

Here is the story of The Optimistic Lad and (Yet Another) Near Death Experience.

(Be assured this will be a completely unbiased account.)

The Beginning:

On Friday evening a hopeful, enthusiastic man had trouble falling to sleep anticipating the car he was going to purchase the next day. The bus tickets to the great city of Mount Vernon were purchased and he had filled his head with the limited, but effective, amount of car knowledge he had.

Saturday morning arrived and the man hopped in a cab that whisked him to downtown Seattle's exciting and colorful Greyhound bus depot. Sitting with the other bus patrons in the early AM, all headed out for various mundane destinations reminded the man just how happy he was to be purchasing a car, even if it was older, it would still be a wonderful feeling to get to work on his own power, get more groceries than he could carry and buy the big cat litter, obviously this man dreamt too large. Like an ancient Greek hero, his hubris would soon be punished.

Two hours later on a trip filled with interesting smells, repetitive sights and a passenger with a worrisome flatulence problem he arrived at the Mount Vernon bus station. The seller of the car had agreed to meet him there although he had warned the man about the Mexicans. Apparently the man was venturing into the seedier side of Mt. Vernon. South of the Water Tower. The man got off the bus and spent some time connecting with America in the quaint bus stop that hadn't been renovated since 1954. The man did witness Mexicans in the area. Apparently, he discovered, they took buses and picked people up as bus stations. Just like other people. The man looked forward to sharing this knowledge with the car seller. Now the man knew that the seller was going to be a little while so he sat, all set to relax outside the bus station on an old wooden bench. Content to sit back, anticipating the arrival of his car, smelling the last few days of summer and the wistful approach of Autumn. It was then the 4th grader appeared. Apparently the single mother that works at the bus station is unable to afford day care so she brings her little bundle of joy to work with her. Perhaps she hopes the exposure to so many people traveling will bring her a cosmopolitan air later in life. In any event, this little miracle from Heaven proceeded to tell me the amusing stories of her childhood. That most precious time. It began with her day to day trials and tribulations in gym class and with her new teachers. Then the little tyke began to denigrate the man's knowledge on practically every topic, insisting that her life lessons were much more valid than his. She then began to relate the happy tale of her hatred for her imprisoned father, her life as a half breed and the special severe discipline she lived day to day with. It was amazing to look into the eyes of a little girl and see the stripper that she would one day become.

Time didn't seem to pass, and yet somehow it did. The seller arrived with his son. In tow was my soon to be car. It was very rough around the edges, as I knew it would be. We exchanged pleasantries. He unloaded the car and described a beautiful familial scene. He had purchased this car so his 13 year old son could indulge in his racing fantasies. It seems that his boy has a penchant for racing and, in order to keep him off the streets (of Anacortes....Lord knows it gets rough up there) he thought a learner race car would be in order. This, of course, gave me pause and we moved to the vehicle inspection portion of this adventure. Now the body was beaten, and I was made aware of this before my purchase was made. I began my inspection of the vehicle; he assured me that, while there were no major problems, there were many minor ones that would have to be addressed. I looked the car over, the engine was running very rough, but I expected it to. The fluids were fine, the engine seemed like it ran after it warmed up and all the basics seemed fine. I took it for a drive and the brakes were mushy, but okay. We drove back to the bus stop; I checked under the car for leaks, saw a very small leak on the rear right axle and figured there might be a leaky brake line. I thought I'd have to get the brakes done soon so I

found that an acceptable risk. It also seemed like there might be a slight suspension problem in the front right of the car, as it was a little lower, but again, an acceptable risk. He assured me that there were no major problems and that he and his son fixed up cars together for a living. He then regaled me with stories his hatred of city life and of his divorce and his joy a receiving full custody of his husky lad. It gave me pause, thinking about how awful the mother must be for this stonerish gadabout to have received full custody. The father seemed certain that his young boy, the spitting image of himself was sure to be a lady killer when the lad's new car was fixed up. I am equally certain he would never be.

At last, the paperwork done, the money exchanged and the car started on my own I waved as the simple country family drove away. Not wanting to be out of compliance with the law, I stopped the car and went over to the phone at the quaint little bus stop and immediately insured my car. Satisfying my legal duty I prepared to drive over to the nearest licensing agency and register the car in my name. I got in, turned the key and, to my dismay, nothing occurred. I panicked. I fretted. I got angry. Then I paused, looked at the gas gauge and the gas tank read empty. I thought about what to do. At last I decided I would call the seller. I went over and called him. I tensely waited to see if he would pick up the phone. One, two and three rings, then, he answered. I let him know that car wasn't starting and I thought it was out of gas. I felt righteously indignant! I wouldn't let him get away with screwing me over. I deserved better treatment than this and I was damn well going to let him know about it. Before I could express any of these sentiments he offered to come right over with some gas. He said they must have driven it around too much last night. He apologized and said he'd be right there.

Not 10 minutes later he arrived, gas in hand. He went to the gas tank and began to fill it up, spilling quite a bit at one point when it became too heavy for him. He got it gassed up and he got in the car to start it. He turned the key and there was a slight popping sound and a little white cloud came up from the battery. The feelings of indignation rushed back into my body, filling me, making me feel vaguely like what a grown up must feel like. He then apologized for forgetting to tell me about the wire that needed to be reattached on the battery. He showed me when it didn't start all you needed to do was make sure the wires were attached. I got in started the car, waved good-bye again. I shook off my negative feelings for the seller and began my journey to the registration office.

Only here would my troubles begin.

The Middle:

As I glanced at the address for the registration office I put the car into gear and began my tour of Mt. Vernon. A pastoral town filled with good country folk. A town from a simpler time. Where the bad part of town is actually on the other side of the railroad tracks and the good American folk hate the Mexican illegals they themselves employee to pick their vegetables. As I drove about, enraptured with this American Dream turned into reality I realized I had no idea where I was. I found an open spot to park, in the shade of a magnificent tree right outside of the beautifully tended lawns of a funeral home. I examined my poorly printed map, took a moment to enjoy the moment and turned the key in the ignition. Nothing happened. Panic once more set in. After a few moments of despair I hopped out, steeled myself and opened the hood. I attempted the battery adjustment that he had showed me. Lo and Behold! Glory of Glories, it worked! I, much more hesitantly headed onwards.

As I drove I began to realize the brake situation, while fine in town, was going to become a serious problem on the highway, so I would have to start deciding what to do. I continued driving northbound up 18th Avenue in Mt. Vernon. I was going downhill, pleased with myself at finally finding the street that cut through town when I noticed the brakes deteriorating more significantly. As I headed down the street and took a left on College Parkway (using my proper hand signals, there are some minor electrical problems that I was aware of, but I figured I'd be home long before night) I saw the registration office nestled in between some strip malls and I pulled quickly

in. Nearby was a grocery store and I was torn between scheduling a brake job with a mechanic or going in and just registering the vehicle. I ended up deciding to run to the grocery store, order a quick veggie sandwich (I hadn't eaten yet today) and look up mechanics in the phone book. I grabbed the sandwich and went outside to search through the yellow pages for a place to get my brakes done. I called around to a few different places, getting the same result each time. It was Saturday afternoon and they weren't going to be able to fit me in. I kept calling, my hope getting lower and lower at each point. Finally I came across a garage that had an opening, but only if I got there by 1:00PM. The time now was 12:40PM. I agreed. I drove quickly over to the registration location and waited in line for 10 minutes. At 12:50 I began my mad dash across town. By this point my brakes were getting downright goofy. Fred Flintstone had a much more advanced braking system than me. Also I was beginning to feel quite woozy. I began to suspect that there might be more than a few pinprick holes in the exhaust. I was pulling through the heavy weekend mall traffic of Mt. Vernon when I car cut in front of me. I jammed on the brakes. They held, barely. My foot was also now covered in a large amount of fluid. Apparently the braking system was much, much worse than I had anticipated. Finally I saw the used car lot that housed the mechanic I so desperately needed. I pulled up, parked the car, felt the waves of tension begin to relax and checked in.

I was just finishing up some of the food I had purchased for my lunch when the mechanic and all the salesmen called me out. I came out and they pointed to a very large puddle under my car. They seemed a bit frantic about it. I asked what was the matter. I assumed that they had discovered a very large brake fluid leak. I was informed that the pool was a gas leak. A very large gas leak. A very, very large gas leak. It turns out it was quite amazing I wasn't dead. I was pleased to discover that I was basically driving a fuse. A car with no brakes to speak of with, what turned out to be a completely rotted out top of the gas tank. One spark, one tossed cigarette and it would have gone up like a candle. Mind you, a very large metal candle containing a human and causing quite a bit of shrapnel, but a candle none the less. The folks there described various scenarios that they had been witness to with leaky gas tanks, none of them ended well. On a positive note, it was the largest, most dangerous leak any of them had ever seen.

It made me think back to when I had purchased the car, which now seemed like months ago. The seller had spilled the gas as he was filling it up. Slippery fingers. I think not. The bastard actually sold me an amazingly deadly machine, in front of his son, and covered it up by pretending to spill gasoline under it. For \$500.00 dollars. That's what my life was worth to him. Five hundred bucks.

Tomorrow: The exciting conclusion or "The Danger Arrives!"

The Thrilling Conclusion

Optimism! That was the only thing keeping me from opening my wrists at this point. I blithely told the mechanic, Carl, to go ahead and see if he could replace the gas tank as well. Mind you, I had no idea if he'd be able to procure a used Dodge Dart 1976 gas tank in the limited market of Mt. Vernon, but I decided to try. Now began my time in Northern Washington. The town of Mt. Vernon seems to have been founded by racists and the Mexicans who love them. Never since the Deep South have I been in such a divided town. They both exist side by side, but never the twain shall meet. As I was pondering the town, Carl, the mopey but competent mechanic informed me that he would be able to fix my brakes and he had found a gas tank to replace mine. I almost shrieked for joy. Until he let me know that this adventure would run me over \$500.00 bucks as well. There wasn't much I could do, so I relaxed to the inevitable. I asked when he would be done, as it was now 2:00 in the afternoon. He seemed certain that the problems wouldn't take him more than 4 hours. I asked him to throw in fixing the broken battery connector so I wouldn't have to worry about that. Luckily, I said to myself, it was still summer so I'd be able to get back into Seattle while the light held. Now I had 4 hours to kill and very little money. I

decided to embrace adventure and walk through this fun filled town. It was Saturday afternoon and there was a mall listed on the map. How could a man not have fun?

Twenty minutes later I had sweat through my clothes and realized that this wasn't a town at all. It was Hell posing as a strip mall. Desperately needing liquid and, more importantly, Air Conditioning I decided to patronize the local Arby's. The air conditioning was only mildly working but sweet Jesus, the milkshake and curly fries saved my life that day. Apparently, the weather Gods had decided to kick up the temperature for a last gasp of summer. The hatred that I felt as I walked around that rural / suburban nightmare place watching every fat bastard on the planet hop into an air conditioned new car made me understand the rage that fueled various past revolutions. I sat stewing in my own bile, watching those I had suddenly come to loathe from behind the protected glass of the Arby's. The remainder of the afternoon passes as I wandered in a heat haze into different miserably depressing stores. One of the worst locations was a Rite-Aid that seemed to specialize in merchandise that was all at the cutting edge, circa 1963. The aisles were all extremely wide, perhaps a nod to the super-sized customer base, perhaps to allow marching bands to go down them when it was to rainy to have parades in the rest of this mallish nightmare town. I purchased a map of Skagit County in the Rite-Aid of the Damned and began my trek anew. As I walked I realized that there was a disproportionate amount of Yard Sales in this area. Everyone it seemed was selling all of their rusted out crap to other, extremely excited residents of the area. It was vaguely like a concert except everyone was ugly.

I saw a Starbucks. My hatred and rage nearly boiled over. I was moments away from charging the store, smashing through the main window, jumping up on the counter and urinating all over the customers. This entire nightmare had begun because my employer, Starbucks, insisted that I get to work at 5AM. A shift I had informed them that I could not work. Nevertheless, they informed me, I would have to be there with or without transportation. It was suggested that I purchase a bicycle. A bicycle. I am not a sporty man. It boggles my mind that someone would recommend I purchase a bicycle as we head into the rainy season in America's rainiest region. Not to mention that last time I was on a bicycle I was in an accident so bad I had to have the left side of my face reconstructed and nearly lost my eye. God Bless this Job Market! I realized I was standing, panting and rolling my eyes staring at the location. Like a good lad I swallowed my anger, saving it for a stroke later in life. I walked in and ordered a drink. It was amazingly bad. The service was awful, the drink tasteless and the service rude. I was stunned. My job, a standard monkey job, was listening to folks tell me how awful different Starbucks were. Turns out they were right. Who knew?

Finally the 4 hours had passed. I could return. My walk back to the garage was just as hot, but there was the sweet thrill of a fixed car at the end. As I approached I realized that my car was still up and being worked on. My sweat ran cold as I pictured hours of extra work and the fees that would entail. It turns out my fear was entirely justified. By 8:00PM I had gotten to know Carl quite well. A reticent divorcee he told me of his trials and tribulations mostly focuses around the ex-wife who had bled him for most of his money and then left him. All the while he kept working steadily on the car. The auto lot had other amusing folks. The salesman who offered me a light and it was actually a hand buzzer. The young hungry salesman who was slightly less attractive than Rodney Dangerfield after a week of drinking. The angry boss was great fun as well. He would come in and yell at everyone to get busy, make fun of the customers troubles then get incredibly frustrated over some minor detail until he almost burst a blood vessel. Towards the end of the night, as Carl continued his labor the angry owner figured out my bill. (Which was significant.) I gulped as I did some quick mental figuring and, realizing I actually had enough in my back account I gave him my MasterCard debit card. For the next 15 minutes he would swipe the card through and nothing would happen. The vein got larger and larger on his head. He began to mutter to himself. I attempted to let him know that the reason was probably something to do with his phone line but he was less than interested in constructive criticism. After doing this for quite a bit he screamed for one of his salesman. The salesman ran up and he told the salesman to take me to a cash machine. I told him I didn't want to do that because I'd get a fee. I swear to God I thought he was going to have an aneurism right there and then. After he,

literally, sputtered for a few moments, he told me he'd compensate me for any expense. The salesman took me to a gas station; I got the cash and paid the man. By this point Carl had finished and everyone was locking up for the night. I shook Carl's hand, he pointed out a few mechanical points. He mentioned he hadn't bled the brakes so to be sure to pump them for a bit. We exchanged a laugh and then the boss came out and yelled at Carl. The lights went out on the lot. The people left. The lot was dark. I realized I had lost the light.

I started the car up, turned on the lights and headed out. I pressed on the brakes. They were mushy but much better. Since the dash lights didn't work it was very dark in the car. I pumped the brakes for a bit and the brakes seemed to get worse. They began to hit the floor. I shrugged and pulled out into traffic. I-5 was easy to get onto although it was very difficult to tell my actual speed. As I picked up speed I decided to hit the brakes, just to make sure everything was fine. When I hit the brakes I again felt liquid spray all over my foot. I quickly reached down, put some on my finger, brought it up and smelled it. It was brake fluid. Carl had fixed the brakes. He hadn't fixed the brake lines.

Once more on this fine day panic set in. This time it was here for the remainder of the day. I moved over to the slow lane and anticipated a very long, slow drive. One of the items that Carl had discovered for me was that the front right wheel was actually the incorrect wheel. Not tire mind you, but wheel. This caused the car to lean slightly to the right, making the steering a bit unbalanced. It was in this situation that I found myself, careening down the highway, not able to see my speed, with no brakes and a wheel that was fighting against me.

About 10 miles went by.

I was just above Arlington. The road was getting more and more crowded. My steering column failed. Suddenly what I did with the steering wheel didn't associate with the way my wheels went. I began to drift across traffic.

I never realized I was capable of sweating so much.

I very slowly began to press the brake. If I jammed it I'd have no way of controlling what way I went. I slowed for what seemed like 10 years but was more like 10 seconds. Finally, after I dropped below 25 the steering wheel reengaged. I pulled off at the exit to North Arlington, took it and pulled into the parking lot of the Denny's. I sat, stunned for a solid 3 minutes. I got out a cigarette.

It was the best cigarette I ever had.

Later: The Epilogue or, "Stop this crazy day!"

The Epilogue: I Will Never Get Home Alive!

I sat while the cold sweat trickled down my ragged face and pondered my situation. Saturday night was here and instead of relaxing at a bar with vaguely friend-like people I was sitting at the North Arlington Denny's in my DeathMobile. I was mightily pissed.

I stared at the Denny's watching a very large amount of people enter. As a matter of fact, the Denny's was a' hoppin'! Now I can understand going to a Denny's, a 24 hour bowling lane or a putt-putt course, but only when you are severely and righteously intoxicated. And yet here was North Arlington's finest turning out for an evening of good family dining. As I walked into the restaurant I saw that the younger 20 something set seemed to come here to see and be seen. I was paralyzed with pity when I realized that they were actually coming here to get laid. It boggled

my mind to think of preparing and primping to attract another and then stepping out to Denny's on a Saturday night.

The crowd was vaguely nauseating as my smell combined with the cheap perfumes and colognes in the air of the foyer. I saw a pay phone and approached and, of course, there was no phone book. A group of young men, out of the prowl, were discussing the hair of a girl, who was, I can only assume, a transplant from the New Jersey area. Her hair was as high as the day is long. I was happy to realize that Aqua-Net was still used in this day and age. Amazingly it seemed that they were attracted to her. As I entered the madhouse that was Denny's and clawed my way to the register I began to feel very faint. I mumbled my request for a phone book to the receptionist, got the book and quickly left the restaurant to get some air, or at least get near some air while I had another cigarette.

I didn't know what to do. My money was almost completely gone. I was still way to far north. I seriously considered attempting to drive the machine again, but quickly remembered that pesky steering problem. I also considered living here. Just quitting my job and being the guy around town who talked about his life in the big city and stopped his car by bumping into houses. One look at the population in the Denny's and I knew that could never happen. I opened the phone book, looked up towing places and began to call.

About 45 minutes later I found I place that I might, and I mean, might be able to afford, if the guy was willing to take a little cash and run the rest through on my card. The dispatcher was very helpful and pretty cosmopolitan. I had a pretty good feeling about this.

You would think I would have learned not to trust my feelings by now.

Another 45 minutes had gone by and I had relaxed a bit. As much as one can relax in the parking lot of a Denny's in a hick town apparently populated by the genetic rejects of the Pacific Northwest. Suddenly the tow truck was there! Salvation! Home! Safety! Both doors of the tow truck opened.

They arrived.

You know those couples that have to be all over each other constantly to prove that they belong to one another? You know those couples that say mean things to each other, that are supposed to sound like jokes, but everyone knows that they actually don't like each other? You know those couples that tell mocking stories of each other just to cause their partner pain? They would be like that, if those couples where overfed whales who, somehow, weren't allowed to bathe or change their whale clothes. To describe the loving couple as unattractive would be terribly unfair to the unattractive. Add to that; the braying voice of donkeys and the breath that smelled vaguely of ass and the picture is near complete. The driver had been working for 3 days straight he was happy to inform me, with no sleep at all. (At least the awful chemical smell oozing off of him was explained, country methamphetamine! Mmm, Country Fresh Goodness in Every Bit!) and the female immediately launched into how he was unable to spend any time with her since he was always working that's why she just drove around in the truck with him. She added many, many more comments but I was unable to focus on anything except for her face. That wretched face. When she spoke you could clearly see her rotten teeth. That was unpleasant, but somehow she picked items out of her teeth while she was talking to you. Then she'd throw the teeth items onto the ground. The driver was interrupting her constantly. He could barely contain his disgust of the City of Seattle. He was shocked that anyone would need a tow there. He was angry that he had gotten this call.

I despaired.

I realized I was going quite mad. The day had simply been too much. The sun and fumes and gas had destroyed my mental process. They continued talking for awhile and then finally they

began hitching up the car. The Good-Bye kiss was both nauseating and fascinating. I realized I was very close to giggling. I had purchased a small flashlight earlier and the only picture that came into my head was taking the flashlight and knocking out one of the driver's teeth and putting them one of the rotten spaces the female had. I wondered if they would be quiet then.

I realized that Drastic mental adjustments needed to be made! I vowed to behave as if my desire to begin a murder spree was something unreal. I would act as if I were at work. I'd place my actual personality behind a polite insipid one and just keep my apartment in mind.

It was a wonderful chance to bond with another person, this long bumpy drive back into the city. On the way down the driver discussed his hatred of Seattle, and his flight from that fine city. It seems he grew up in Jet City. And almost every year he moved further and further away. It seems he didn't like the ever growing urban element in the city. I stared at him.. I wondered what my chances would be if I grabbed his head and pounded it into the steering wheel shouting, "Urban is City, you ignorant bitch!" I figured I was in a tow truck pulling an all steel car doing about 60 so the chances weren't good.

His three day straight working doing too much meth smell was overpowering so I decided to focus closely on his next entrancing story of Seattle. It seems he and his friend were down in Seattle for a rave.

(A rave, he informed me, had drugs at them, and you weren't allowed to go to one until you were over twenty-five. I again, wanted to scream but maintained my focus. He added that while someone like me would never do drugs he had enjoyed them when he was younger. Someone like me? My God, you sorry fool, if you had any idea.)

So, he and his friend met a girl and they went out to Denny's. He wistfully asked me if I remembered the old Denny's by the freeway. (Will I never be free of this awful web of Denny's?) I told him I did. In the early morning the three of them were eating and the girl was talking at a mile a minute. Apparently, as such conversations are wont to due, this one turned to sex. The girl was telling them that she had been in a threesome with two guys and now she'd like to try one with two girls. He told me, "I told her to get the hell away from me. I don't want to do any gay stuff. I told her she was a slut and then we left." Did he realize what he had said? Did he have a hatred of pseudo-lesbians or did his ears not hear the word girls. The poor, methamphetamine eating, smelly, stupid bastard had just outed himself to me and he didn't even realize it. A quiet settled on the truck and we drove.

Seattle was there, it was in view! Never had the city been more glorious, I was looking out on Lake Union and the city lights were shining in the clear night sky. "Jet City", I murmured. The driver said, "It's not called that." My mood was such that not even this blatant stupidity could annoy me. Nearly Home. Thank God.

"No hills!", said the driver, "We can't go up or down any hills, the truck can't take it." Now I was being charged by the mile and had very closely figured out how far everything was. I had no room for error. A light sweat broke out once more. How the hell was I supposed to get to my home without going over any hills. It's a hilly town for Christsake!

I plotted a Byzantine course that was the least hilly cutting through neighborhoods and flat streets all through town. As we drove by the Seattle Center the driver started appreciating the evening dress of many of Seattle lady folk. He began with a rousing tribute to one young woman's breasts. In fact he would continue talking about those particular breasts for the remainder of the ride. He assured me that it was okay with his girlfriend if he looked, she didn't mind at all, he just wasn't allowed to touch. The idea of any person anywhere wanting to touch this person puzzled and saddened me. And of course the girlfriend minded, she was a hideous beast destined for a genetic dead end until she found her knight in stinky clothing. His opinion of the city had

apparently changed, as he waxed philosophical about the breasts of this woman then the next. It was riveting.

One right turn and one left. The chains on the truck grinding. The sound of a car being released. I was home! I was not dead! I hadn't killed anyone! Horary! I paid the driver the cash I had and then he took my card. It was more than I had. I didn't have enough money. I fully panicked. This would be one unhappy man if the card bounced. On a side note I had recently gotten a tiny raise at work that was supposed to have been on my last check. It hadn't been done. Quick calculations told me that it would have been enough. I choked back a scream.

Literally 20 minutes passed. He talked with the owner on the walkie-talkie about how terrible Seattle was. (Apparently Seattle had become bad again without my noticing.) This was Hell, I decided. Not a hellish experience but actual, literal Hell. The car had killed me. The steering wheel failed back up on that highway, I plowed into a bus killing some traveling nuns and I was destined to continue on the journey home for the rest of eternity. The driver pulled out some gum from his front pocket. It was sweaty and greasy. He handed it towards me. I declined.

The walkie-talkie crackled with noise. There was a garbled message passed. My anxiety reached its peak. "Okay." The driver said. "No problem, see you around." Somehow it had cleared. Sure it'd mean a bounced check fee. But he was driving away. I was standing there, outside my apartment, beside the car. I was 11:30 P.M. on Saturday night and I was home! In a state on disbelief I walked up the stairs, fed my extremely hungry cat, and mixed myself a drink. I plopped back onto my couch in sheer relief. Even through this had been one of the worst, most expensive days ever, all was right in the world. It was 11:55 P.M.

I sat for a bit. I stirred my drink. The ice cube cracked and a piece of ice flew into my eye. I jerked in pain and spilled my drink.

It was after midnight.

A new day had begun.

-Matthew Murray, 2003.