alley, knocked over a few oil drums, and headed to the north side of town, where the streets turned to dirt and streetlights ended. It was a dark night and he hoped we could find a place to hide in the rural darkness.

Monte had it floored as we flew out North Ford. The pavement had ended a half-mile back and we were kicking up a cloud of dust on the bumpy dirt road. Joe fell back, his headlights dimming in the thickening cloud.

Boys, Here's What Happened

“What’s the mileage?” I yelled over the din of the engine and roar of the tires on the dirt surface.

“A mile to go,” Monte yelled back.

I pulled myself to the back of the front seat and stared at the odometer. As the tenths ticked off, Dude screamed, “Lookout!” A deer stood in the middle of the road, frozen in the glare of the headlights.

Monte slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel hard to the left. The Tank started to slide, the rear coming around to the right. The deer, gaining its senses the second the glare was gone, bounded off, jumping over a deep ravine that ran along the right side of the dirt road.

In what seemed like slow motion, the rear end of the old Pontiac became the leading end as we slid toward the ravine. Monte fought the wheel and the brakes, but the course of The Tank was beyond his control. From my seat in the back, I turned around to see the ravine rushing toward us. I braced for the crash that didn’t happen. Miraculously, The Tank came to rest with the front end clinging to the side of the road and the rear end hanging over the void, wheels spinning uselessly.

Hoping to improve the weight balance, I carefully climbed into the front seat, landing in the middle between Monte and Dude. Just as I settled into the seat, Monte directed our attention to the odometer. The spinning wheels kept the odometer turning. Ten nines turned to ten zeros in quick succession. Despite our tenuous situation, we cheered! The car slid back a few inches. We looked at each other and with apprehension growing, moved as far forward as we could.

Joe pulled up, rolled down the window, and deadpanned, “What seems to be the problem, Ma’am?” We didn’t find this funny.

Larry and Bobby climbed out of Joe’s car and surveyed the situation. “Nobody move!” Bobby ordered. “Stay in the car!”

Despite our intense desire to evacuate The Tank before it fell into the ravine, Bobby told us that our combined weight was the only thing keeping the car from tipping over. “If you get out, it will go in for sure! And, you might not all get out in time.”

Since I was in the middle, it dawned on me that I would be the last one out—if I got out. “Nobody move!” I yelled, repeating Bobby’s order. The three of us inched even closer to the dash, hoping to keep The Tank’s center of gravity over the road.

Now what? We decided we needed a tow, but that meant Joe would have to drive back to town to make a call, and the old Pontiac was barely hanging on. We didn't have time. As we debated solutions, a pair of headlights appeared down the road. The vehicle slowed as it approached. It was a police cruiser and Officer Hal was behind the wheel.

He pulled over, got out of the patrol car, switched on his flashlight, and surveyed the situation without saying a word. He peered through the driver's window shining, the flashlight on the three of us clinging to the dash. We couldn't have run if we wanted to; we were trapped in the car. Finally, Hal spoke. "Looks like someone's been playing Ditch 'Em!" Hal was a Golden High graduate. He knew the traditions.

Monte, from his steering-wheel-hugging perch, denied the accusation and blamed the deer. "I had to hit the brakes or I would have hit the deer. And hitting a deer can cause awful damage to a car. We could have been hurt or killed!" Without moving, Dude and I jumped figuratively to Monte's defense, declaring how large the deer was, and acknowledging that Monte had saved our lives.

Even though we did our best to hold perfectly still, mounting a strong defense takes movement. Gravel crunched and The Tank groaned as it started inching toward the ravine. "Nobody move!" Officer Hal ordered as he ran to the patrol car. He opened the trunk and found a chain. He ran back to The Tank, got on his hands and knees, and threaded the chain around the front axle. Then, he pulled the patrol car a few feet from The Tank and connected the chain to the patrol car's tow bars just as the old Pontiac started sliding into the ravine. The Tank pulled the patrol car toward the ravine. Officer Hal jumped into the cruiser, threw it into reverse, and started backing up. His wheels spun; the chain jerked tight. The Tank's slide stopped, then the patrol car pulled it slowly back onto the dirt road, delivering the three of us to safety.

Shaken but relieved, we climbed from the car. Dude dropped to his hands and knees and kissed the dirt road, giving high praise to God and Officer Hal. Monte and I thanked Officer Hal profusely, praising his quick action. He smiled and said it was all in day's work.

Boys, Here's What Happened

Our opinion of Office Hal changed that night. He saved us from falling into the ravine and he declined to charge Monte with reckless driving, probably from lack of evidence. And then, after a lecture about the dangers of Ditch 'Em, he let us all go without a single call to a parent. Officer Hal headed to town and we headed to the Dairy Queen for cokes and milkshakes and the first of many retellings of that evening's adventure.