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Signs

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Signs

Bill Elgersma

My father had two simple pleasures in life to keep him grounded. He loved to whistle—something like a finch—loud and tunelessly—and he loved to laugh—belly laugh. No matter where he was, his whistle announced him. Arriving late to church and therefore parking the car in the depths of outer darkness after dropping us off on the front steps, he would whistle his way through the parking lot. The open windows in the summer tracked his progress, and we sunk in our seats, mortified as the preacher patiently waited. At the sale barn we could always find him in the herd of men by his whistle, and even coming in from the barn, milk pail in hand, he would whistle his way up to the house and we would know supper was ready. Oblivious to the world around him, he whistled his way to places where finances, relationships, children, and church problems could not reach. He kept one bottle of Maalox under the seat of his car and another in the cabinet over the kitchen sink when whistling no longer kept the ulcers under control.

Laughter was as good as medicine. Regardless of where he was, if something was funny, my father laughed—not polite laughter that acknowledges possible humor; he tilted his head back and roared. Tears would stream down his face as he tried to explain the source of his enjoyment. At that point his voice would alter as he attempted to force air out of a diaphragm that was doing double duty, and his mirth would grow. Because the laughter was so innocent, it was also infectious. Others would hear him laugh and join in—laughing because he was obviously enjoying himself without reservation. By the time he stopped, he was exhausted as were those around him, and he would puff to get his breath back.

And often he was the source of that laughter.

He had no difficulty laughing at himself: whatever had occurred in the course of his day—interactions with others, occurrences on the farm, stories from others—all were reasons to share and double over. However, he was principled—he did not laugh at people's misfortune. He had endured enough trouble of his own to know laughing at others was not funny, and it brought him no enjoyment.

Perhaps he whistled and laughed with passion because my mother rarely did. Hers was a world of tension. She handled the finances for the farm and knew how close to the edge we lived. She opened the bills, balanced the books, and dealt with the bank at a time when farming was not lucrative.

In time, as money became exceptionally tight, my father took a job where he spent most of his day driving and meeting people. In some ways this was just an extension of whistling and laughing. He escaped the realities of his world while my mother was trapped at home to manage the farm and the kids, constantly reminded of how tough the situation was. Where his pail was half full; hers was three-quarters empty and this only increased the tension.

When meeting her for the first time, those who knew my father would assume a bubbly, enthusiastic, upbeat individual only to be surprised by a reserved introvert who rarely smiled and even more rarely laughed. When meeting them as a couple, people would gravitate toward him, and he would rise to the occasion. Soon she was lost in the background, and the ride home would be deady silent. He would be worn out from playing the part, and she would be furious that he had played it, knowing he would throw up before they turned into the laneway from the stress of their situation. In her world he was a fraud; in his world the facade was survival.

With the switch in jobs, success soon followed him, and with success came more travel. He would

flee the house by 8 a.m., often returning home late in the evening, going to the barn first to check on the cattle and then coming into the house. I suppose he was driving his problems away, and it worked. The financial situation improved, and the house seemed calm. However, this came at the expense of vehicles.

Not that long ago, North American-made vehicles were not expected to last 100,000 miles. The missing digit in the odometer testified to this. Regardless of whether this was a strategic move by automakers to frighten car owners into buying on a regular basis, simple short-sightedness, or a testament to low expectations on the part of the automakers themselves, by the time cars had 60,000 miles on them, it was time to trade.

My father was averaging 50,000 miles per year, so typically he would trade up every two years, trying to stay under 100,000, which was considered the universal death knell for a vehicle. While this was an expense, the business was doing well, and having my father on the road and keeping the bank at bay allowed my mother to restore her dignity. Sure the cars were expensive, but he was not extravagant. Early on, his new cars would have power steering and brakes, and in time, AM and FM stereo, one of the few luxuries he allowed himself. When cruise was available, several generations of cars were purchased before he would indulge himself with that feature, and air conditioning only came with his second last car. However, his last car, the one he purchased in his middle 60s, was loaded with everything, including a power antenna. It was a Grand Marquis, not his typical car of choice. Apparently this was Mercury's flagship luxury vehicle, just below a Lincoln, but he would never have purchased a Lincoln—it would have been ostentatious—too wealthy for his clients—and what would my mother say? In retrospect, I suppose the luxurious features of this car gave him his last laugh.

Six months after purchasing the Grand Marquis, my father died. It had been a good day. I have no doubt he whistled his way into the grocery store with the contract neatly tucked in an inside pocket. He had closed a deal that afternoon and had a massive heart attack while picking up a few items for my mother on his way home. While the situation was sudden, he had died as he had lived,

liking what he was doing and happily interacting with others. My mother was now on her own, but as the kids had left home, she had increasingly been by herself, and she had made a life for herself. Shortly after his death she sold the house, moved to the city, and bought an apartment. She had grown up in a town with buses and trains and hated life in the country, isolated and alienated from everyone and everything. Farming was for poor people, and her siblings felt sorry for her while our cousins looked down on us as the poorest people they knew. A move to the city would extirpate that image, and being on a bus line meant she didn't have to drive much. You see, she had learned on a Ford—a Model A—and although she often bragged that she had never been in an accident whenever we critiqued her driving, we would always respond with, "Ya, but what about the ones behind you?"

So, here she was, on her own, in a town of 400,000 with a Grand Marquis that she had rarely driven. Mostly she used the bus, but as she became acquainted with the other seniors in the building, she became the designated driver, a thought that might even frighten angels. The others no longer owned cars or were no longer capable of driving or were cognizant of the fact that they should no longer be driving or were victims of their children selling their cars. Whatever the case, she had wheels and that meant a bevy of bluehairs might be out on the town.

In time she became familiar with the car. In relative terms, its size rivalled an aircraft carrier in a time when the auto industry was downsizing and other drivers saw both its size and her age and moved on over. Regardless of who might be at fault should there be an accident, their vehicle would lose to hers, so she endured few scrapes and continued to be the best driver on the road.

The intricacies of the vehicle were a different matter. She never understood many of the features and consequently ignored them; however, knowing that this would be the last car she would purchase, she maintained it faithfully. A nephew in the area who owned a shop would pick up her car monthly and go through it to ensure the safety of others on the road, while one of my brothers quietly paid him without my mother's knowledge. The added bonus of this arrangement was that the

car received a monthly bath as well, which in the winter in Southern Ontario is an absolute necessity. Salt is the snow removal equipment of choice, and the automotive industry thrives because of its ability to corrode a car. Frosted with a layer of salt after a snowfall, the rime etches into the paint and gradually penetrates the metal. In time, as cars hear the snow forecast, they defeatedly begin to rust, knowing what is coming.

Well aware of this, after a foray on the town with her buddies shortly after a late-spring snow squall off the lake, she took the car to a type of car wash that is almost extinct today. There was a time when people drove their cars onto a chain-driven track at the front of a carwash where an attendant—typically the 18-year-old kid who hated high school, terrorized teachers and classmates, and ended up on the back end of a pressure washer pre-soaking the salt off the underside of vehicles before they entered the tunnel—would be waiting for them. A sign would flash saying, “Put car in neutral.” Then another sign would flash saying, “Turn off engine.” My mother is dutiful if nothing else, and she follows directions. Her car went into neutral as the sign demanded, but on this occasion she had buzzed down the power window to tell the attendant he didn’t need to lower the antenna because it lowered itself. Then the sign flashed, “Turn off engine.” And she did.

Now, in today’s world, an engineer somewhere figured out how to get juice to carry over for a brief time after the engine’s power has been cut, perhaps because of possible situations like this, but more likely to have headlights stay on until owners can get into houses. Not so in 1993. When the key was turned to the “off” position, the power was gone—to everything. The only way to restore power was to turn the key to the “on” position. And as far as the carwash was concerned, there was no way to stop the track.

To compound the situation, my mother had paid for the “Ultimate” package, a premium carwash selection that includes two automated pre-rinses, soap, a rinse, then wax, a spot-free rinse, and finally extended drying time by four monstrous blowers. The entire process typically requires the better part of 10 minutes, with the car salt-free and gleaming at the end. This level of decadence is well worth the money, knowing that you are defeating

nature’s intent of taking back its minerals.

So, the window is down, the key is off, and the rinse sprayers have just kicked on when the attendant realizes the window is not going up. The horror of realization on that 18-year-old face strips away his façade of cynical boredom with car washes and old ladies and life in general. In the face of crisis, he attempts to salvage a grandma. He shouts for her to turn on the key and put the window up, but...too late. His voice is lost in the hiss of spray pummeling the steel as she drags forward. To his credit he runs beside her, continuing to shout instructions in an effort to rescue her, but as stated earlier, my mother follows directions. In her defense, growing up with Model A’s and crank-up windows, the world of power-anything is a mystery. She is not turning on the key. In her mind, the car starts, and she hurtles out of the other end of the car wash like a kid on a water slide. No way, no how.

The first rinse sort of catches her by surprise. At 68 she wears her bottle blue-gray hair in a bun, pulled back from her face with lipstick, mascara, and rouge applied to her cheeks—something to give her a little color in the grey winters of Ontario. The rinse cycle dismantles the complexity of her bun like Houdini and a rope trick—dropping it straight down to her shoulders while sticking to her face as the rouge and mascara merge to form stage makeup Alice Cooper might enjoy. By the second rinse, the resourcefulness she learned on the farm pays off. She sports a purse large enough to carry infants and perhaps small farm animals in, and this becomes her shield of choice. As the hurricane enters her window, that miniature suitcase fills some of the space, but the force of the water is too much for an elderly lady, and she retreats to covering the side of her face while the flood continues to rise in the car. It doesn’t get better. Soap, rinse, wax, rinse—her wool suit is soaked as are her boots, not to mention the interior of the car. In time her arms are too heavy to hold the purse, so she puts her head against the steering wheel with arms covering her temples to wait out the storm.

The final insult is the extended drying time. Typically we grumble because drying time is too short, and our locks and doors freeze when we exit the car wash, but this is one time when every second is an eternity. When the wind from the

blowers hits the open window, it swirls through the car and returns out of the same gap. As a result, my mother's hair, formerly stuck to her face, now appears as a frenetic weathervane, first pointing directly toward the passenger's window and then twirling around to head back out of the door, making her appear to have received a giant beehive swirl. By now, any makeup has long since been flushed from her face, and the force of the wind dries some of her clothes along with the top of the dash. Everything has received a good going over.

After an eternity the blowers moan to a halt and the track releases the car. It rolls into the area where attendants normally wait to towel-dry any remaining water droplets. A pool forms where it stops. She puts the car in park, and her dedicated attendant opens the door to help her out, unsure of what might occur as he stands in front of her. She steps out, and the water drains in streams from the hems of her coat. Her pockets are full, and as she turns them inside out, water gushes. Her boots are full to the top, and as she lowers the zippers, water pours out like a breached levy.

The poor attendant, a kid at best, is lost with

what to do, and so he does what he is paid to do—he begins to mop her off. Taking his towel, he pats her, attempting to soak up some of the water, at the same apologizing and saying “I’m sorry, Ma’am, I don’t mean to be fresh” while she stands there paralyzed from what has just happened and at a loss for words. He continues until she tells him she is fine, where, much relieved, he stops. Attempting to connect with her in some way, he asks what her husband will say about this, whereupon my mother gives one of her rare chuckles and tells him her husband is dead, but he would have laughed until he cried if he knew this had happened. With that she sloshes back into the car, squinches around in the seat, and starts it up. As she drives away, a river trails from the car much like a boat being pulled out of water.

The drive home begins in sunlight, but shortly the clouds roll in as are wont to do in Ontario springs. Arriving at her apartment, she parks the car where it continues to drain. Opening the door, she hoists her waterlogged body out only to be greeted by the sound of a finch celebrating spring, for all the world to hear. And then the skies open and the warm rain falls hard.