

## **RACING THE LIGHT AT DERSHEM'S CORNER**

*A line of elms stood sentry on each side of the road just before the new, improved ramp approach to the state highway intersection. As we came upon the elms, which up to now had obscured any view of the traffic light itself, I saw a glint of red through the branches.*

We were in the house on Greeley Chapel Road less than a week when they hung a traffic light at Dershem's Corner. Dad told of it when he came home from work that day.

"Did you see what they've put up at the corner?" he asked my mother as he met her in the kitchen, sounding more amused than annoyed. "A traffic light. Not just a flashing yellow one; a red-yellow-green, honest-to-God traffic light." I was in the front room, which was no distance at all from their conversation, the house was that small.

"That's peculiar," Mom replied, which always meant, "I'm confused."

Dad went on, "Not a house or building of any kind on that corner. Two pastures, an orchard, and a corn field. And a traffic light. What was wrong with the stop sign?"

"Do you suppose it's because of that young couple and their baby who were killed?"

"Who were they? Just some poor transplants from West Virginia. Not like they were the governor's nephew or something. And it's not like other people have been killed there."

"Not lately," Mom said quietly.

"Hmmm?"

"A couple of my uncles were killed there when I was a little girl," Mom recalled.

"Okay, like thirty, thirty-five years ago. That doesn't exactly make it a trend."

"I suppose not," said Mom. "Maybe it's just a bad intersection for accidents. That corner does appear rather suddenly if you don't know it's there, and people do seem to go too fast on this road."

On this road. I had shortened it to Gree C Road, which Dad later took to mean Greasy Road, for some reason. Our house sat midway along a flat, four-mile straight stretch without stop signs. Two miles to the left out our driveway and you were at Dershem's Corner, our usual direction whenever we went somewhere. Two miles to the right, toward Auglaize County and Midwest farming infinity, you came to the Erie Lackawanna Railroad tracks beside a little stream and a cemetery, where we would pick wild strawberries in the midsummer's swelter.

Dad's route to work took him to Dershem's Corner for his wait at the new traffic light, across the broader, much busier state highway, and four miles or so further on Greeley Chapel Road to the small factory where he worked, making some kind of airplane parts. It wasn't many days before he set a pattern of grumbling every time he came through the door from work.

"Light is red *every time I hit it*. Every single time!"

"Well, the state road needs more time," Mom answered vaguely.

"More time for what? I sit there three or four minutes and I'll be damned if more than five cars go by."

"Please don't run a red light, Wallace. I don't want you to get killed there too."

The only regular occasions I had for riding with my father through that light came on Sundays when we went to and from church. Sure enough, the stupid light might be green as it peeked through the elms overhanging the approach, but no matter how Dad timed his assault, the thing turned red in time to arrest his advance. It was a veritable drawbridge lifted just before an invader could cross the moat.

"I swear someone sits in a house and watches me come up onto that light," Dad began repeating as the days rolled on.

"I suppose they do," Mom replied the first time he alleged this, not catching his drift.

"Someone has a button to press to change that light whenever they see me coming."

At first Mom said: "They do not, Wallace. That's ridiculous." On subsequent days she took to saying:

"Which house, Wallace? There's no house near that intersection." Eventually she merely complained that she was tired of hearing it.

The traffic light became Dad's overwhelming obsession. But Dad had a surprise for him, whoever it was, wherever he sat, who had his thumb on a traffic light switch. Dad bought a new car.

I had wondered when he would do it for two reasons. One, I had already concluded privately that that would be the way to break the spell of the traffic light, and two, Dad had promised me an incentive for moving out to the country: I would inherit the black 1939 Chrysler that had served as our family car for ten years and had already been broken in for 15 years before that by Dad's uncle, Homer Gettle, over in Fort Wayne.

At 14, I was not licensed to drive, but Dad had intimated, in a lighter moment, that he would let me learn by driving up and down Gree C Road. "You mean right away?" I had asked, not ready to believe it.

"Sure," he had answered, and spoke as well of using the lanes in Woodlawn Cemetery and Farout Park when we could go off together for practice.

There was just one problem. The Chrysler needed some work. Nothing major, he had assured me. But it wouldn't be ready for me to take out onto the road until the problems were corrected. I'll say right here that it needed two things: some brake work and an adjustment to the throttle linkage on the carburetor.

I knew about the brakes. Whenever we were out, Dad had to pump them a few times before we were confronted with any occasion to stop. I understood, to a point, what this accomplished. I had seen brake shoes and brake lines exposed on other vehicles. Fluid was funny stuff. That's what I knew.

I was also aware of the linkage problem. For months Dad often had to "kill the motor," as he put it, and coast to the side of the road, where he would raise the left side of the gull-wing hood and flip a short rod back down because it "went around the eccentric." Then he could set out again as if nothing had happened, until it happened again.

Dad's new car was a '59 Chevy, two-tone baby poop. Besides being twenty years newer and relieving us of

the mechanical problems, this car had one additional advantage over the Chrysler, as I saw it: It was a station wagon. The old Chrysler, a four-door sedan, stood six feet tall. Two steel bars bracketed to the rain gutters made a roof rack. U-bolted to this rack rose a covered plywood box, painted black like the car. Inside it were the essentials for living in an extended family whose members were reliably unable to provide their own garden hoses, rope, copper tubing, lamp parts, and such. Since Dad always kept a rake and sometimes other garden tools lashed to the lid of the box, the overall effect was that of a black armored car with a machine-gun nest on top, the rake handle nine feet off the ground and pointing forward.

When the station wagon arrived, the stuff from the black box found a new home in a jumble behind the new car's rear seat, while the rake found a new, lower perch on the Chevy's luggage rack. After that, the box lay empty atop the Chrysler.

The first few mornings with his new wheels Dad smugly rolled onto Gree C Road headed for work. By the second week he was back to accusing someone of sitting in an upstairs bedroom of some house nowhere near the corner, with a finger on the switch to change the light as Dad approached.

The last I heard them speak of it, Mom suggested that Dad come home from work the long way some day, so that he could approach the intersection not by Greeley Chapel Road but by the state road, Route 117. Surely, if 117 was favored, then he would be too, she had reasoned.

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I suppose Dennis Dershem's name had passed my ears during the first few days in the new house. Mom was quietly excited to move to this stretch of road, where every house for miles was occupied by a Dershem or Sunderland or someone else connected with her ancestors. So, for days, she enumerated her cousins, many of whom she hadn't seen since childhood, even though they had never been more than ten miles away, and most

of whose children she had never met.

Like me, Dennis was one of those children. He was sixteen and a half when I met him but I had him by a few pounds and an inch or two.

It was late June. School was out. Dad was at work. My little sister, Raelene, was at the next house up the road for the day. Mom and my littler sister, Tammy, had ridden off with a carload of female relatives.

I was mature enough to stay home alone. The Chrysler sat on a large patch of mown grass next to the long driveway. I spent the early afternoon happily lying underneath the car with a toothbrush and a coffee can of gasoline, cleaning the grease from every inch of the undercarriage. In two days I had polished the lower engine and suspension components this way, and now I was grooming the transmission housing as if it were going to a wedding.

I said "alone." Beside the car, his heaving chest too high to squeeze into any space larger than a culvert, lay our old Saint Bernard, Boner, (named by Raelene when she was too young to pronounce "Bernard").

I was thin then, and scooted easily about on the cool, shaded grass beneath the great machine. I had paused behind the transmission to regard a pair of exposed, inward-curving brake shoes poised to clamp onto a small drum on the driveshaft. I pressed them to the drum and let them snap back to rest, agape. A thin cable ran along the frame and its frayed end stopped just short of this pair of shoes. Here, then, was my parking brake. I mentally added it to my list of repairs, none of which I knew how to do myself.

Dennis appeared as a pair of Converse sneakers bracketed by a pair of spoked wheels somewhere near the front bumper. I ignored him for a long time. I wasn't ready to meet kids. Here was one on a bike, and I had my own car already, for crying out loud.

"This is a straight eight, ain't it," the sneakers said at last. "New Yorker. First year they made a New Yorker."

I squeezed the parking brake shoes to meet the drum a couple more times and let them snap back, mostly in

order to make some mechanical noise, before slithering out into the light. I decided on a mildly smart-aleck approach, although it didn't really describe me. "What cousin are you?" I asked.

The kid looked hurt. Then something in his countenance rose up to meet my toughness. "You junkin' this piece of tin? Here, let me help you strip it," he said and parked his bike.

"Hell, I ain't junkin' it. Runs like new. 'Fact, my dad just sold it to me," I claimed.

"You have your license?" The kid helped himself to one hood latch and raised that side.

"Naw'chet," I admitted grudgingly. "You?"

"Didn't pass the test yet."

"You took it already?"

"Yeah. I been sixteen since January. I can drive, though. Drove this road here since I was six or seven. Cars, tractors, even trucks. They don't care how you really drive on the test. They just want to see how you can act like a old lady behind the wheel. I didn't catch onto it the first time. Next time I'll know what they want. Stop way back. Turn your head way left and way right like maybe a herd of cows is s'posed to stampede by any minute. Proceed with caution. Drive like you left on Saturday to get to church on Sunday."

He had me grinning. "You really are sixteen," I accepted.

"Sure. You?"

"Almost fifteen," I exaggerated. I was really fourteen and one third. And I reflected that once you hit sixteen you didn't have to think in age fractions any more.

"What's your name?" he asked me at last. He had established his superiority in years, so was now empowered to demand that I reveal my identity. Until we knew our rank, neither of us could ask. He was also empowered to open the driver's door and slide in behind the wheel.

"Larry. Larry Miller," I said.

"Okay, Larry Larry Miller. I'm Dennis Henry Dershem."

I made some comment about too many Dershems to keep track of them all.

"I'm the only one you'll ever really need to know. Don't bother with the rest. I can tell you all about 'em sometime. Most of 'em are just simple. Work too hard but don't know nothin' and don't have nothin' to show for it. Lived out here all their lives. Me too. Nobody interesting to hang out with, except a couple of the girls are pretty nice if you know what I mean."

I didn't know. "You mean our girl cousins?"

"Oh, yeah. We're cousins, ain't we. Yeah, they're our cousins."

"Whadja mean, 'pretty nice?'" I asked, leaning on the door frame. This was getting somewhere, although if it was going in the direction I suspected, it was alien territory for me.

"Just nice to look at and stuff like that," Dennis frowned at me from inside the car, then, as if disgusted, he added: "We don't mess around."

"Good, 'cause I have sisters," I said lamely, not wanting to elaborate. I didn't want this kid, cousin or not, to think about them in some funny ways, either.

He seemed to forget the subject. Instead, he gave me a raised-eyebrow look that spoke of mischief. With a half grin, he asked: "You have a key to this thing?"

"Nope. Not yet."

"I seen you drive up in this here car when you moved in. Lotta cars, so I was hopin' this was yours. I like the old ones."

"What kind do you have?"

"I'm gettin' our '51 Studebaker pickup when I get my license." I was at least even with him here. I wasn't "getting" this car. I already had it.

"No key, huh?" Dennis mumbled, still in the driver's seat. He stiffened to reach into a pocket of his jeans. The thing he held up looked like a pair of wires with alligator clips on every end. "Do you know how to hot-

wire a car?"

Part of me leapt with excitement. Part of me shuddered in panic. Since I hadn't answered, he went on: "It's easy," and he reversed himself on the seat, head toward the pedals and feet in the air.

"Yeah, well, I don't really have – uh, permission to drive this yet. Besides, it has some, you know, small problems."

"I can check 'em out," he said, reversing ends once again.

The starter button stuck out from the dash. Dennis pumped the gas, floored the clutch, and with an exaggerated gesture, pushed and held the chrome button. The Chrysler replied immediately with the contented hum of leashed power.

I ran around to the passenger side and jumped in. It was in no way my intention that the car actually move an inch from where it sat, but hearing it run for the first time under my authority made me flush with eagerness.

Holding the clutch down, my cousin put the column-mounted shifter through the three forward and one reverse positions several times over. He pressed in the large knob under the dash marked OD, and then pulled it back out. This was the only thing he seemed unsure of. "You leave it in overdrive all the time?"

"Yep," I said, unsure myself. I recalled something Dad had said about it going into overdrive by itself when it needs to – if the knob is out, I assumed.

Dennis shoved the knob in. "No sense in wasting it," he said. "Whatja say was wrong with it?" he then asked.

"Uh, the carb linkage sticks –"

Dennis revved the engine high and let go the gas. It calmed right back to a sweet idle. He did it again, the engine complying once more, then just said: "Yeah?"

"And the brakes are weak."

"You just pump them up," Dennis said, and did so. I watched as the pedal started low and then went down with shorter strokes. Dennis stood on it for a moment to show that it was hard.

"What else?"

"The parking brake is unhooked."

"Where're we fixin' to park that we need a brake?"

"Oh, okay," I said.

Then he pulled it smoothly into first and let the clutch out very professionally. We were pointed toward the back field, away from the road, so I remained silent as we crunched onto the driveway and rolled past the house.

Dennis let the car make a couple of slow circles in the barnyard behind the house while he rolled down his window. Then he spun the wheel with ease and pointed us in the direction of the road. Boner was trotting along my side, pleading to go whithersoever we might be headed. I stepped onto the running board, threw open the rear suicide door, and slammed it after the big oaf lolled in.

The car turned right onto the pavement and accelerated so gradually it felt like a train pulling out of a station. I rolled my window down and actually relaxed as I peered over at my distant cousin. He was fiddling with the few switches and buttons that protruded from the warped and buckled white plastic that coated the metal instrument panel. Then he threw me a reassuring grin. Boner laid his heavy chin onto the back of my seat and sniffed the stirred air.

Dennis began explaining all. I let him feel superior and just said "Oh," over and over. He thought the radio, huge and brown and '30s-looking, was the neatest part. Even back then they had push buttons to set the stations.

Then he showed me about shifting. This I already knew, too, but it didn't hurt to hear it analyzed so thoroughly by a truly good teacher.

Over the course of four or five minutes we lazily covered the couple miles to the railroad crossing. Dennis let the Chrysler roll to a stop directly over a set of tracks.

"What are you doing?" I asked, annoyed, not alarmed.

Squinting up the rails, he said: "Look. You can see halfway to Indiana one way."

"Halfway to Jupiter the other way," I added, agreeable, and was about to gently urge that we not wait until a headlight appeared in either direction when Dennis backed into the maintenance road alongside the tracks and turned us back toward home.

"Let's give it a little try-out," he suggested, picking up speed in first.

As I uttered: "Uh..." he knifed into second and pressed the gas. The flat-head straight eight had reserves I had never seen my father use. Boner began panting between us, and Dennis dropped it into third, then pulled out the overdrive knob. The road ahead was clear and quiet for at least a mile.

We gradually picked up speed until Dennis stomped the gas as hard as he could, his back stiff against the seat. The car glided forward as if we'd changed gears once more.

My cousin-teacher-pal grinned at me and then let off the gas – only this time the pedal didn't rise from the floor in response.

The car still accelerated. Dennis exaggerated the act of lifting his foot from the pedal, but the car didn't take the hint. We both peered straight ahead. Dennis muttered some curse. Boner began a faint whine.

Dennis next began calmly pumping the brake. Each push sank deeper toward the floor until the brake pedal refused to come back up at all.

"Quick! Hold the wheel!" Dennis ordered. As soon as I reached toward it he let go and dove to the floor. While he tugged the pedal, I kept us on the center of the road, where the line should be. Within a couple seconds, with Dennis's tugging, the pedal separated from the rod that connected it to the linkage.

Flipping onto his back, on the floor, Dennis glared at me wide-eyed. His head lay on the dead brake pedal,

his feet pressed into the back of his seat. Back-handed, over one shoulder, he pressed the clutch. The engine, freed from the work of propelling the car, screamed in agony. Boner howled.

"Let it out! Let it out! You'll blow the engine!" I yelled.

Dennis was already letting go in order to fumble with the wiring behind the dash. He yanked some wires out and made some sparks. The radio hissed. Something popped like a dropped light bulb. But nothing changed.

Fields whisked past like sample house lots – wheat, corn, wheat, clover, oats, wheat – as fast as you could say the words, which, frankly, it wouldn't have occurred to you to do. Occasional trees shot past us like close-set fence posts on either side, doing that rapid wum-wum-wum that trees make when they rush past. The air inside the car was a hurricane. The two or three houses before ours, along the road, weren't even blurs. I did recognize the green lawn of our house looming on our left, but before I could think of anything, like BLOW THE HORN, it was gone. (I thought I saw a red car in the driveway, way up by the house. That would be Mom and Tammy being dropped off. That would also mean Dad should be getting out of work soon.)

With Dennis still operating behind the dash, yanking his hand back now and then, and cursing, I held the wheel true. I had no idea how fast we were going – I doubted, in a flicker of lucidity, whether anyone standing in our driveway even would have realized that a car had sped past – but when I glanced at the speedometer for the first time I felt the loss of presence that always accompanies shock. It was stuck on the maximum, but I was too stupefied to register what that was. A hundred? A hundred twenty??

Just beyond our house came a set of three minor dips in the road. Whenever he had the family along, Dad liked to take these at about fifty, giving us all that momentary sense of weightlessness that kids love and mothers disapprove. I knew those dips well. At 50 they were just over three seconds apart.

Dennis had just hauled himself upright when we topped the first one. As we fought for the wheel – Dennis leaving the steering to me and only trying to steady himself – I counted one second to the next and one more to

the third bump. The car's suspension bottomed out on each one but there was no graceful sense of weightlessness in the series. The car remained a level, shuddering projectile.

As we took the bumps I lost some control of the steering while Dennis's chest slammed helplessly against the wheel. He seized it first by the white-metal horn ring and pulled back, pilot-fashion, breaking the ring right off. Then he leaned into the wheel with terror in his eyes and took over once more. He held us on course.

My mind has always been good at math. Three seconds between dips at fifty meant one second at a hundred fifty. Still the old Chrysler seemed to be gaining. And at a mile a minute it would take two minutes to cover the straightaway from our house to Dershem's Corner. At a hundred fifty, we would cover one mile in something like 24 seconds, or two miles in – something less than a minute!

As we closed the distance on the Corner the car's suspension, or drive train, or entire body – it would never again matter – began to rumble violently at the strain on all systems. Something vibrated. Then something else in sympathy. Then things began to fly off in rapid succession: hubcaps, which were discovered months later, the after-market rear-view mirrors, and the wide wooden lid to the black box above us.

Nevertheless, our velocity climbed.

There wasn't time for thought. It's true that a few images bulleted through my mind as fast as the minor features passing along the roadside, each vision representing an option, I suppose, but each with a built-in objection: Jump out – but, then, how do you tuck and tumble at that speed, and what of poor Boner? Turn the wheel slowly and take us into a field – but the ditch was too deep and we'd roll over. Step on the clutch and let the engine blow, but what kind of explosion would that make in our faces?

As if to accentuate our predicament, Dennis jerked uselessly at the parking brake handle. It locked in position – holding nothing. He tromped one more time on the flaccid brake pedal...

Then time ran out.

A line of elms stood sentry on each side of the road just before the new, improved ramp approach to the

state highway intersection. As we came upon the elms, which up to now had obscured any view of the traffic light itself, I saw a glint of red through the branches. In another second we zoomed under the arch of high branches like an experimental fast train entering a tunnel. In a half second, wum-wum-wum-wum-wum-wum, we were out the other end of the tunnel, approaching Mach-point-3. Boner was licking my ear, but it was more his shrill whine that bothered me, so I slunk down in my seat and let my eyes roll skyward.

When we hit the grade at the edge of Route 117 it felt as if we'd taken a giant speed bump. Already lying low in my seat I saw the traffic light pass the windshield – and it was green!

Not only was it green, it was barely arm's length above the windshield. Then came the percussive crash of traffic light meeting gun turret. And that's all I remember until all had become still once again.

Dad would later tell how he had taken Mom's advice and had come by way of 117 in order to approach the intersection that afternoon from a different direction. Another car, a pokey one, blocked his way or he's sure he could have beat the yellow light and lunged around the corner onto Greasy Road before it gave us the green. That he was prevented from racing the light became the remaining bit of evidence I needed for the existence of a benevolent God. Instead, he coasted to a stop, grinning at the irony of the curse, and stared at the yellow lens giving way to the red from behind the obstructing vehicle.

He would then tell how the filament in the red light facing him had barely begun to glow when a lumpy, black fuselage without wings, resembling a 1939 Chrysler, with the dog, Boner, facing him and pleading at the rear window, rocketed beneath the light, its wheels fully eight feet off the ground and still ascending.

The meeting of the plywood box with the gently-swaying traffic signal was the bonus in the show, the sort of special effect they don't print on the ticket or even announce in the pre-show publicity. Only the lucky seat-holders find out about it.

Plywood chunks fluttered far and wide while the sheered metal jacket of the signal spun skyward. Severed wires completed the performance with a shower of sparks. It was practically a two-ring circus, for if the

audience were watching the sparks, they were missing our finale.

Of course, none of this passed through Dad's mind as we were leaping the highway. The instant passed too quickly, and Dad, for the moment, was dumbstruck.

The driver in the stopped car ahead of Dad's opened his door and stepped onto the pavement in order to peer after us over the roof of his Rambler, too late to truly catch our descent. Dad didn't wait another second but jerked his wheel to the right, gunned it, and passed on the berm, then cornered sharply right onto Greasy Road. And greasy it had become.

Dad missed our touchdown, well beyond the improved grade on Greeley Chapel Road's opposite approach to the highway. That's good, although he heard it as he was breaking free of the traffic. What he missed was the violent annihilation of one mighty automobile which had served as his family car for ten years; one classic car that had promised to serve as my prize for many more to come.

There was nothing to salvage. Of course. By the evidence, the motor threw a rod and burst the oil pan as soon as the rear tires were relieved of the pavement's resistance. The weight of the engine pulled the front of the car downward, permitting, we suspect, a neat four-point landing. All four wheels broke clean away first. The front bumper, meanwhile, turned under and scraped away the oil pan, the battery under the driver's seat, pipes, shocks, drive shaft, differential, and gas tank. These and all their mounting hardware strewed the roadway in a slurry of engine oil and rear-end grease and water.

The two big, vessel-like front fenders fanned outward to become the wings on a snowplow, rotating the car a hundred eighty degrees to face Route 117 again, as if the hulk were contemplating another aerial assault on the light. While we were airborne, the bi-fold hood turned into a crow taking flight, only to collapse and tumble into an orchard. One rear door flopped open on the landing, the upper hinge apparently a victim of fatigue.

Dennis's face and chest did a number on the steering wheel for the second time. He spent seven weeks in

the hospital, preparing for a rigorous court appearance. I broke my hip, lying, as I was, low in the seat and below the dash. I was out in ten days, wondering how I had escaped breaking my back as well. As I see it, my twenty-percent hearing loss was a consequence of the wheel-less car's screeching on pavement and the cannon-like sound of the near-empty gas tank exploding belatedly when it struck pavement after a quick flip in the air.

Dad parked well back from the menacing wreckage and watched as Boner exited lamely from the stilled, dark, mechanical carcass. The big dog tried to run but dropped at the edge of the road, whined and tried again. And dropped again. We couldn't afford vets in those days, but he healed. Ever afterward, when he needed to be taken somewhere, we would have to tackle him and drag him into a waiting car.

In the days and weeks that followed Dad had little to say about the affair. Nothing he could say was anything but obvious. "The next car you own will be the one you earn yourself." I heard that once. And once I heard him mutter in measured syllables: "One hundred sixty-five miles an hour!"

While I was still in the hospital, the three or so other witnesses who had comprised our audience made urgent inquiries with my parents and Dennis's. Then they went about their lives, the way people do who have been present at other incredible events. I don't mean events like plane crashes, which aren't incredible, just spectacular. I mean something incredible, like... like a three-ton car lifting off and taking kamikaze flight to destroy an offending traffic light.

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Dad seemed mostly pleased in one small way. For nearly a month, after the flight of the New Yorker, a stop sign filled in for the traffic light, and that suited him fine. Then the light was replaced, only this time – (What? Did they think the moment would ever be repeated?) – they hung it a good twenty feet above the intersection

instead of the standard fourteen or so.

From then on Dad had one green light after another when he approached that corner. My mother said it was because he had learned to time them and to come up onto the intersection more casually than before.

By summer's end the state settled on a simple warning signal, flashing yellow for the state road and red for Greeley Chapel Road. A one-paragraph blurb in the *Lima News* noted the change. It didn't mention our accident but said the change had been mandated in order to discourage those motorists who might otherwise be tempted to race the light.

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