

THE CAR

Most days we boys played war. It's the one world of fantasy in which a boy can get reliably lost – before the obsession with sex sets in, anyway. World War II was popular. We were always battling Nazis, storming the beaches, launching grenades, taking and retaking Normandy. Every once in a while, it was Viet Nam but the stink of ambivalence – was it even really a war? – muddied the mission objectives. Everything worked better when it was Good vs. Evil, black and white, or as in the case of today, Blue vs. Gray. Yes, today it was the Civil War and the North was winning, though not without taking heavy losses. We boys elbow-crawled along the ground to the cover of a low mound. We wore the blue caps of the Northern infantry (left over from a recent adult neighborhood costume party). We were vastly outnumbered, but that was nothing new. The Confederate troops emerged from the sunken road, covered in dust from head to foot, gray as ghosts. Their courage reeked of desperation. Brandishing revolvers and firing wildly as they came, they yelled their crazy yells to wake the piled-up corpses. Suddenly, an explosion rocked us as a caisson blew. The driver's body flew high in the air. Limbs and trunk and blood and guts and the shattered fragments of the wagon rained down upon us and covered the

adjacent cornfield in wood and gore. Explosion noises erupted from our lips and we threw dirt in the air to dramatize the extent of the destruction. Thankfully, no one was hit by shrapnel. It was a Gettysburg of a day and with our toy guns, sticks and dirt clods we were fully immersed in the occult power that battle holds over the souls of boys. It was a feeling that the first person shooter games and paintball (not to mention the reality check of time in the service) could never quite recapture.

This was a July day in the days before the Warming and the air was clean and cool feeling. Cotton candy clouds puffed happily across the sky, like a Photoshopped backplate borrowed from some old Renaissance painting. So it wasn't too stifling-hot but we were parched from the exertion. Captain Steve, a year older and our acknowledged leader, gave each of us in turn a welcome drink from his canteen. We wiped our dirty faces.

And then Captain Steve laid us out with a doozy of a revelation.

"My brother fights for the Confederacy."

The foxhole fell silent, as each of us boys imagined what it would be like to be honor-bound to kill one's own brother. Not just pin him down, and drool loogies inches from his face, but actually *kill him*. Holy Monitor and Merrimack, that was heavy.

But this was no time for sentimentality or introspection. Captain Steve lowered his spyglass and called out that he could see Nathan Bedford Forest astride a dapple gray stallion in the distance, and Stonewall Jackson and even Robert E. Lee surveying the carnage with cool eyes. The bullets continued to rain and the casualties continued to mount and the parrot guns bellowed to deafen the devil. "It's getting damn hot in here boys!" said Captain Steve. But there was only one way out of hell and that was forward. Following Steve's hand signals we scrambled 20 feet to the left and flung ourselves down behind a shallow granite overhang. It was good cover. Now it was time to give those Rebs a taste of their own business. "Fix bayonets, men. On the double-quick!" As we moved out, all the pent up tension of the day was released. We out-shot, out-yelled and out-fought those Rebs. With a charge of dazzling bravery the boys of the Fighting 69th were able to retake Purgatory Ridge, in this, the 19nd Battle of Bull Run.

The troops refreshed themselves and nursed their wounds over Cragmont root beer. Steve held court and we younger boys listened intently. He was only a year or two older, going into 7th grade, but he already had the signs of manhood – a slight

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definition to the bicep, a wisp of dark down on his upper lip, a high forehead genetically predisposed to a widow's peak, and a hint of tempered steel in his glance under a darkening brow. He wasn't like the other older boys, he was more thoughtful. And he would never tease us, or make us eat dog biscuits. This was our Captain Steve. And we all wanted to be just like Steve when we grew up to be 12.

One of the younger boys pointed at a passing hot rod, an immaculate '68 Firebird. We all whistled and expressed admiration, and then looked to Steve for confirmation. Steve looked into the distance with those inscrutable eyes and gave his verdict.

"We should go back to the days before cars." When no one waded into the silence, Steve continued, "The world would be a better place without cars. We should just use horses. And ride bikes."

Was he being for real? Or was he just messing with us, as he sometimes did, pulling rank, reminding us that he was among us, but not of us.

Peter, a short boy with shoulders beginning to broaden and a teeth-gritting, jaw-jutting hustle, whether the game was basketball, kick-the-can, or soccer, spoke up. And when he spoke, he spoke for all of us. "'But not all cars are bad. What about ambulances?'"

We all nodded. It was a good point. But Steve held his ground.

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"More people have been killed by cars than will ever be saved by cars," said Steve, and spit into the summer dust, ending the discussion.

We boys finished our Cragmont sodas in silence.

In the early 90's, the Japanese car makers started working on a secret initiative. They knew the Warming was coming, and they were worried that they would be held responsible. They didn't want to be the cigarette companies of the 21st Century. After watching the debacle that was the electric car, and realizing the stranglehold that the "energy companies" (i.e., Big Oil) had on the economy and therefore the policymakers in Washington, they decided to split the difference. Create a "hybrid." Honda was the first to come to market, with a sleek bucket of bolts called the *Insight*. One of the problems with the two-door, 70-mpg *Insight* was that it still looked like a Jetson's-style nerdmobile of the future – aerodynamically covered back wheels and all. In '93, Toyota introduced the first generation hybrid *Prius*, so unremarkable in its ugliness that it could be called the world's first invisible car. It disappeared into the backwaters of history without a splash.

It was with the second-generation Prius that the movement really took off. The part-gas, part-electric Prius was a compromise in every conceivable way. Indifferently drivable. Modestly ugly. Mildly techy. And, HUGELY popular. Given its milquetoast soul, the backlash was tragi-comic in its intensity, manifesting itself in throwback plastic buffoonery such as: 70's muscle car knockoffs, as well as 'truck nuts' - scrotum replicas hung from the trailer hitches of V-8 pickup trucks. But dangling testicles could not forestall the inevitable and within 25 years, nearly all new vehicles were "hybrids," i.e., powered by an internal combustion engine, augmented with an electric motor. From there, it was only a small step to electric cars. Everyone agreed, the electric cars were better, hands down. Faster, more fun to drive, easier to maintain. Soon the combustion engine was a nostalgic niche, a curiosity; a collector's item. But the damage was done. The Earth was haggard, abused, chronically fatigued, bereft of beauty. Her weariness was contagious. Distracted, medicated and doused in CBD, we ping-ponged from one screen to the next. Even language itself, became, like, I don't know, sort of like, imprecise? Lacking in certainty? As if communication itself questioned its ability to communicate. Got all sorta, kinda muddy-ish. Truth was just your opinion. All the good, positive words like hope, peace, charity, joy, love and optimism received the same tired eye roll - verbal artifacts,

ruins of a bygone time when, just for instance, Miami wasn't a type 7 malarial swamp.

The Warming came on more slowly than the alarmists predicted but rapid enough to cause widespread destruction and societal upheaval. No one really anticipated the extent of the fires, and how they would compound the greenhouse effects. No one really understood the inter-relatedness of the jet stream and sea currents. The impact on weather and changing migratory patterns. The devastation caused by the bark beetle. Desertification. The water shortages. Temperate zones turning tropic and the north becoming the new temperate. The land and resource grab occasioned by the ice melt. The warming waters accelerating the melting of the ice caps exponentially. The homeless refugees of third world corporate colonial exploitation coming home to roost, and the first world, dealing with the mounting global humanitarian crisis, putting up literal and figurative walls. The rich hid behind their encrypted bank accounts and password protected gates in AC cooled mansions and penthouses, systematically dismantling all checks, all balances, all unions and all rights to resist and organize. The organs of free speech

became a grim parody. The only news item you could rely on to be even remotely impartial and accurate was the weather.

"Today we have an E-Storm Watch in effect. Look out for flash flooding. Those nearest the high waterline keep your inflatables handy. The air quality is moderately unhealthful, so wear a mask if you plan any outdoor activity. Back to you, Brenda, for sports."

The erosion and exhaustion of soil. The nitrogen blooms and rise of drug-resistance bacteria, microbes and contagions like malaria and TB. The mass deaths of arctic mammals and fish. Sea lions, harbor seals, salmon, cod. The beaches becoming stinking sulfuric boneyards; a medium circle of hell lacking only brimstone. The crows, pigeons, seagulls, ants, and cockroaches – and curiously, rabbits – didn't seem to mind. Some days it seemed like those were the only species of creatures left.

No joke, today I read about a genetic breeding experiment where they're trying to get the crows and rats to eat the cockroaches. That scientist will win the Nobel effing prize.

Maybe the humidity got to everyone. No one had the will to fight anymore. And the South did rise again, slowly. Relentlessly. Inevitably. When the vote for secession came up in the House it went through like a no-contest divorce. There was a bit more discussion and posturing in the Senate, but it passed there, too – with some abstentions. It's possible that everyone just figured that the president would veto it in the end, so no one would have to lose face. But in the end, Madame President called Texas' bluff. The "Lone Star State" had threatened for years to make good on its slogan, and with the north drowning in tropical thunderstorms and the daily compounding of federal debt, she signed. What followed didn't exactly mimic the pattern that preceded "The War Between The States," but close. After Texas came South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, and the north half of Florida, "Floribama."* (*A name that started as a joke but gained momentum as a way to delineate a separate identity from the more multi-cultural Caribbean-influenced southeast coast of Florida.) It was as if the Southeast Athletic Conference had decided to create their own nation, and so subsist solely on sports licensing and gambling revenue. Tennessee was the lone holdout. And really, with the balkanization happening around the world, what made us think that we were immune? The former Great Britain had become

Scotland, Wales and England; Italy had shattered into a number of city states, as had Greece. Catalonia was its own nation, independent of Spain. The global economy was borderless, global, block chain and instantaneous but everyone wore their localized nationality like a badge, or more accurately, like their football club, on shirts made in Bangladesh. The South was emptied of nearly 15% of its population, as rising heat and a general unwelcome atmosphere forced self-identifying 'progressives' north. Camps were set up in Wyoming and Montana - far from the Tsunamis and now reasonably temperate.

On the eastern seaboard, people fought the sea, wind and elements with the same grim acceptance that they'd always fought the Long Island RR and the 7:30 commute. Lower Manhattan became a system of dykes and canals, beautiful in its own way. I liked to think that 600 years after being founded by the Dutch, it finally, truly became a New Amsterdam. My personal pet chimera was that Canal Street become an actual canal, but no such luck. It remained a hawker's paradise, one booth after another offering novelties, rhinestone encrusted snap-back brims and knockoff jewelry.

And that brings us up to the present; or really, yesterday. I was leaving my spin class, the full VR experience, with the bikes that tilt and climb. I'd done 43 miles around Lake

Wakatipu on the New Zealand's South Island before walking back out into the Howard Street gloom. The City smelled of ammonia and the now-familiar swamp rot. Above, the low ceiling of clouds roiled and tussled like rabid cats in a dank wet bag. I walked over to the Starbucks on Lafayette and out front I saw a black lab waiting patiently for its owner. When it looked up at me my memory broke its leash and took off running.

"Hey, it's a Bosco," I said, half aloud and to myself.

I'd loved Steve in the way only boys can with that cool unquestioning alloy of trust, honor and loyalty. Steve was my hero, quite possibly immortal and best of all, the older brother I never had. Then and even now I appreciate his gift for creating worlds in which all of us neighborhood boys could live, as summer days turn to twilight, the spell only broken by calls to dinner. The magic on the other side of "Let's say ..." Entire worlds with rules of their own and an inner logic and their own gravity. The historical battles we refought. ("Cover me!") The epic ballgames we replayed. ("Five, four, three, two, one ... he shoots and ...") His family dog Bosco was 100% pure, unadulterated boy's best friend, and could reliably guide us through any minefield.

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So, yeah, I was there when the car hit Steve's dog. We were playing catch with his dad's football, regulation size, the kind that stings your hands and will sprain your fingers if you're not careful and of course Steve threw hard. But stinging pink hands were a small price to pay for the privilege of basking in the halo of Steve's aura. After awhile we decided to embark on a mission to the Stop-In for candy. The road to the store was busy enough to have a yellow line down the middle. Bosco wasn't supposed to come, not ever, and Steve tried a number of times to make him turn back. But Bosco was loyal. "Dumb dog," Steve finally said with feigned irritation, and quietly relented. Bosco could take care of himself, we felt, so we weren't concerned. Bosco paced alongside us, and then ran ahead to scout at intervals, curving back to the beat of his own doggie algorithm, looking at us as if to say 'Hey guys, where we going? All good so far?' On one of these curl routes Bosco drifted out into traffic, and before we could react a red Audi A4 hit Bosco in the hindquarter and spun him hard in a 360. Bosco's eyes met ours, full of pain and mostly puzzlement. His crushed haunches collapsed under him and into themselves as he attempted to drag himself to safety with his forelegs. All Steve could do was hold his dog's head in his lap while Bosco's pained yelping grew quieter and then he stopped twitching altogether and shaking and shivered to stillness.

The car never stopped.