The '57 Olds

Sam Schwartz

Battle Creek High School

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol1982/iss1/17
THE '57 OLDS
by SAM SCHWARTZ
Battle Creek

The old car pulled around the tight corner, crossed directly over I-405 and began the long climb into the Santa Monica mountains. She was a barely elegant '57 Olds hardtop, looking none the younger for her half-done flashy sky-blue paint job (over old dirty brown and rust acquired in Michigan); nor for her two shiny spoked hubcaps over out of place mag rear tires. A bright orange hood cowl indicated that her engine had been souped up, but she wasn't showing her stuff now. She simply pulled; not too fast, not too slow either, just pulling along with a quiet lack of enthusiasm. She moved because she had no choice, but she held no grudges. Still, she always managed to look elegant.

Behind the wheel, Joe Natalski's thoughts ran at much the same pace as his car--steadily, but with no desire. Agatha (the car, named after the legendary Agatha Christie) had some zip, all right, but now was not the time or place for it. First, he must stop home and talk to his wife. It would be hard, but it had to be done. Most of life was hard, too hard. But one still has to live it. It's all one ever gets, it shouldn't be thrown away lightly. But one still reserves the right! Anyway (he scratched his thick shock of raven hair, his mind was wandering again) the business at hand was talking to Linda, and he would have to get that done with before he could finish the evening's work.

She wouldn't like what she was going to hear, but it would sound better than, a hell of a lot better than the truth! He'd tell her that he'd be quitting the studio job. Editing just didn't make it. He needed to create. Maybe he'd go into TV news, feature writing. That could be an interesting enough business! But he'd have to get out of L.A. It was too hot and the smog made him choke. Chicago would be a better town. There'd be work and the air was cold enough to keep him healthy. Then he'd tell her he was going downtown for a publicity meeting or somesuch and let her mull it over for a while. Not that her immediate condemnation nor her eventual bitterness would ever really matter to him. He'd just fix up old Agatha and head down toward the cliff...

Of course, Linda would want to know how the last day's shooting went. Joe (at the present) worked as a script editor for a popular sitcom. He'd started work for the studio as a script writer, but a younger and just enough brighter man had taken the position away. It was the usual line--"We greatly value your contributions to the studio and we feel that you will be even more useful to us in an editorial position. . ." Most people would be overjoyed upon receiving that note, but not Joe. It meant a
hey pay raise, but with no kids, he and Linda were well enough as it was. The fact of the matter was, Joe had an inborn need to create. He just wasn't happy editing. Anyhow, the season's work was finished as of today, and next week Cherylle would go off on a prom tour. (Cherylle Howard was the starlet rushed to unexpected fame, mostly through Joe's writing, by the sitcom. The producers thought she was a nobody, along with the show, but the fans loved her.) He'd go on an extended vacation. Joe grinned. Very extended. One thing script editors didn't have to do was tag along after the star!

"Hey!" He swerved sharply to avoid an oncoming car. Agatha responded instantly, as usual. "Another maniac driver in these hills. It's hard enough trying to stay alive without . . .

"Stay alive . . ." Anger faded quickly as it came. How soon one forgot one's dearest plans. He'd no need of anger now. If someone wanted to get killed, he would. And . . .

And there went the sudden sharp turn to the left onto the cliff road! It figured! He'd been here two years and he still missed the turn every third time. Besides, the crazy driver'd flustered him. He swung right into the driveway he used as a frequent turnaround and pulled out into the opposite lane of the road along the cliff edge. The road from Burbank actually joined the cliff road going downhill, but Joe lived on another street that could only be reached by turning uphill to the left. However, the cliff road joined at such an angle as to give the appearance of just another road coming in from the left. Until you were past it and noticed the cliff dropping off beside you. Agatha passed by the cliff road and began the long climb north along the edge of the Santa Monica.

These hills reminded him of another quite similar place where he'd spent most of his childhood--Portland, Oregon. That place had hills, all right! Thinking of those giant upthrusts of basalt brought back memories. He'd been born in Toledo, Ohio, but his parents, bless them, had moved to Portland when he was four. He was an only child and his father had been an insurance executive. His earliest memory was of driving around a bend in the Columbia gorge and seeing the hills rising above the far side of the city against a blood red sunset. The cold of Toledo (and the wanderlust) were in his blood, but the beauty of the West Coast was in his heart.

He'd gone to kindergarten at the age of five in an elementary in Northwest Portland. (The city was divided into five sections, each a community of its own. At this time, Northwest was still rather small, but it grew quickly.) He'd been, according to his now dead parents, the smartest brat in his kindergarten class, but come first grade, he'd dropped to second and stayed there all the
way through graduation from Lincoln High. His parents had been proud of him; he thought he'd failed. He'd taken an early interest in the verbal arts. He'd shone in writing, but was eclipsed in math/science and graduated salutatorian, with a 3.96 GPA.

He'd also taken an interest in athletics, primarily swimming. Although he probably trained the hardest of anybody on the team, he lacked the ability to make a real winner. He finally dropped the team and gym in his junior year and added a drama writing course to his curriculum. Another failure. That was also the year in which he got the one B, in trig, that cost him his slot in the co-vedictorianship. Again. In his senior year, he dropped math altogether and took mostly media arts classes. He accepted a scholarship from a minor literary guild. It was a major scholarship, and it, combined with some parttime work on the side, would serve to get through a masters in media arts. But then his parents died.

"Ahh...There's the spot." The always unexpected point where the road swung sharply out on a shoulder of the escarpment, giving a stunning view of the L.A. panorama spread out before one like a baseball field covered with little toy building, and big toy sky scrapers, and all interlaced with the web of the great freeways. He slowed Agatha to a crawl and looked out over the guardrail. East and a little south lay the heart of downtown. The top stories of the skyscrapers were still alight with the sun from behind the Santa Monica. Farther across the empty space he could see the gold splash of sunlight on the Hacienda Heights, barely visible through the late afternoon smog. Northeast the thin double line of I-210 stretched away east past the Rosebowl and Pasadena. Not yet visible around the outthrust of rock lay the Hollywood Bowl and Beverly Hills. Below was Burbank, and the studio he had just left, for good. Much of Joe's life revolved around this one spot in the hills above L.A. It was here that his parents had been killed when the brakes went out on their family car. It was here that he'd met Linda. Six years after his parent's death, he'd just got his M.A., he'd come here to visit the spot. He'd taken a bus up from downtown, got off at the cliff, and started clambering down about the cliff face. She'd come by in a Hertz Rent-A-Car and stopped, looking out at the view. He'd quit exploring and appeared at the cliff edge in the middle of her view, his business suit rather dusty and rumpled from the rocks. She'd politely (and smilingly) asked him what he was doing and he told her. She hadn't replied with the usual solicitous pity he always got from women. He knew right then she was something special. They'd talked awhile, then Joe suggested dinner and they climbed into her car and drove through the rush hour traffic to Chinatown. They were both strangers to L.A., but she knew about a good Cantonese restaurant. Two months later, they were married.
It turned out she was a business consultant, and a good one, which meant she could find quite gainful employment almost anywhere. He, at this time, was a moderately successful short-story writer specializing in mystery and science fiction. Joe swung Agatha left onto the home road and left the cliff descending back into the shadows. She was working in Denver, Colorado, and he simply went to live there with her. The marriage ran beautifully. Joe began his most productive period of short-story writing. They lived happily and well for two years. He climaxed his writing with a mystery novelette entitled The Perfect Murder. It was an eerie story of a car driven off a cliff, in fact, the very cliff where his parents had been killed. A very few clues led away from the obvious (and incorrect) killer to the frightening solution. It received great reviews from the critics, but due to its uncomfortable size (30,000 words) and Joe's complete lack of other works of similar stature, it was never published outside of a two month serial in a moderately popular mystery magazine.

Then, in the summer of their second year of marriage, the wanderlust caught up with Joe. He accepted a job as a script writer for a public radio theater program taping out of Detroit. Linda was in the mood for a change of scenery too, so she wrangled a well paying job as a consultant for GM. They moved east.

After a year in Michigan, Linda decided she wanted children. Joe didn't. He couldn't take up the father role he thought had led to the death of his own father. He still thought his parents had died on account of him, his needs and wants. Linda was justifiably angry, but she put on a good show of understanding and forgiveness. But it just wasn't the same. They lived on as before, but grew steadily apart. It was evident after the theater moved its taping studies to Portland, partially because of Joe's quiet urging, a year later. Linda was crying for intimacy, an end to isolation, but Joe couldn't face it and hid. This evasion only aggravated Linda's need, only made the problem worse. After another two years, when he took the job in Burbank, the realization finally came smashing in on him. He felt a desperate need to make up, somehow, anyhow, but Linda flat out told him it was too late. The disclosure implicit in her words then, and others, took a while getting through; but by the time it did, the desperation had dimmed to a chronic worry, and thence to a dull, everpresent pain in the back of his chest. He finally realized she must be shaking up elsewhere, but by then it didn't matter anymore; it was just another failure to chalk up next to the rest of them. Besides, he'd been doing some of the same lately, with none other than Cherylle Howard! How do you think she became such a success? But that was only fun on the side, another mark of failure. He knew, with an awful ache in the pit of his stomach, that he'd never be close to Linda again. But damn it all, he loved her!
"I love . . . her . . ." His spirit hit rock bottom. But it wasn't rock, more like quicksand. His thought ceased, he simply existed in a bottomless well of misery, while Agatha drove herself up the last steep switchbacks of the home road.

Agatha's tires crunched on gravel, and Joe somehow shook off his gut-wrenching depression. It was instantly replaced by a sharp pang of anxiety at the sight of his attractive brown ranch-style house. It stood on the west side of the road with the last slopes of this particular ridge of the Santa Monica rising just behind it. Another two switchbacks up and the road looped around to the north back down into Beverly Hills. The lease on the house had been a good deal, he thought, an unexpected wry grin twisting his face. The studio must have wanted him bad to get it for him! But a year later they made him an editor. Of course, they thought it was a great compliment to go on the editorial staff after only a year at the studio. Shows what they know!

But inside the house was Linda, and he had to have that last talk with her he could go. It was just one of those things one had to do, like writing a will. Well, he'd be better off getting it over with now. With that last thought, he shoved open the sky blue door and slid out of Agatha. He turned to look at her. Did he detect an attitude of sly humor? Probably just the evening light playing off the half-done paint job. But he often thought he saw a similar—expression—between Agatha's slightly rusted fenders. Without a doubt, anyway, she had her own unique personality. She was Joe's best friend.

He turned quickly and strode up the walk, an unusual spring in his step. He was ready. He pulled open the brown western styled front door and stepped into his living room. "Hey Linda! Ever see a car wink?"

She gave him an annoyed scowl from the phone in the kitchen doorway. He wasn't surprised to find her on the phone. She spoke into it, in a fake-gossipy tone: "Gotta go. Bye-bye!" She turned into the living room. "Not too recently. Why has Agatha been smarting off again?"

"How'd you guess?" Non-directive therapy. Humoring him. That girl knew too much psychology. Couldn't use it well enough, not on him, at any rate. He grinned, "She sends you her love!"

Linda did not reply. A strange look crossed her sharp features, half guilty relief, half here-we-go-again annoyance. She reached up absentely and pushed a couple stray strands back into the blonde cap formed by her tight bun. She always kept her appearance severe, with a sharp, biting edge that kept her to all outward scrutiny quite the business girl. But Joe knew she had a few other commodities going for her in her consultation job. For instance . . .
"That was Mrs. Brown on the phone," Linda chatted airily. "She's quite . . ." deep breath," . . . quite a little gossip."

For instance this transparent "Mrs. Brown" story she kept feeding him. He'd checked, months ago, and he knew there was no chattery Mrs. Brown in the green house down the street. He was sure she knew he knew, but she never changed the line. "Tell her to look for some real juicy stuff in tomorrow's paper."

"Where?" Humoring him again. She sat down on the sofa, her arm across the back, one long leg curled under her.

"Oh, I don't know . . . In the obituaries."

"What? Joe are you all right?"

Damn! Almost gave it away. "Oh fine," smiles. "Just . . . joking . . . of course. No I'm great! Really! Got the season's shooting done today. Now I get a break."

"Oh really? That's good. Want to go off someplace, maybe big bear lake, for the weekend?"

This was insane! That was the nearest thing to a proposition he'd had from her in months! "Maybe. But first I've got something serious to tell you."

"Oh?" Worried frown, one eyebrow slightly raised, great acting! "What is it?"

"I think I'm going to have to quit this job next season. Move back east, maybe go into TV news. You know, feature writing."

"How?"

"I've got some connections in Chicago. I should be able to get a decent slot with some local news show. Besides, I've got a good speaking voice."

Linda laughed. "Yeah, but if you go around looking like a tornado just hit you, you're not going to make it very far!" Joe glanced over into the hall mirror. He did! His raven hair was blown wild from the wind through the car window. His tie was draped loose beneath his casual shirt in turn opened three buttons down.

"Maybe so. But I just can't take this editing business. I've got to get out of here!"

"Now you wait a minute!" Her tone was severe, business-like as her hairstyle. "You're not seriously considering running off again after your 'ideal job' again. You know you're never going to find it. I found that out long ago. It doesn't exist!"
"Yes I am! I have every right in the world to try to make my life what I want it to be! And I'm going to. It's my life!!"

"It's my life too!" She stopped cold. They were both glaring down each other's throats. He was angry as hell because she was treating him like a child, and she was angry as hell because he was treating her as a slave. "You can't... keep... doing this to me!" She was suddenly sobbing against the sofa back. Joe was taken completely surprise by this sudden outburst. He hadn't planned for this!

He took a step toward her, reached out a tentative hand for her shoulder. She cringed. He bit back stinging tears of his own and said, clumsily, his voice cracking, "Just think about it for a while. I have to go." He pulled back a step. "Agatha and I've got to go meet a friend." He rushed blindly to the door. At the last second he turned. "Linda?"

"Huh?" Her tears were gone.

"I love you."

Agatha stood parked at the top of the ridge above the brown ranch house. Her hood was up, somehow adding to the look of cunning imposed by her blue paint job. Her humor was infuriating Joe at the moment. He replaced the last screw in the cover of the brake fluid reservoir and tossed the empty water bottle down the slope into his backyard. Maybe Linda would find it. If so, she would have enough info to figure out his plan. But only post facto. He was safe now. It would be a professional job. Only amateurs cut the brake lines, it was too detectable. Professionals used water in the fluid. The man in his novelette who engineered the "perfect murder" was a professional. Hell, the whole job had been in the planning for three months now, ever since he'd found out he couldn't handle life any more. Agatha was smirking again, damn her! Here he was, he'd just finished preparing what could be considered her execution, and she took it as a big joke! Hell, she was just a car! No, she wasn't just a car, she was an elegant old lady; she didn't joke, she just took everything in stride as it came to her. That was why she was his best friend. He stopped short just before slamming her hood back down. He'd given her everything he could for her, ever since he found her in a shabby Denver used car lot; he'd spent hours on her engine and paint job; and now he was going to kill her. No! He'd never do anything to her she wouldn't want. She was simply going to repay him for his years of dedication by helping him finish what he had to do, help him finish his life. He slammed down the hood, patted the cowl, and climbed inside. He was determined to go ahead.
The Lord is my shepherd ... Huh? Where'd that come from? Joe turned the ignition key. Agatha kicked over with a healthy roar. She was ready. Sunday school as a kid in Portland; his parents; his parents' funeral. The solemn words and their morbid implications had been etched into his memory, even though he'd never used them since that occasion. The 23rd Psalm. The Death Psalm. He could hear the quiet, sad, and somehow fake voice of the preacher still, somewhere in the back of his skull. His parents had been visiting L.A. to inquire into orientation at U.C.L.A., where Joe was to enroll in the fall. The brakes had given out in their old Ford, and they'd plunged to their deaths over the cliff that gave such a fine view of the city. The car had been destroyed in the ensuing explosion and fire.

Good God, his thoughts were starting to sound like the 11:00 news! Agatha had been waiting patiently, almost cooly, while he had been remembering his lost past. He shifted her into gear and slowly pulled out onto the downhill road ... I shall not want ... No, I shant, shall I? he told the old, sad preacher voice in the back of his head. It would be a relief to leave. Joe concentrated on the road. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures ... He was at peace with his consciousness. Here came ... and there went the first curve. He passed the front of his house and waved. Bye-bye. That was the easy turn. He would be moving faster further down. He had to calculate his speed exactly so that he could get past all the switchbacks and still have enough momentum to clear the cliff edge with its guard rail. He leadeth me beside the still waters ... Peace.

Joe wrenched the wheel sharply, feeling Agatha's tail slip ever so slightly. This was going to be rough. He let up on the gas. Couldn't get too eager. This was a feeling to be savored—total peace with one's self. Few men ever realized it, except maybe when all men died. Of course, he was about to die. The feeling didn't bother him, though. Maybe it hadn't penetrated yet. Maybe he'd psyched himself out with all his plans so that he no longer thought of it as death, but as a success. Maybe, deep down inside, he felt this, like all his other plans, would fail. Failure. One word, summing up in a breath all his reasons for first living and striving, and now for dying. It was the sum total of his life. It was inevitable in just about all he did. His life-long list of failures passed through his mind like ghosts: swimming, his high school GPA, his parents, his short story writing, Linda, his work as a script writer ... But he'd had one success, The Perfect Murder; and he'd find his ultimate success, and with it, peace. He examined his situation; he didn't look forward, backward, outward, any longer; just inward. And inward he found only tranquility.
There was a rather long straight section after this next curve... Joe spun the wheel again. The road swung in a wide arc along the edge of the slope, past a long row of expensive but nonetheless ticky-tacky houses with magnificent views that got them lived in. He passed by the one belonging to 'Mrs. Brown' and waved, just out of spite. At the end of the row the street split; one street turning back up to the left, the other looping around to the right and down into a long, treacherous set of switchbacks that led to the cliff road a mile ahead and 300 feet down. He restoreth my soul...

Joe took pressure off the accelerator. The last few houses were slipping by on his right now. And the Psalm was back. Now did the next line...

He guideth me along straight paths for His Name's sake... "No!" He found himself screaming. "It's not right!" He caught himself just in time to clear the next turn. Hard right. Agatha's tires skidded. The speedometer read forty. "It is right!" he admonished himself sharply. "Now just hold on, Agatha." He felt her gathering speed.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... Death. "Death!" He wrenched past another switchback, his tires squealing. Death. The full force of the idea, of non-existence, came smashing home. Death. A nameless panic born of the will to live slammed his foot down on the brake pedal. He didn't want to die, not now! No response from the brakes. The car continued to accelerate. Death. Fifty-five miles per hour. Death.

"Pull yourself together, man!" Joe barely squeezed past another turn. I fear no evil, for Thou art with me...

"Lord, let me out of here!" No. He banished the panic. The brakes were gone. He couldn't downshift because he needed both hands for the steering. If he tried a sharp arresting turn, he'd probably flip Agatha, which would be just as fatal as the cliff, and could cause an accident with another car. Therefore, he had to go through with it.

Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me... A longer straight away, and more turn, and we would be out. He would have to engineer the scene to look as if he had tried to turn uphill onto the cliff road, that was how the novellette was written. The novellette, his first great work, would serve as the model for his last. That was why he chose this particular cliff. The Perfect Murder was a suicide!

Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies. ..What was that? A hunger pang! He whipped past the last turn in a power slide and floored the pedal. The harvest moon lay dead ahead, just rising above Hacienda Heights, Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth...
Over. The brown and light blue '57 Olds shot out and down in a long, graceful parabola, pieces of the smashed guardrail flying out in front of her. Before she smashed down on her trunk and rear fender, Joe had time to intone the last two lines of the Psalm:

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

The morning was bright and clear, thanks to a crisp ocean breeze that somehow made it through the Santa Monica. The rising sun silhouetted the tips of the downtown skyscrapers and lit a portion of the ridge a couple hundred feet above the cliff road; but the cliffside was still deep in the long shadow of the Hacienda. There was slight chill in the air, and Joe shivered as he limped along the rocks 100 feet below the twisted guardrail, toward the crushed heap of metal and glass that had been Agatha. He'd checked out of the hospital with multiple lacerations, a gash in his left arm, two busted ribs, and a sprained ankle, as well as a bill as long as the bandage on his arm, unwound and stretched slightly. Agatha was dead.

He would set his life straight, somehow. He admitted it, his gut feeling had been right, his plan had failed, just like the rest. He'd had a fun time getting the cops to believe his story about failed brakes, especially with the black tire marks indicating breakneck acceleration leading toward the guardrail. He managed to get away with a $200 fine for not keeping his vehicle safe. The cop who wrote him up had said that he'd never get near an old heap like that on a bet. Joe would have busted his nose right then and there except he'd been too weak to sit up in his hospital bed. The reason he'd failed was plain stupidity; the car hadn't caught fire because there wasn't a drop left in the tank. Either he'd forgotten to fill it up or had someone, maybe God, punched a hole in the tank while he was in his house?

The divorce had been easy; out of court, no nasty scenes or anything. Linda got the lease on the house in L.A., and Joe took the Chicago news job. Insurance would give him enough dough, if the fine were successfully glossed over. It would be better for both of them. He always wrote his own ticket; he hoped one day he'd be able to quite writing it and settle down. Maybe even get married again and have kids. Maybe. But Agatha was dead. She'd given her life to straighten out his. He'd
probably never have a better friend. He had one last debt to pay off before he could be free. He stepped carefully through the broken glass and reached out a loving hand to touch her twisted fender. Her weight shifted slightly on the rocks. Suddenly the look of sly humor was back, oddly unfamiliar because her "face" was upside-down. Joe smiled. She would always be his best friend. With his free hand he reached into his coat pocket for the little black prayerbook he kept but rarely used; he had what he needed memorized, but preachers always used a book at funerals. He thumbed through carefully to Psalms, then read aloud:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He maketh me to..."