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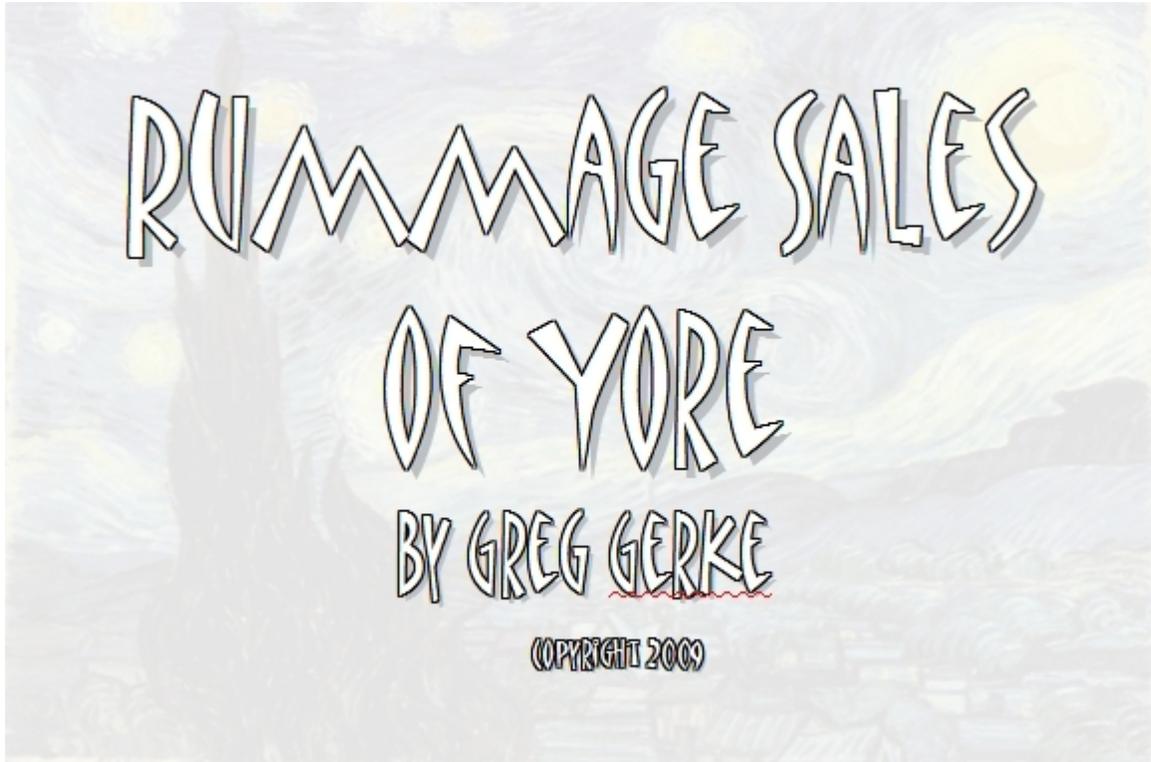
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# RUMMAGE SALES OF YORE BY GREG GERKE COPYRIGHT 2009

When I was a 'little guy,' my father and his father liked to take me along with them as they scoured the junky wares, plain rubbish and some genuinely decent items at rummage sales all up and down and around Southeastern Wisconsin. Our base was Milwaukee—the city of our births. From there we might drive some fifty miles on a Saturday or day of the week in summer if the promise of the catch was great enough. We traveled to such smaller towns as Menomonee Falls, Racine, Lake Geneva, Elkhorn, Oconomowoc, Palmyra, and Fond du Lac.

But beyond adding such items as Encyclopedia Britannica sets from the late 1950's, mason jars and coffee canisters of screws, washers, nuts and bolts and the odd saw or table vice—what I believe we really did was just hang out together, going on our quests just to get out of town, feel the wind in our faces and get a hamburger at some far-off diner where the waitress looked like she'd changed the oil in her car before the start of her shift at 10 a.m.

My grandfather was a tall bear of a man. He had snow white hair, big hands and an odor of Borkum Riff pipe tobacco. His general largesse with me, the youngest of his seven grandchildren, probably colored him in spectral light but I looked forward to no one more for the first ten years of life. He was retired and had a friendly, golden aura about him. Everyday worries didn't keep him down. He'd ride about the neighborhood on his bike, a pipe set in the side of his mouth, mannered, yet eagle eyes casting for a neighbor to talk to.

My father was his oldest child and only son. He worked for the county parks as a supervisor. He was the same height at his father but more trim. His face was seemingly placid but a coiled rage living in the corners of his green eyes sometimes sprang up, reminding our family to stay in line. Reticent and socially awkward, he mostly watched TV, read and did crossword puzzles outside of being with his father, repairing old cars and building cabinets and bookcases. He was fascinated by leather jackets and boots, power drills and socket sets. For those purchases he would buy the best quality—Sears brand. But as his relationship with my mother deteriorated he drew deeper into the former leisure

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time activities.

The primary decision to be made before heading off on these day trips was which car to sail in. I seem to remember curt phone calls between my father and grandfather, who lived less the fifty paces across the alley from us. My father simply had to know if he should bring the silver Ford Mustang Mach 1, a sports car from the year of *The French Connection* with a huge engine (302ci), or the brown Mustang from a year later, a tamer model but still powerful, the cab set way back just before a trunk only two feet long. On the days we went, most often my mother did not need to utilize her Mustang, the brown one—as presumably the terror of the household (me) was leaving with the most reviled member of the household (my father) and she would finally have peace and quiet, a chance to do the laundry and cut coupons for grocery shopping. And at times, though prone to repairs, the mint green 1973 Mustang my sister drove was also available.

Sometimes my Grandfather wanted to take one of his cars— yet another Mustang (No, our sir name was not Iacocca), this one a 1979 Cobra, yellow and black with a V-8 which often made it fishtail and the fanciest, swarthiest piece of machinery in the neighborhood, a 1975 Ford Thunderbird. Nationwide, its nickname was the 'Big Bird.' The largest Thunderbird ever produced at the time, this behemoth weighed over two and a half tons. It looked like a black limousine or at least three-quarters of one, it was that long. Total black interior, plush seats, room enough for two couples to have sex without ever touching. I don't think my grandfather agreed with the Mafioso mystique this vehicle evoked. After all it was a Ford—all-American, all-gargantuan, all fuel non-efficient. And besides he was German-Czech, a former lineman for Wisconsin Electric and adored *Columbo* with Peter Falk. What number of the Cosa Nostra would ever watch a show about a cross-eyed Jewish detective in L.A.?

The celebratory barbecue held in my grandfather's yard after the purchase of 'Big Bird' was a seminal event. Imagine the occasion of a mother returning home from the hospital with her new born. My grandfather's difficult birth to Baby Thunderbird (two years and one owner old, it was in primo shape) consisted of years of saving disability after falling off an electric pole and social security in order to one day be the envy of all the neighbors of German and Polish ancestral origin and the downright contempt of the one Mexican family in the neighborhood, the Cruz's—who just might take Baby a long way from home for a joy ride and leave it in the long grasses on the shoreline of Lake Michigan. Hamburgers, hot dogs, bratwurst, coleslaw, potato chips and pickles were served on this coming out day and shower all wrapped into one. My aunt and uncle brought turtle wax to gussy baby up. My mother made an Oreo tort straight from its blue-ribbon winning recipe at the Wisconsin State Fair. My father brought me as a present and instructed me before leaving for grandpas that I "have ta beg to go for a ride. Don't let up. Keep asking him. And then when he says 'yes,' say I 'only want to go with Dad. I want Dad to drive.'" To drive seventy-five on the freeway with grandpa and dad? I played my part.

In some of the surviving photos of the time, my grandfather actually held out a steak cooked fairly rare on a skewer over the open engine of Baby Thunderbird. Grandpa would do anything for that car, break any maxim, stay up to all hours to keep it company in the garage and have it washed bi-weekly during the harsh winters to erase all the salt accumulating on the underbelly, keeping it warm and cuddly.

I believe when my grandfather decided between his cars, he did so on the basis of how much the trip would be a fuck-around session. If high on that scale then the Mustang was utilized, probably to stretch out the engine on Interstate 94, but if the sales they had found in the newspaper promised a nice booty then Lord Thunderbird (it had so gotten used to being fussed over it sometimes insisted on the royal address) would slowly make its way down the road like an imperial hovercraft with me stretching to look through the small back window like a King's captive offspring. If they really attempted to pull off some good

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deals, wouldn't they drive up in something less bespeaking of money, say the eldest, rustiest Mustang? But that wasn't their angle. If it was a job of any sort, it was a finesse job. They wanted people to see what they had (basically a near mint five-thousand dollar Ford Thunderbird), respect them and almost be glad to give this father and son team their refuse at a discount rate because look at the vehicle they drive—how cared for and adored—and wouldn't you just want to hand over your dearly departing junk to people like this?

So, this team of undertakers and me, a functionary of sorts ("Oh, what a cute little boy you have!"), went about Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Waukesha, Kenosha, Walworth and Dodge counties in order to bring back more crap to our already overstuffed homes. Ostensibly, as I said. My father wanted to spend time with my grandfather—his 'best friend in the world' according to later proclamations. And what better place in this world is there for best friends to hang out then on the road in the wide open country.

As I sat buckled in the soft back seat I fantasized at the jubilation of finding loads of models, matchbox cars and baseball cards, but in front a wisecracking and sometimes inhospitable banter reined and like an accomplished supporting player, I dropped my dreams to witness these two men at their finest. At times my father would even walk around his father's house like a suitor, calling, "Hey Moose. Moose!" A pet name. They were something like a great team—a great comedy team. They played off each other, they infuriated each other, but each also had the ability to make the other laugh so hard they'd shout, "Shad up, will ya. I'm goin' ta piss in my pants."

If I want anything now it is to pay tribute to these two men. Every time we climbed in those cars an initiation took place. Hunters and gatherers we were, going out into the fields, the grasslands as crushed and formed by the Ice Age glaciers and bringing back items that might make our life a little easier. Desperately I relish their interplay because it is something so lacking in my present life of headphones, text messages and youtube.

One episode is particularly memorable. On a winter's day we were on our way to Sears at Southridge Mall in the Mustang Cobra. The snows had subsided a bit and now great pools of sludge adorned every street gutter and sidewalk opening. My father insisted on driving and grandpa relented. We sped up the two-lane 35<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge over the Milwaukee Railroad on the right side. As we descended my grandfather spoke of the craftsman hammer he wanted to buy there, "I want that silver bugger you got a few months ago, the same one." Near the bridge's end on a small strip of curbside pavement side was a city worker in an orange utility uniform that stood investigating a water main break. Floating right next to this man was a good foot deep puddle of this gray winter sludge, its calm surface like a patch of mud.

Seeing the green light ahead my father changed lanes and accelerated down the right side so the passenger side tires roiled in the thick liquid and sprayed ripples of heavy, cold water and ice particles up and down this worker from face to toe. I looked back to see the poor man holding his arms before him, his crooked mouth barking at our disappearing Cobra. Grandpa slammed the dashboard, huffed and on cue exploded, "Elmer, that man is going to be son of a bitching you all day!"

My father has often repeated this story to me over the years. He enjoyed other people's anger, a delight I confess to sometimes sharing. Like most of us he had fun pushing the line to see how much he could get away with. I surmise he probably did it just to elicit that great colorful profane response from his father—a 'Well, what do you think of this Pops?' type of dare he performed via sneak attack on a city employee (man in orange) by a county employee.

The end of my grandfather and father's strange, dysfunctional and always forgiving

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courtship came while I was unconscious and in a dreamland where the Brewers won the World Series and I was surrounded by thousands of assembled and not yet assembled model cars. Only the next morning, as I ate my giant red tupperware bowl of Rice Krispies while watching the Bozo Show out of Chicago on cable television was I let in on the news. Midway through the cereal my mother sat down on the couch next to me as Bozo the clown helped a small girl throw a pin pong ball into a bucket to win a prize. She told me my grandfather became very sick the night before, so sick he in fact died. My first death. He had been in the hospital for weeks. Lung cancer. He lost a third of his bulky, two-hundred and fifty-pound body. I had been told that he was not well enough to be seen. At my age I did not know that this translated to 'it's just a matter of time.' A spontaneous gush of tears confirmed what I had been told but never knew—people you love do go away and never come back. I didn't finish my Rice Krispies.

Now that I am into my fourth decade of living what I desire most is to 'shoot the shit' just like old times and preferably with men. Stores and rummage sales were the means, but spending time together the end. What more does anyone ask for? The graciousness of sharing life. Laughter, the pastime of causing faux trouble, ribbing, taking trips, seeing what is what.

In their presence I saw how real guys acted—no matter if it was childish. They were big children and I was still a little one. And every time out was a new adventure. We never knew what we'd wind up with. Each backyard or store gave them an occasion to riff off each other and enjoy that sacredness called 'play.'

Last summer I was in San Francisco with an old friend of mine, a male friend. When we lived and played together in Oregon, I would at times address him as 'Moose.' For two weeks we went out drinking, fucking around the best we could, conjuring the old magic. But full-time work and long term relationships had mellowed us—we couldn't keep it up forever. The last morning together we had some food at a new hip bar/cafe in a neighborhood where ten years before murderers and heroin addicts ruled. Soon I needed to leave, to drive back to Oregon and catch a plane back to Brooklyn. Men our age and older sat around on computers with headphones checking their email or Wikipedia or dating sites. We had had a good visit and now just watched them in silence. Wondering, but in a way not. We were exactly like these men. We have moments when the real world doesn't interest us and we are happy to be the ruler of our own on-line kingdom. He and I looked at each other and grinned in complicity. We knew it was time to get back to our lives and we never indulged in small talk.

While we paid the bill at the counter one of these on-line men shrieked in terror. The whole place stared in his direction until he put his hand up, "Just something I read." People went back to their own business. I kept waiting for him to tell what it was. My friend was under no such delusion and picked up the tab.

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*Anthology* and others. *There's Something Wrong With Sven*, a book of short fiction has been published by Blaze Vox Books. His website is [www.greggerke.com](http://www.greggerke.com)