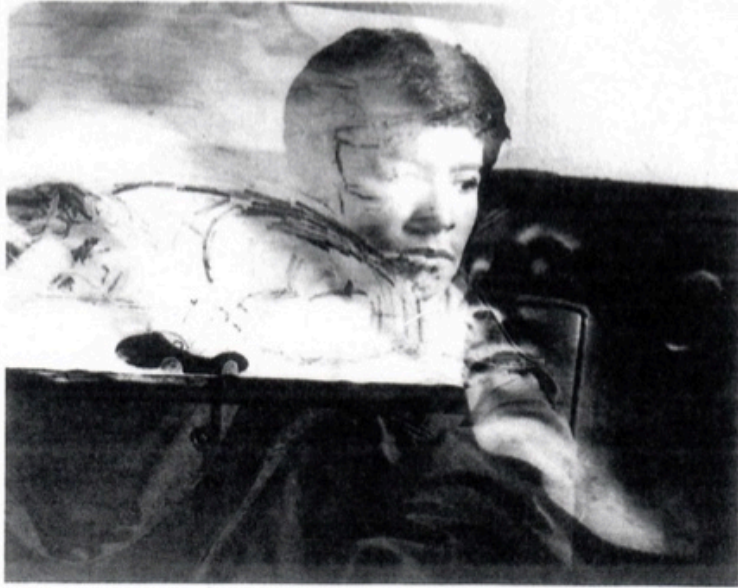


W I N D B L O W N



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WINDBLOWN

Trinity Heights, circa 1960: Life had never been so good for a kid growing up within the freedom and security of a middle class American family in the Southern Bible belt. Suburbia was sprawling under the Texas sun. The economy was pumping. Gasoline was a quarter a gallon. Everybody had jobs. Homes were owned instead of rented and the two-car garage was invented. Chrome coffee pots percolated in kitchens and bleached squeaky clean clothes blew dry on backyard clotheslines. Streets were paved with curbs and sidewalks. There was no war and washing the car was a national pastime.

Traveling south down Marsalis Avenue in 4th gear at 3,000 rpm, the traffic light was green at Overton Road as we speeded down in front of SOC High School a minute before the morning bell rang. The front lawn was crowded with book toting teenagers. We had the boulevard to ourselves, downshifting our topless two-seater roadsters in unison as hot, brittle exhausts sucked back, cracked and popped in the brisk morning air echoing off the two-story schoolhouse.

Talking heads of gum chewing girls in mouton coats turned. Letter jacket jocks with flat tops jaws dropped as the red, white and green sports cars roared by, three abreast, past the schoolyard down to the football field where the Golden Debs were practicing high kicks for tonight's big game. In the curb lane from the cockpit of a white Triumph TR2, Jim, chewing on a cigarillo and wearing goggles, raised a gloved hand to the drill team girls as our sports cars drowned out the music of the marching band.

Bob, in a right hand drive red Austin Healey 100S, signaled for a U-turn at the next intersection. We turned around and made one more pass by the school, accelerating through the gears up the grade. As the American flag was being raised and the 1st bell rang, I spotted Mary Louise in the drill team line.

We made the block at Overton Road with a series of right turns, then into a grassy church parking lot. I grabbed my books and bailed from the polished aluminum cockpit of my British racing green MG. Jim unbuckled his aircraft seatbelt and climbed out of the low-slung TR. His car smelled of grease and brake fluid. Bob lit a cigarette as we hurried across Marsalis Avenue headed for class.

Bob: It's Friday, guys. I can handle Friday. Did you see Mary Louise, Bill Boy?

Billy: You mean did Mary Louise see me?

Jim: You could spot Mary Louise in a herd of moutons at 500 yards. She's not so much.

Bob: When are you going to ask her out man and stop torturing yourself?

Billy: I'm working on it. What's a mouton?

Jim: A mouton? It's a little furry animal like a squirrel that moos like a cow.

We entered the school "mooring" up the stairway as the tardy bell rang.

Jim: We're late and we got a math test.

Bob: What do you mean we got a math test?

I ducked into Spanish class as my pals echoed down the shiny brown hall. It was our senior year. We were best friends. A true camaraderie had grown out of our schooldays together. Going fast was the glue of our shared experience. It always came down to that, the cars and the road: the yellow and white striped paved two-lane pike, boulevard,

highway leading wherever we chose. In a ragtop roadster with a windscreen, a roll bar and a seatbelt, going fast was an art.

Rolling over the highway under the sky, we slip-streamed, double clutched, downshifted and four-wheel drifted in an ongoing chase these last fast years together. Going fast was the wild hair of our being and the code of the open road had been sewed on our windy souls.

Time flies. The 7th period bell sounded and the week-end was off to a rolling start. After school, we were standing by our cars smoking in the parking lot when Mary Louise walked by.

M L: Hi.

Billy: Hey.

Bob: Madama, ma'm. (Imitating Jett Rink)

Jim: What's up hon?

M L: Are ya'll going to the game tonight?

Jim: Doubtful.

M L: C'mon. Where's your school spirit?

Billy: In my locker.

Jim: I left mine in junior high.

Bob: I traded mine for this car.

M.L: (laughing) You guys are so crazy.

Jim: Adios.

We watched her walk on.

Billy: So she's not so much, huh?

Jim: I take it back. She's fine, okay?

Billy: She gave me the eagle eye in the hall this morning.

Bob: You sure?

Billy: I think she did. We talked by the lockers.

Bob: What'd you say?

Billy: I said hi.

Bob: And she said...

Billy: She said hi.

Jim: You said hi and she said hi and she gave you the eagle eye? Jump start my heart!

Billy: You would have had to have been there. It was how she said it, what she did. The girl has got some moves.

Jim: She put the Quietus on you, huh?

Billy: Let's roll. I'll see you at Sivel's, Jim, 5:30 sharp.

Have fun on your date tonight, Bob. We'll meet up at midnight in Cedar Hill. That's the plan, right?

Bob: Absolutely. My date has to be in the dorm at 11:30. I'll see you guys at midnight on the town square in front of the bus station.

A few hours later Jim and I rendezvoused at Sivel's Drive-In and met up with bikers, Don and Larry, to swap our cars for their motorcycles for the evening. They had dates

for the football game. Sitting on his black and chrome BSA Gold Star, Don was combing his hair when we pulled up. Talking to a carhop, Larry straddled a new silver and blue Triumph Bonneville Trophy Bird. We agreed to swap back at 11:30 at Red Bryan's Barbecue.

Jim mounted the BSA. One kick and the Gold Star came to life. I kick started the Bonneville Twin and off we roared like rolling thunder down Fort Worth Avenue. At Westmoreland Road, we turned right and traveled south redlining the tachometers through the gears. We turned east on Kiest Boulevard cruising along as the autumn evening sun flickered through trees flecking the falling leaves.

Rounding a downhill bend at Hampton Road, we scrambled and downshifted for a red light. The two motorcycles were harmonically opposed and protested in combustible atonalities, music to our ears.

A carload of Golden Debs and majorettes were crammed into a powder blue Cadillac convertible sitting at the traffic light. The girls were decked out in their satin gold and white game night regalia. Streamers, tied to the mirrors and door handles of the car, danced in the breeze. Jodie and Mary Louise sat in the front seat next to somebody's dad driving. Kathy, Joan, Judy, Pepper and Barbara were in the backseat, 20th Century foxes all, jazzed, razz-ma-tazzed, blushed and flushed, flippant, flirtatious and prematurely ripe.

"Rock 'n roll blared from the car radio. "Billy, Jimmie," the girls laughed, "Take us with you. We want to ride. We want to rumble" A team spirit fight song was started up in the backseat. Mary Louise was riding shotgun as I edged the motorcycle up beside her. Looking at one another in the commotion of revving engines, rock 'n roll radio, a fight song and the folderol of teasing girls, Mary Louise cocked her eyebrow and said, "Hi" the way she did in the hall at school today.

In the mille second of a changing traffic light, the brunette with the Go-On-Green eyes and the knockout smile made time stand still. "Hi," I replied as the light turned green, the clutch let out, the throttle cracked back and off we roared like two Marlon Brando into the sunset. We stayed beside the Caddy down Zang Blvd and over the Trinity River Viaduct to Dallas as the streetlights came on and the motorcycles droned like wailing saxophones while the wind cried Mary.

After kissing his date goodnight on the nursing dorm steps, Bob pointed the Austin Healey toward Cedar Hill. In our cars again, Jim and I headed south out Hwy. 67 to the berg atop the Great Balconies Fault, rumored to be the highest point between there and Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The Cedar Hill town square was deserted when Jim and I pulled up in front of the empty Greyhound bus station to wait for Bob. Jim raised the hood of his Triumph and began changing the spark plugs. We could hear the Healey coming down Main Street. Cedar Hill had no cop or patrol. Bob pulled up and got out of the car.

Bob: Damn, it's cold.

We had mapped out this road race months ago and driven it a few times. We called it the Grand Prix of Great House. Late night was best. No traffic. The race started at the

television tower on the outskirts of Cedar Hill and ended at Great House Cemetery near a town called Venus.

Bob: It's a rolling start from the tower. The last one to Great House treats. We meet for eats at the truck stop café.

Jim: I'll be in the back booth waiting for you two.

Bob: I'll see you in my rear view mirror turkey butt.

Bob lowered the Healey windshield a tad to reduce wind sheer. We put on goggle and driving gloves, started our engines, and strapped ourselves in, slowly motoring out Belt Line Road to the edge of town.

At the huge new blinking sky tower the race was on at sixty miles an hour. From here the streetlights of Venus were visible 30 miles away. Bob, in the strapped down louver hood Healey, was abreast Jim's Triumph, side by side on the two-lane downhill. My MG slip-streamed the Austin Healey by occupying the zone of reduced air pressure and forward suction immediately behind his car. Downshifting, the three of us four-wheel drifted through a curve half-way down the grade and then hit the straightaway at a hundred miles an hour to turn one where Belt Line junctions Farm Road 1322 snaking south to Venus.

Over the next 25 miles of winding road, each of us would lead, follow, pass and change places. About five miles from Great House, Jim, in the lead, hit loose gravel on a sixty mph curve, spun out, skidded backwards off the road, and came to rest in a corn field, lights on, engine off.

I went by Jim with Bob's Healey close on my rear. My modified MG was 600 lbs. lighter and faster in the turns, but was no match for the Healey's overdrive on straight-aways. A long straight-away was all that remained of this race.

The four banger Healey was soon slip-streaming my MIG, only feet away and about to make a play to pass. I could hear Bob's engine louder than my own. His headlights were blinding. I reached up to deflect my mirror when, suddenly, the Healey was gone. Flat-out in high gear and a few feet apart, Bob had disappeared. There were no headlights behind me; only darkness for the next few miles to the finish line.

I slowed down and pulled into the cemetery, turning the car around to park on a bluff overlooking the valley below. I killed the engine, removed goggles and gloves, unbuckled and climbed up and sat on the back of the car. I lit a cigarette and leaned against the roll bar. In the quiet of the night, the whine of camshafts still rang in my ears.

Out here under the starry sky deep in the heart of Texas, I felt the inherent goodness of being alive. Life was glorious and absurd, miraculous and maddening and totally incomprehensible. Life could not be known or understood. It could only be lived. And what it was that made us live would never do anything less.

The silence of the night was broken by the distant sound of Jim's Triumph miles away. I could see his headlights zigzag the winding road out here where the stars shine clear to Tulsa.

I started my car and headed back down the hill to find Bob and the Austin Healey. He was on the side of the road sitting on the fender of his car with a silver flask in his hand. I pulled up and killed the motor, leaving the headlights on. I walked over to his crashed

race car. The grill had been shoved into the radiator and both headlights were busted. Bob took a drink from the flask and handed it to me.

Billy: What happened?

Bob: Did you see that collie?

Billy: What collie?

Bob: That collie. (Pointing to the front of his car)

Lodged in the grill appeared to be the brown and white furry remains of a dog. We stared in disbelief at the smashed front-end. There were no bones or flesh, no mangled body. There was only fur.

Billy: Where did it come from? Where's the dog?

Bob: Beats me.

Jim flies by at a hundred and five in overdrive, the Vanguard engine belching yellow flames as it de-accelerated. He pulled up and climbed out of the car.

Jim: *Que pasa?* What happened?

Bob: I hit a dog.

Jim surveyed the crashed car in the headlights.. I handed him the flask.

Jim: Well, here's to close calls!

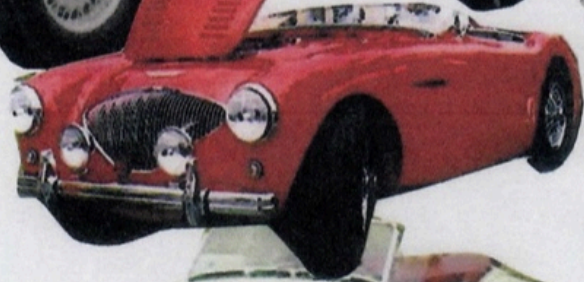
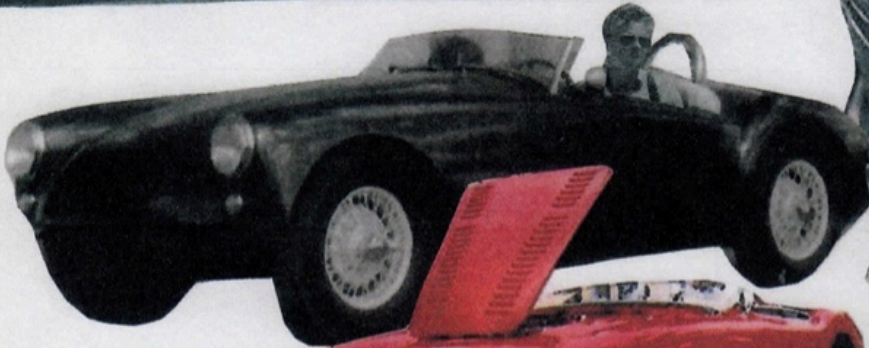
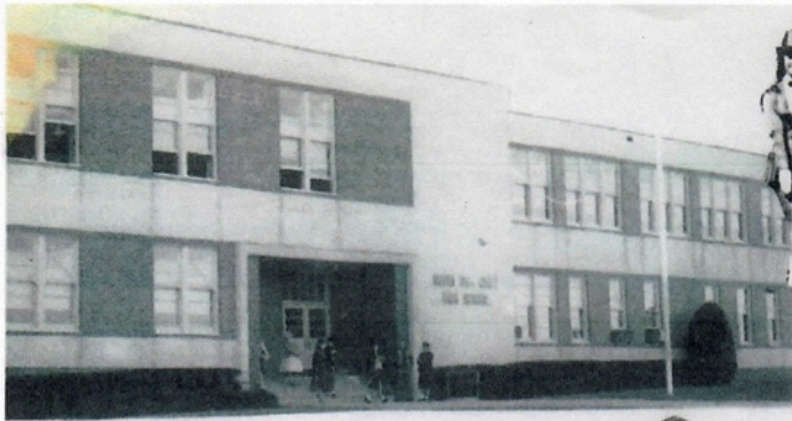
Bob: Amen!

Billy: Amen and Awomen!

Thirty years later, I woke in the night from a dream of boys and machines, libertines at sixteen. We went separate ways eventually except for here-say now and then. Whatever happened to Bob or Jim?

"What it was that made us live and would never do anything less" lost its grip over time. I pondered a bungled life and knew its best time had been back then early on as friends going fast blowing in the wind on a highway under the sky fancying the idea of being alive.





SIVILS