

Ode to a Silver Screen

by Rick Baber

- Taken from Dinner with W.T. – The Cybermouth Chronicles -

Clumps of flowering weeds had grown up above the tall grass. The speakers had been removed by speculative investor/thieves, but the white posts stood erect - giving the place the look of some neglected military cemetery. The small building near the center had been boarded up, as if there remained something inside that needed to be protected, and the sight of the weathered and shredding plywood added to the ghostly feeling that came over me as I stood there before this relic.

From the pile of garbage behind me dashed a ragged old tomcat, and I watched him scamper all the way down front, beyond the dilapidated playground equipment where, majestically, stood the screen. To me, on that breezy late-Spring afternoon, it appeared as an enormous granite monument. And, although it was relatively un-blemished, in my mind's eye I could see the words carved there. "Rest In Peace."

You could call it fate that took me there, but it was nothing more than the call of nature, really. I had missed the last service station on the way out of town, and decided the abandoned drive-in theater was probably the most private place around. Until I got there I didn't know how right I was.

Driving through the ticket booth without having to stop and fish my pockets for money, even after all these years, didn't feel quite right. I almost felt an obligation to my own heritage to misplace my trunk key and lie to the suspicious gum-smacking apparition, blowing bubbles behind the open window. "Just me and her. No. No beer in the trunk. No people either. Sure, you could look, but it's my dad's car and I only have the ignition key."

It was eerie. I was no more than a hundred yards from the hot catalytic converters on the neon-colored economy cars buzzing up and down the highway, and I was proceeding slowly into 1969. When I stepped out of the car and that breeze blew back my hair, it brought back a flood of memories, which I only then realized were going to be unique to only two or three generations of people. Of all the humans who have ever inhabited this planet, and, probably, all of those who will come along, only two or three generations of Americans - if they were to stand where I was standing - would share this empty, nostalgic, bitter-sweet feeling.

I thought about my son. What lifetime memories could he develop living in the Information Age? What wild, adventurous stories would he have to tell his children and grandchildren about some packaged entertainment that he brought

home and plugged into a little box beside his television? Or some numbers he punched into his remote control that brought the latest video releases to him via the miracle of fiber-optic cable? In this life, we have the moment, and the memories. And the memories last a lot longer.

Mine take me back to the trunk of a 1967 Ford that belonged to my friend Duke's father's used car lot.

I “came of age” in a small town in north central Arkansas. The drive-in theater was as much a part of the lives of teenagers as bell bottoms and rock ‘n roll. In small towns there’s always one kid who gets to drive before everybody else his age. Since Duke’s dad owned a car lot, he was that kid. As early as the eighth grade, Duke would manage to come up with some big LTD or something similar nearly every weekend. We’d all chip in for gas and ride around town until we had just enough fuel left to make it out the highway to the White River Drive-In Theater, and get everybody home afterwards. Nobody got to drive but Duke, and we never gave him too much trouble about that. We considered ourselves lucky just to be included in one of the few gangs our age who didn’t have to be chauffeured by our parents. Of the five of us, only Chris had an older sibling, and she wasn’t about to share her own car time with a bunch of rowdy Jr. High kids.

The most important thing was that the car was functioning. That meant making personal sacrifices if funds were short. Since Duke was the driver, and Karla and Teresa were of the feminine persuasion, Chris and I usually had to fork up our money to buy the bulk of the gas, leaving us without the cost of admission to the theater. That’s why we had an LTD instead of a Beetle - major trunk space.

Across the highway, and a quarter of a mile back, was a café that always closed before dark. That parking lot was always where the switch was made. Duke would pull up there and order us to hand over our money and get in the trunk. One of us would always suggest that one guy and one girl should ride back there together, but Duke insisted that the girls didn’t need to be back there getting dirty. I think he just enjoyed being seen pulling into the drive-in with two good looking and popular chicks in the car. At the time, there were no real romantic relationships between any of us. It wasn’t because any of us wouldn’t be receptive to one, it was simply that none of us knew how to go about getting such a thing started. Later on, my relationship with Teresa developed into a boy/girl sort of thing, and we started going out on some real dates. But for now, we were just five buddies in search of adventure.

On one occasion, Duke was particularly jumpy about sneaking us in. I don’t know exactly what came over him. Usually, we would pull the trunk lid down from the inside, and hold it there, without actually closing it, so we could let ourselves out when the car stopped inside the theater. This time, Duke insisted that we lock the deck lid down completely – citing as his reason the light inside

that might come on at the ticket booth and lead to our discovery. Both of us were slightly on the claustrophobic side, and argued against such unusual measures for about half an hour at the café, but surrendered in the face of the alternative – going home.

Everything at the ticket booth went smoothly, although I had to hold my hand over Chris' mouth to keep him from giving us away with his giggling. From our dark hiding place we felt the big car gliding over the humps between the parking rows. Karla and Teresa, acting upon that melodramatic, mother-like concern that is so common among young teenage girls, leaned up to the back seat to ask if we were O.K. This seemed like something we could somehow use to strengthen the growing bond between ourselves and the girls. Sympathy for our heroic and death-defying efforts. We didn't answer.

“Duke!” Karla yelled, “They're not saying anything!” There was a touch of genuine panic in her voice that made us feel wanted.

I could picture that stern look on his face. Never looking back for fear that someone would notice that he was in the driver's seat alone, and two girls were in the back, talking to the seat. He growled in a low voice. We could hear every word. “Be quiet! They just can't hear you through that seat.”

They continued, softly calling to us. We, bastards that we were, did not answer.

Teresa was, without doubt, the most grown-up of all of us. About the time we felt the car roll to a stop she took on that authoritative tone that we had all grown to recognize as a sign that she was tired of our foolishness and we had better shape up. “Rick...Chris...are you guys O.K.?”

Duke was still up there making shushing noises at them, telling them that we could not hear them. Chris moaned, as if he had just come out of a coma or something. “Let us out. We can't breathe!”

Karla's voice grew louder. “Let them out, Duke. They can't breathe!”

“Rick!” I could hear Teresa commanding me to answer her.

“I think he's passed out.” Chris moaned back a reply for me as he laid his hand on my shoulder as a signal that he would field this one. It was hard to keep from laughing out loud as we could feel the tension mounting inside the car.

“Rick!” she repeated, “Answer me!” This time neither of us said anything.

There was a moment of pure silence, and then outright panic by the girls. Karla was crying, and Teresa was demanding that Duke open the trunk. He was talking to them like a dad does to over-anxious children, sternly advising them

that, if they didn't be quiet, he would have to take them home. He wanted to wait until the cartoon started, so nobody would notice him letting us out of the trunk. He informed the girls that there was more than enough air back there for us to breathe for several hours.

When he said that, they did quiet down, but we could still hear them, sobbing quietly. We began to get the impression that maybe he wasn't going to let us out for a while. Chris decided to make the best of a bad situation. He removed the bottle of Bali Hai from the pocket of his army jacket, took a swig, and then lit a cigarette as he passed the bottle over to me. Then I fired up a Marlboro and we proceeded to have our own quiet little party in the dark.

After several minutes we could hear that the girls had turned their concern for our welfare into indignation that we were playing such a cruel joke on them. They began saying things like "Let's just let them stay back there", that brought us back to the reality that we were imprisoned in that trunk, and the possibility did exist that we could suffocate. With two geniuses smoking cigarettes in such closed quarters as an LTD trunk, the air does quickly get rather stuffy. We put the cigarettes out, but there was no way for the smoke to escape. I don't know to his day whether or not he was pulling my leg, but Chris sounded deadly serious when he spoke.

"Do you smell gas?"

I didn't feel like this was the proper place or time to indulge in conversation with him as to the feasibility of smelling gasoline in a place that was so full of cigarette smoke. And I did know that there was plenty of gasoline near us, because I had spent my ticket money to put it there.

"FIRE!" I began screaming at the top of my lungs. Chris joined me. Then the girls, screaming frantically at Duke to let us out. Over all the voices I could hear his.

"Shuttup! Goddammit, shuttup!" I'll take this damn car out of here and back it into a brick wall!"

But we continued screaming, and the girls continued screaming and crying. Duke started the car, and we could hear them pleading with him to open the trunk. He quieted down, and tried again to convince them that we were only pulling their chains. It sounded as if they might have been going for it. The total darkness was shattered again by the flickering of Chris' lighter when he lit up two more cigarettes and handed me one. He kept the lighter burning as he fumbled around underneath him and came up with a tire tool.

"Hold this", he said, handing me the burning lighter.

Before I could say anything, he took the tire tool and broke out the taillights from the inside.

“What the hell is going on back there?” Duke was sounding as if he might actually be getting angry enough to back into that wall.

About that time both of the girls apparently saw the smoke boiling out the holes that had been the tail lamp lenses and let out blood-curdling screams. We felt the left side of the car rise as Duke jumped out, and heard the crunching sound of him running across the pea gravel to the back. Then the sound of him fumbling through his keys. When the trunk opened a huge cloud of smoke boiled from it and Duke had to back up and fan it from his face before he could see us. By that time our heads had popped up through the cloud – laughing.

Karla and Teresa had already run over to some other cars seeking help. A crowd of people gathered as Chris and I climbed out of the trunk. Duke looked down at the shattered red plastic in the gravel. Before he could say anything the manager appeared through the crowd and advised that he was going to call the cops if we didn't leave immediately. We did.

It was quite a while before we got a ride back there with Duke.

Then, there was "People Packer Night". That's where you can get everybody in (or on) your car into the Drive-In for two bucks. Bruce Kelly had something like a '58 Plymouth. One night we set the record with, I think, 38 people. Of course, we cheated. While the guy was counting the kids coming off of and out of the car, the ones who had already been counted slipped around to the other side and came back through again. It was a pretty funny stunt, which won us some menial prize, as I recall, but, when we all piled back on the Plymouth to ride the rest of the way in - over those humps between rows - Bruce drug the oil pan off the car. So we only got to pull that one once.

A little later, the Drive-In was one of the places spent exploring with the girl who would become my wife.

And her little brother.

It was a dirty trick, but her mom (who had obviously been there a few times in her younger years) sent him with us nearly every time we tripped up and let her know where we were going. Bad as that was, it was no insurmountable obstacle for a thinking man such as myself. A couple of extra railroad cars shoveled out at the rock quarry earned me a few extra bucks every week. Those dollars were readily handed to Terry once the Mustang was parked, and he would disappear to the concession stand - usually for the night. For years I believed I had outsmarted him and his mother, but when I became an older man I realized that

the kid was more clever than I, and probably made enough money off of me to retire several years before I do.

I remembered one of the few times we got to go there on a real double date. About half way through the movie this guy came flying across the hood of my car, after being punched by another guy. Chris and I jumped out to avenge my Mustang's honor. Becky, who never could stomach physical violence, promptly opened the car door and puked before so much as another punch could be thrown. Nobody wanted to take the chance of being knocked down into that stuff, and whatever else was about to occur from the chain-reaction when we started getting whiffs of it, so the conflict ended there and then.

After her oral eruption, however, not much hanky panky occurred that evening either.

Be that as it may, standing there as I did nearly a quarter of a century later, I had to wonder how big a part the old drive-in theater played in what became of our lives. If we hadn't gotten to know each other there, would we have made it to the altar, and survived these twenty five years together?

Probably. But it wouldn't have been nearly as much fun.

The other people? They went on to make lives of their own, as people do. Like the drive-in, some of them have since vanished from this world. But, for me at least, every rusty white post rising from the gravel represents one of them, and a good time we shared.