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I was a car guy most of my life. I became car aware pretty early. By the time I was eight or so I was making model distinctions. I blossomed into full scale car lust after I turned 10 and we moved to Adel.

I have vivid memories of sitting in study hall reading a story in CarToons about the travails of a drag strip owner with skimpy crowds. While talking with a friend he pointed to the grandstand and said, "Those are MT, and I don't mean Mickey Thompson." That was the first time I'd seen the initials MT associated with the name Mickey Thompson, a certified deity in my young car guy universe.

38 years later, I would complete the MT circle by learning a lot about his life and, to the extent they will ever be known, the details of his murder, from one of my friends and from Mickey's son, Danny. I learned a lot of the story from Danny while I leaned against Mickey's world land speed record car, an object of my life's dreams that I never imagined I would ever see in person, much less examine in leisurely detail.

But life is like that. If you put a question out there, if there is a circle that is not closed, life, the universe, God, can and will answer it, as long as you remain open to it.

Sometimes, the questions arise in your youth, and take a long time to get answered.

When you're a kid, cars aren't just cars, they are living breathing creatures, creatures you animate by your broken-knuckle wrenching, late nights on the lift at Standard or DX and endless dollars poured into the Adel NAPA store. By your sweat, and the magic of a little Ethyl, you create a life, a rumbling, rocking (depending on your cam profile), roaring (depending on your glass packs) life.

And that creature, that life, becomes your first independent world. It provides freedom of movement and is a universe of your making, a universe that you control, it is your first major empowerment.

That creature, that life, can change your world and your place in it. It can elevate your station, alter your caste, and get its doors opened by girls who would otherwise never look at you.

And that creature, that life, can provide entry into exclusive tribes, the Ford, the Chevy, the exotic and elusive Mopar. Tribes that without your decorative scars, your logoed T-shirt, your idling entry ticket, you could only view from afar. Without your car, you were exiled, always wondering what secret rites and rituals were being performed behind those garage doors leaking light out onto the Summer grass.

One of the first cars I helped animate to life was Gary Peters' Falcon. A rare two door factory sport package, it featured bucket seats, a console, a factory floor shift and the fast revving 260 V-8. Red over red with tasteful white accents in the interior, it retained every single piece of factory trim. It was clean, compact and very quick - the perfect street racing sleeper.

My friend Ed Lewis provided the Bona Fides required to gain my entrance into Gary's garage, the holy of holies, the inner sanctum, where Gary's Falcon sat, hood off, guts open. They didn't know it, but it was my first time, I hoped they'd be gentle, and most of all I hoped I wouldn't screw anything up.

Over that cold Iowa Winter we worked in the tiny garage. It was unheated, like every other Iowa farm garage. Heat was saved for the shop, where important machines from the farm were maintained and repaired. A pickup deserved the shop. Cars were luxuries used by the women to go to town. Teenager's cars were below women's cars on the pecking order, barely above lawn mowers.

Consequently, we had a limited amount of time Gary's Falcon could displace his mom's four door gathering snow in the driveway. We were as quick as we could be as we alternated breathing down our curled hands in a vain attempt to restore feeling with attempting to hold onto the frozen tools. Every frostbitten minute was glorious. It was my first time breathing life into a still, cold automotive creature.

As the seasons changed and Spring's warmth crept under the garage door, Gary's creature grew less cold and inched closer to warm blooded existence.

The unique smell of the world's richest soil awakening from its Winter rest began to permeate the garage. The leaves on the trees sprouted, promising another season of renewal, growth and life. We hoped and prayed that our Winter of work would yield the same.

Finally the day came. Nothing will ever match the moment when Gary turned the key, the motor cranked a few times and sprung to life. It ran! It lived! Let's go!

Relegated to the back seat due to my junior, apprentice status and by the fact there were only two bucket seats up front and they were both a year older, I nonetheless felt like a crown prince as we motored into town, (Oh, the low rumble of that ride!), and cruised the streets of Adel.

It was Gary's Falcon, finally on the streets, making its debut. In such a small town, where everyone knew everything about everybody, it was no secret the Falcon was being built. But finally, here it was, in the bright, revealing daylight.

We made the obligatory first stop at Haselhuhn's Car Wash to clean off the garage dust, and then began the procession.

Like all tribal rituals, The Loop was a very highly prescribed and strictly defined activity. One motored stately west, up the hill, past Tiny's Horse and Buggy Inn, past the Stables Motel, and made a slow right into Horseshoe Lanes, down the parking lot and then a very slow pass of the bowling alley, with only a quick glance inside allowed to see who was on the pinball machine or what young lovely might be at the counter with her friends and Tombstone Pizza.

The Horseshoe Lanes segment was a very important part of the Loop. Later, when I built my own engines, I knew guys who would choose a cam profile just to create the perfect loping idle as they passed the bowling alley.

But in Gary's Falcon, he hadn't chosen the cam to impress the crowd at the lanes, he'd chosen a mild lift to optimize the output of the motor with his available exhaust. We had a modest but noticeable lope as we passed by the bowling alley entrance alcove.

I was assigned glance duty. No one on the pinball machine, no babes at the counter. We were cleared for takeoff.

Form dictated a slow exit of the parking lot. Your pace was critical because to remain cool, you must roll the exit, meaning your speed must put you at the top of the lot during a gap in traffic. A California Stop was required, just a quick tap to light up the brake lights, with no penalizing deceleration, and then rolling out onto eastbound Highway 6.

Since the average traffic count on 6 through Adel was probably no more than 400 cars per day, interleaving your way into the traffic stream was not a challenge of orbital mechanics. But even so, a Looper was stamped severely and permanently inadequate if they misjudged and were forced to come to a full stop for anything other than a passing town cop, or God forbid, the malevolent Iowa State Trooper, Verlyn Beal.

If conditions warranted it, a minor peel out was allowed on exit. These conditions included the usual criteria list for an Iowa teenage boy: a) girl I want to date in the parking lot, b) girl I used to date in the parking lot, c) rival guy in the parking lot or worst of all, d) rival guy with the girl I used to date in the parking lot. Lurid power slides were considered bad form at the exit from Horseshoe Lanes, but were tolerated in the case of scenario (d), especially if the girl you used to date dumped you for your rival.

Gary was a logic match of zero on all four scenarios, so we motored stately eastbound on 6 and headed back down the hill to the four way stop.

In that era, the four way stop was the town's lone set of honest-to-God traffic lights and a gas station on each corner. They were real gas stations, with mechanics on duty, service bays and kids pumping the gas, checking the oil and washing the windshield - every windshield, every time.

The four way stop presented the ultimate quandary to a newly mobilized young man in his car. From that point you could reach any place on earth. U.S. Highway 6 would take you all the way east to New York or west to California, the land from which everything cool flowed.

Highway 6's right angle counterpart was 169, running directly north and south. You could run 169 to Canada, as some did later to avoid the draft, or south to New Orleans, as others did to discover the mysteries of Mardi Gras. From the four way stop, anything and anywhere was possible.

But to stay on the loop, one waited for the green and turned stately to the left.

This moment, the turn at the four way stop, was the peak of the promenade from the car guy's standpoint. The posers, those who were All Show and No Go, built for the endpoints, the girl turns, but the four way was a guy's turn, a car guy's turn.

When you worked at the four way stop gas stations, you always gave an eye to whoever was cruising the loop. You didn't actually have to look, since you could recognize every commendable car in town by its exhaust note. In fact, if you had any interest or ability at all you could lay in bed at night, open window aching for a Summer breeze, and tell who was on the loop just by the exhaust sound, even if you lived blocks away.

At the four corner stop, the cars built for speed, worthy of respect, deserved a real glance. If a car had recently scored a major street racing victory out at DC Drags, then it deserved genuflection - stopping what you were doing and following their path accompanied by a discernable recognition, a flick of the windshield brush or a tipping of a dip stick would do.

The measure of your months of work was told at the four way stop. A long awaited car by a respected builder deserved immediate respect. A low end effort by a beginner deserved none. The only way to climb the ladder was via the crucible of DC Drags, a section of county highway northeast of town, or other ad hoc quarter mile strips of pavement recognized as valid tests of manhood.

On this day, Gary's Falcon's debut day, we received a couple of tracking glances on our left turn at the four way stop. That was high praise, and probably in part due to the rarity of the ride.

A small block project was noteworthy, and the Falcon's diminutive 260 was a veritable sewing machine compared to the big blocks shaking the pavement around town. The question these last months had been, "Who would build a Falcon? A compact?" But Gary's Falcon was factory, it was clean and it sounded tight and sweet. And that made up for a lot.

It was important not to overplay this moment. If Gary gave a full nod, or worse yet a sweeping wave, all the frozen work of the Winter would be for naught. He played it close to the vest. Gary gave a miniscule wave, nothing more than return flick, a ripple of his fingers on the wheel.

I could read the gratified look on his face in the rear view mirror. All the work had paid off. Gary had earned a four corners tracking glance. This was heady stuff for an untested, unproven, small block Falcon.

Elated, elevated, floating north, we crossed the tracks and descended to the square. Standing as a sentinel, a gatekeeper, on the southeast corner, diagonally across from the courthouse, white and shining, was Harvey's Uptown DX.

A modest little station, Harvey's was the bastion of a hardened cadre of pure car-guy denizens. Harvey Greenslade, the old man, always drove spotless examples of the GM empire. From his wife's immaculate Caprice to his pickup to his wreckers, everything was clean, straight and complete.

As in any organization, the standards and ideals of the leader were reflected in the company. Sons Jim and Steve Greenslade and Tom Becker ran the shop. Each drove pristine examples of whatever their economic position would enable. And whatever they drove, it was real. No posing was tolerated.

A shifting assortment of teenage wage slaves worked the pumps. Should they have the temerity to enter the shop, each was grilled relentlessly and mercilessly about all things automotive.

The car guy standards were high and everyone was tested every day. Which years and displacements, exactly, had four bolt mains? Which option code trannys, exactly, were narrow ratio? What, exactly, was the stock primary and secondary jetting of a Holly 650 double pumper carb? Thus every single one, even the lowliest kid sweeping the drive, was a tested, vetted, car guy.

As we rolled towards Harvey's Uptown DX, we knew all of this. We knew that although it was the smallest station in town, it was the toughest test of all. This was the true car guy gauntlet. Only the most worthy received a glance.

And to make matters worse, Harvey's was a citadel of GM loyalty. From the 409 to the 302, from the 283 to the 427, nothing rocked the world of Harvey's like a high output GM V8. And here we were in a Ford, Found On Road Dead, in Harvey's Uptown DX parlance. And not just a Ford, but a 260 compact Ford. Chevy didn't even make a V8 that small. What would be our fate?

We crossed the alley separating Harvey's from the Adel city garage. This was it, our 10 seconds passing the royal reviewing stand. Everyone in town knew Gary's Falcon was due, especially the car guys at Harvey's Uptown DX, who monitored the car guy world of Adel like a doctor whose life depended on the recovery of the King. But what no one knew, was how it would be received.

The distinctive sound of the tiny 260, its pistons no larger than beer cans, with its perfectly matched exhaust, had been picked up by the NORAD class, long range Harvey's acoustic monitoring system as we came over the tracks more than two blocks away. Everyone there knew something new was in town. And it was headed their way.

As we came in view of the service bays, I braved a glance to the right, peeking out from behind the C pillar, hoping to not be noticed. Tom Becker, ever cheerful, ever curious, ever smiling, stood at the doorway of his bay, his white blond hair in its perpetual disarray, wiping his hands on a soiled grease rag. His eyes twinkled, reflecting approval. Then he, ever so slightly, nodded.

Out of the shadows of the second bay came Steve Greenslade, his dark eyes shining behind his large, black framed glasses. He squinted, trying to place this new entrant in the gene pool, then recognized it as the long rumored Peters Falcon. He examined it slowly, sweeping it front to back to front, as a man looks at an attractive woman top to bottom and back again. Slowly, his trademark boyish grin spread across his face.

Next came the stoic Jim Greenslade. Older, dryer, remote and unreachable for those in our age cohort, he was dark and mysterious. Rumored to be capable of evil temper, we feared and avoided him, except when we needed his wrecker to pull us out of ditches lining icy gravel roads. He remained in the shadows, lurking, only the glint of his eyes revealing his presence. But I could see those eyes, and they were tracking us. It was a tracking glance.

In the tiny, glassed in cashier's office I saw the patriarch, Harvey, shift his position. He stood in his usual sentry position at the end of the counter, his presence equal to a fleet commander on the air bridge. Improbably, impossibly, he was rotating his body to better see us. We all froze, afraid to breathe. None of us could believe what we saw. Harvey, the old man, the ultimate arbiter of all things Adel car guy, Mr. GM, was looking at us.

Harvey considered the Falcon. He looked at the complementary mild rake, the perfectly proportioned tires, the tastefully selected wheels, the muted exhaust perfectly matched to the tight little V8, the clean paint, and the rare factory package with all the pieces in place. Harvey considered all of this, and for a tiny collection of milliseconds, the corners of his mouth formed a barely perceptible grin. His eyes met mine and I saw more than any of us debuting Gary's Falcon could have ever dreamed of, Harvey liked it.

We barely noticed the mottled sunlight filtering down through the interlocking tunnel of trees forming dancing patterns on the brick streets. The run to the northern terminus of the Loop was a blur. We met a few other cars dispensing nods and glances along the way, but we were in the clouds and didn't notice.

Not until we turned left into the Pearson's Drive In parking lot did we snap back to reality. This was the most important girl turn of the Loop, with rigid rules for See and Be Seen.

We were beyond elated. We were as full and complete teenage boys as ever lived. We gazed with supreme confidence on those parked in the lot, sipping malts and cokes. James Dean never looked more unreachable in the heights of cool than we did on that circuit through Pearson's.

We were there, Gary's Falcon was there. We had arrived.

We exited the lot slowly, as protocol prescribed. Gary chirped the tires as we headed south, as was required. We returned to the Loop for another countless circuit, each one adding another grain of sand to the beach of our life's experience.

Eventually, Gary tired of the Falcon, as car guys do. He wanted another challenge, a bigger motor, more speed, and of course, most importantly, a bigger back seat.

The Falcon passed on, out of the hands of an Adel car guy, never to be seen again. I always wondered what happened to it.

Because of my association with it, and my Aunt Linda driving one, I had a soft spot for Falcons in general, and mourned their passing from the highways of the Midwest. When I moved to California it was still a rolling automotive museum, and I spotted a few, usually stock, original hubcaps, un-restored, with a blue haired first owner at the wheel. But eventually, even those dwindled and disappeared, and I was left with the nagging question, "What happened to the world's supply of early sixties Ford Falcons?"

The rule of the universe remains, if you put a question out there, remain open to the answer and are patient long enough, eventually, you'll probably get the answer.

And sometimes the answer arrives in a very unexpected place.

When we crossed the border into Argentina the roads changed. Instantly, they were filled with French brands of all eras. Sixties and Seventies Renaults, Peugeots and the ultra-quirky Citroens were everywhere. Mercifully, they were mostly as slow as us, so we had company clogging up the two lane roads.

Also, Land Rover Defenders were ubiquitous. Within two hours I saw more Defenders than in a month of Chile. It appeared the world's production of Defenders had been split 60% to Africa, 39% to Patagonia and 1% to the rest of the known world.

And something else, too - early sixties Falcons. Everywhere.

A few were derelict, on the last owner who would drive them into the ground and then pick up another car descending to its last station in life before the wrecking yard.

But the vast majority were well kept. Most had all the trim and almost every one had the original hubcaps. No blue smoke on compression (rings) or decompression (valve guides), these were fresh, well maintained motors. They had good tread on the tires and no endless suspension cycle of worn out shocks or squeal of brakes gone bad. The interiors ranged from good to amazing.

All the world's Falcons had come here, to northern Patagonia, Argentina. It was beyond description. It was beyond explanation. It was incredible.

It was the Falcon Sanctuary.

In memory of Tom Becker, a great guy who died much too young.

Postscript:

Adel, Iowa went through a lean and dark period when four stop signs replaced the signals. Eventually, the dark ages passed and real honest-to-God traffic signals have returned.

The four corners now has three operating gas stations. All three are of the mini-mart, self-serve variety, although Fullers BP/Amoco (the former Standard station) still offers service in a detached service bay building.

Haselhuhn's Car Wash finally bought out the little house that fenced it in after the resident old lady passed away and expanded to multiple drive-through automatic wash bays.

Pearson's Drive In eventually became a restaurant, finally closed and was bulldozed.

Tiny's Horse and Buggy Inn, a renowned restaurant / supper club, closed, was demolished and replaced by an apartment complex.

The Stables Motel became a monthly rental operation with used cars for sale on the highway frontage strip.

Horseshoe Lanes has survived a long list of transient owners and is still there.

Highway 6 was orphaned from the U.S. highway system and is now Iowa State Highway 6.

Harvey's Uptown DX is still there, albeit gassless. Jim and Steve run a towing and repair business from the location.

Kids still cruise the Loop.

DC Drags still attracts local law enforcement at all hours of the day and night.

And, as I have proven, you can still venture to anywhere in the world starting from the four corners junction of 6 and 169. From the four way stop, anything and anywhere remains possible.

The Falcon Sanctuary



Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.
You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel/index.htm>