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Pop

BILL HENDERSON

When Pop died, I bought his '61 Chevy Biscayne sedan from Mom. Although it had 80,000 miles on it, the Chevy ran without burning oil and without breakdown for the next seven years. Pop had cared well for the car. He did it himself.

The Chevy transported my wife and me and our furniture to a new apartment overlooking the Hudson River. On weekends, gangs of boys brought their beer to the riverbank and drank it in the sun. You could hear shouts and bottles breaking fourteen floors up. One of the boys lifted the Chevy's hood and walked off with the battery. I bought a new one and chained and locked the hood.

The next Saturday night, the police told me the Chevy had been stolen, driven to the top of a hill and turned loose.

Sunday morning my wife and I climbed the hill, following first a path through the woods, then a dirt road. We passed a shuttered Hudson River farm house. Farther up the hill a new apartment building was rising. A big American flag flew from the top of a derrick. Signs warned that the property was protected by trained attack dogs. People had been using the area for a dump.

Then we saw the Chevy. It had crashed into a dirt bank. The impact had driven the front end into the radiator and snapped off a door. From the shredded rear tires, I knew what they had done to the transmission. The glove compartment had been pried open and maps, a spare fuel pump, and the contents of a First Aid kit had been scattered on the road. A large rock held the accelerator to the floor. Three unopened bottles of beer lay in the back seat.

We removed as much camping gear as we could carry from the trunk. When we came back later, the stripping of the car had already begun. The beer was gone. I chased three kids into a nearby orphanage.

Minutes before he died, Pop had worked on the Chevy, checking the water, oil, tires, and the tools in the trunk. The next day he was to have traveled into the Pocono Mountains and repaired industrial equipment installed by his company, General Electric. Pop came in from the garage, kissed Mom good night, put on his pajamas, said his evening prayers kneeling by the side of his bed and covered up. He left the bedstand light on for Mom.

When she came to bed, she noticed something about his sleep. Not wishing to disturb him, she turned off the light and lay listening for his breathing. Hours later she touched him and he was cold.

After the funeral, the Chevy was not disturbed. When I bought it, the tools in the trunk were just as he had arranged them the night he died.

Once I had written to Pop, "Please tell me what your life was like before I was born." He never replied. When I brought up the question during a visit home from college, he said he had lived an ordinary life, of interest to nobody.

That summer we went on our annual fishing trip. Pop brought along his old five-horsepower Johnson and we rented a boat and motored a short distance into the bay. With his escape blocked by water, I pressed the question. "What was your life like before I was born?"

"What's so important about it?"

"Because I don't really know about you."

But it didn't work. He just fished and that was that.

We motored back to the dock. He told me that his father had driven a meat delivery wagon for Swift and Company and that sometimes his sons would get up at three a.m. to help him hitch his horse and make his rounds. Often his father drank too much. They lived in Camden, New Jersey, for a while, then moved to Audubon. Outside his bedroom window, Pop remembered a buoy in the Delaware River with a red blinking light.

Pop never told me more about his forty-one years before I was born.

The last I saw Pop alive was on the foggy day that my boat left New York harbor for Le Havre. Pop stood on the deck of a passing Staten Island ferry, searching for me with his binoculars. He was waving and I waved back. But I am not sure he saw me.

Since he would tell me so little about who he was, I tried to understand from what I could remember. "When I was a kid," I wrote in a notebook, "Pop took us to a factory open-house. The family was escorted about a four-story hall that covered half a block. The hall was filled with massive brightly-colored machines. I realized then that Pop spent his days working with tremendous machines like these. All the kids received yellow helmets. Then there was a lightning show. The visitors climbed stairs to a balcony that surrounded the hall. When the lightning was created by the engineers, I was so shaken that I knew I would fall off the balcony. On the second flash and roar I began to scream and Pop led me off the balcony and outside."

Pop understood the engineering of machines and lightning but he wished to know nothing about the body. "The body is the temple of the

Lord," he repeated at our after-dinner prayer and Bible circle. He swallowed no pills. He sweated out toothaches with God alone. He refused to wear glasses until he couldn't read the Bible and for that reason alone bought his first pair. He suffered with a hernia that each year worsened until even the strongest truss left a noticeable bulge under his pants.

Evenings, after repairing huge transformers and switchgear, he returned home and lay for hours on the living room couch reading a book, *Christ The Healer*. He read no other book, besides the Bible and the Chevy repair manual.

Pop watched Oral Roberts heal on television. Except for the Oral Roberts program, Pop would have nothing to do with television unless the set broke down. Then he enjoyed fixing it.

Not once did Pop strike me or my brother or sister. If I angered him, I was sent to my bedroom without supper. He had no defense against suffering. I learned to act the sufferer. He would knock on my door a little afterward and tell me it was all right, I could come down and eat.

When I was sick, Pop would come home early. He would rush up the stairs and kneel by my bed, his hand on my forehead, asking Jesus to heal me. Since I had often enjoyed the day off from school, I was embarrassed by his urgency with Jesus. But then he knew Jesus better than I did.

Pop refused to prune the fruit trees that he planted in the backyard. He didn't want to hurt the trees by sawing the limbs. The trees never produced fruit, grew wildly deformed, and killed all the grass around them.

Each morning at our family breakfast table, Pop tuned in a radio evangelist who warned us that the Communist anti-Christ was threatening Christendom. The evangelist said the anti-Christ should be annihilated while we had the A-bomb and the Reds did not. Pop spooned his cereal and listened closely.

Pop took us to church for Sunday School, Sunday worship and Sunday night hymn singing. On Wednesday night we went to prayer meeting together. Pop often sang hymns with military metaphors and heard the minister explain about "the whole armor of God." Pop asked God to help the President against our Communist enemies. Pop was God's best friend.

Pop believed in eternal fire for those who were not saved, and Pop had suggested that there were faults which might lead even the saved from heaven. When I was thirteen years old, and my brother and sister were much younger, Pop gave us all a family covenant to sign: "Because we believe that the use of alcoholic beverage is harmful to human personalities and to society, we, the members of this Family Circle, God helping us, hereby commit ourselves to total abstinence and dedicate our home to creative fellowship and Christian Service."

My signature was a rebellious scrawl. I was uncertain and beginning to hate.

On the plane home I drank bourbon.

My relatives all made a point of church-going and at the funeral gathering I expected to hear much of eternal life and how Pop was with Jesus now. Instead there was chatter about every subject except death and salvation. At the church and at the graveside, where the grave was covered with artificial grass, the minister did not mention eternal life. A prayer, the Twenty-Third Psalm, a few verses from Ecclesiastes, and it was over. Not even the minister believed as Pop believed.

After the funeral, I went to the attic and among the toys and furniture leftover from my childhood, I talked to the Pop of long ago, became his child again. I could care only this way. For me, Pop had died years before the funeral.

I had a theory after the funeral and I tried to explain it to the relatives before they left: "If we can keep Pop's things around, then we can keep his memory alive."

The relatives didn't say anything.

A few weeks later a General Electric person took away Pop's tools from his basement workshop. Mom gave his shirts and suits to Goodwill and spoke of calling a junk man for the bigger things.

I hurried my search for his past.

In his top bureau drawer I found a brown class assignment tablet from the University of Pennsylvania School of Engineering. The first entry was "Oct. 5, 1920, Freshman English, Mr. Owen, 3 p.m., theme Who Am I and Why I'm Here." The theme was not in the drawer or elsewhere. In cellophane was a shock of his once blond hair with a card "Baby Francis, first cut, 16 mos. 3 wks. old."

In another drawer of his bureau I found a paperback gospel of John subtitled "The It is Finished Work of the Lamb Slain from the Foundation of the World According to the Gospel of John." There was a leaflet by a minister detailing "Seventeen Reasons Why I am *Not* A Christian Scientist." A Moral Rearmament dinner program from 1937 announced that songs for the evening would be The Star Spangled Banner, Bridge Builders and America the Beautiful, and advised "Give God 10 minutes every morning. If you mean business you'll find conviction in your mind that will make you want to live differently. Write them down. They are God's directions for you." A postcard from a hotel in Frederick, Maryland, dated 3/26/35, said "Dear friend, it has taken some time but the Lord led a young man to me tonight. How are you doing? A.M. Turney."

I found a dozen chrome napkin rings; a memo pad of important figures: "I joined church Nov. 1, 1925; cash records for 1923, \$162.50 tuition, \$36.50 new suit;" twelve gift wallets that had never been used; a miniature painted wooden kettle that I made for him in kindergarten; pen knives; old locks; broken watches; a brochure of a town that he had

worked in titled "Scenes of Johnstown, Pa.;" a box of old pennies; two pairs of his father's rimless glasses in one case; a collection of Father's Day and Valentine's Day cards from my brother and sister and me.

In Mom's bureau I found a packet of Pop's letters written to her just before their marriage in 1938. Most of the letters were written from his parents' home in Philadelphia. On May 13, 1937, he wrote from Philadelphia to Westfield, New Jersey. "There isn't much news as usual. About all I know I see in the papers and I guess you're up on all that. You know the time we passed along the Wissahickon there were a good many cars parked and watching something in the creek. Well, a boy 16 years of age had drowned, as you will see by the enclosed clipping . . . My brother and I went down to the Electrical Progress Exhibit at 9th and Samson. We obtained quite a few good ideas of the new developments there."

On February 14, 1938, he wrote from the Commodore Hotel, Washington, D.C. to Westfield: "Last Saturday I thought I'd see Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs by Walt Disney. There's a picture for you. You almost forget they are colored drawings, there is so much life and character to them. That's another one you should see. I wouldn't advise it for small children though, as there are parts which are often terrifying. Other parts are nice as you'd want them to be. Anyway, it takes your interest from start to finish. A woman had a small boy next to me and he became scared at different parts. He actually got up and hid behind the seat so he wouldn't see it."

In an undated letter from Philadelphia to Westfield, he wrote: "I suppose you think I am a nut on religion but honestly I'm not. I like to learn of the deeper things in life and you can really find enjoyment in them too. When I was working in Baltimore year before last, I visited the library there and happened to pick up a book called *I Was A Pagan*. It was very inspiring, in fact it was about the Oxford Group of which up to that time I had heard nothing . . . Although I'm not identified with the movement I'm interested in it as I probably told you."

In December, 1937, he wrote, "You know sometimes I blow hot and cold on different things. I wish it were not so. I believe that is because of a selfish attitude and it is only by consecrating our lives to God's Will that we can go forward. Knowing and asking that He will not allow anything to come to pass that is not according to His Divine Plan for us. Knowing also that He will thoroughly furnish us for any good work. I'm praying also for you as well as myself that we may be spared any mistake which we may make one way or the other."

On January 8, 1938, just after his thirty-seventh birthday, he wrote from Altoona, Pennsylvania, where he had gone to fix a tank that was leaking nitrogen gas. "Here it is, Saturday night, and way up in the mountains. I tried to find the leak by painting the tank with soapy water, but the

water froze immediately like frosting on one of your cakes . . . I went over to Pete's home in Chester Monday night. One of the fellows could sing and he did his best to entertain the crowd. Most of the time was spent in drinking beer. They had a beer keg down there and everybody was kept in supply of fresh beer. Also sandwiches were being passed. I didn't take any beer but Pete had plenty of ginger ale on hand too, so I just sat back and took it all in. That's the first beer party I was ever to and to tell you the truth there wasn't much life to it outside of a little house fly. How much more fun you can have with the silly games we have. I think I prefer that to either beer parties or bridge parties. Nobody is bored."

After copying the letters I placed them back in Mom's bureau exactly as they were so she would not know I had read them. Then I took my notebooks and went to the attic and cellar and around the backyard cataloging all of Pop's creations: a lawn seeder; a sunlamp stand and timer for my fourteen-year-old pimples; a book case; a desk; a wagon with a '49 plate on it; a record player and recorder he built to capture and play back the voices of his children; a crystal radio set; a ping pong table; a vise.

His snowblower invention sat in the basement on flat tires. He spent almost as much time with the snowblower that year as with his Chevy. At the first snowfall, he lugged the snowblower upstairs, but it was too heavy to push through the snow and it blew the snow straight up. So he took it back down to the cellar and left it.

I wanted to find the final letter Pop had written to me a month before he died. I looked through my luggage but it had disappeared. Pop had finished the letter with his motto, "Whatever happens, be good."

Mocking, I used to ask him what he meant by *good*.

"If you don't know, I can't tell you," he always answered.

Long after Pop died, a kind friend said, "Your father told you the truth when he said his life was ordinary. Stop looking for him. You can't create what never was."

I stopped searching and accepted a boozy void. Now and then late at night I'll tune in a fundamentalist hymn program on the radio and I'll know for an instant how it used to be with Pop.

I suppose I could have stopped the stripping of the Chevy in the week after the wreck. I could have had it towed to a garage. I could have asked the police to watch it. But the car was worth less than the price of repairs.

The kids snapped the hood chain and carried off the new battery. They took all they wanted from the engine. They jimmed open the trunk and stole the spare tire and jack. They took the radio and two wheels and they broke all the windows with rocks. The junk car man said he never saw anything like it, kids so thoroughly destructive.