

Creative Non-Fiction  
(personal essay)

**Mercury Sun Valley**

by

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When my dad passed away at the far too young age of sixty-two, I rummaged through a box of his stuff. A lot of random shit. Army photos from when he was stationed in Japan during the Korean War. A diploma from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania after he returned to school in his thirties. Expired driver's license. There was also an old resume printed on that fancy parchment paper everyone used before we started sending PDF files like shooting arrows into the sky.

His entire professional life of blood, sweat, and tears was boiled down into a one-page snapshot with all the requisite corporate buzz phrases in their proper places. I'm sure the reduction of operating expenses by eight percent was pretty damn important at the time.

At the bottom of the box, there was something else. My heart skipped a beat. A 1975 Seattle-to-Chicago Amtrak train schedule and a torn and faded foldout map of Seattle from the same year.

I picked up both artifacts like they were the Dead Sea Scrolls and held my breath. Tangible proof it really did happen.

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I'm not a car guy. Never was. You know how some guys get a hard-on when they see some vintage car or souped-up hotrod? Yeah, that's not me. They all look like Toyota Corollas to me. And yet, it was my dad's love affair with some car with sentimental value that put everything in motion.

It turned out to be my last and greatest adventure from my boyhood. The summer before ninth grade. That awkward age when you want everyone to stop treating you like a kid, but secretly cling to that endless summer mindset. Within a year, I would turn into a surly, rebellious teenager.

But for a few days in the summer of 1975, the seeds of wanderlust were forever planted into my DNA. I owe it all to one of the craziest harebrained schemes my father ever dreamed up. And a 1954 Mercury Sun Valley that turned out to be my dad's version of the great white whale.

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We lived in a small town near Pittsburgh and my dad hung out at Johnny's Gas Station with a cadre of colorful characters. Mostly Italians. I'd usually tag along and fetch his Winston's from the cigarette machine. There were lots of car magazines at Johnny's and this is where he found out about a Mercury Sun Valley for sale, listed by a guy who lived somewhere in Seattle, Washington.

It's important to understand my dad was not impulsive. He did everything with careful deliberation. Common sense and logic, rather than emotion. He thought with his head, not his heart. So when he said we're flying to Seattle with my mom to buy a car and drive it back to Pittsburgh, I thought he was joking. Nobody in their right mind does something like that without seeing what the car looks like.

I imagine my dad had visions of returning to Johnny's behind the wheel of a gleaming Mercury Sun Valley he once owned as a young man. The one that got away.

All I cared about as a precocious thirteen-year-old was my first time on a commercial airline flight and the drive across the wide-open roads of the untamed Wild West. True uncharted territory in every sense. My overactive imagination was already operating on overdrive in anticipation.

It was quite the break from our family's usual mundane routine. What could possibly go wrong?

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We flew on Allegheny Airlines to Minneapolis and then Northwest Airlines to Seattle. The first flight was noisy and uncomfortable, but the second leg was a much smoother flight on the airline that skyjacker DB Cooper would make famous a few years later. No sign of Cooper on this flight.

We stayed in a no-frills hotel near the Space Needle. Spartan and bare-bones, but not a fleabag. We might have been a lower middle-class family, but we had our standards.

Dad made arrangements to go see some guy named Herb, much to the ongoing consternation of my mom, who served as our resident "this is crazy" or "don't go in the basement" Greek chorus. My dad embraced his inner Tigger while my mom adopted a sky-is-falling version of Eeyore.

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Herb lived on the outskirts of the city in a rustic setting that resembled a makeshift junkyard. The main house was ramshackle and weather-beaten, adjacent to a decrepit garage and a barn that stood like a house of cards. When Herb greeted us, my Spidey sense screamed red flags to the high heavens, but I just figured my dad knew what he was doing, assuming he was in his right mind.

When Herb spoke, he barely opened his mouth. That bothered me. He came across like the love child of Humphrey Bogart and Rizzo from *Midnight Cowboy*. Make no mistake, Herb was no Humphrey Bogart and had much more in common with Rizzo.

It was finally time for the big reveal. Raise the curtain and strike up the band. Herb ushered us into the barn to show us the object of my dad's desire. The culmination of a journey from coast to coast and across time itself for a long overdue reunion between man and car. The moment of truth.

Cue the record scratch. Total buzzkill. What the hell was this thing? The one that got away had really let herself go over the years. The former prom queen's fall from grace hit my dad hard.

The white car sat under a covering of straw. It was a barn after all. But the color was pale and faded with lots of rust. It looked like one of those cars that sat in an auto graveyard or some rural backyard that you'd spot with a fleeting glance out a car window while whizzing down the highway. This car looked like it wasn't going anywhere, much less drive across the country.

Herb kept doing his best Bogart impersonation, barely opening his mouth and repeating the phrase, "It's a good car." I didn't have to read my mother's body language to know her sentiments, but I had the same "oh shit" feeling she did. Herb just kept saying, "It's a good car."

Before I knew it, we were in this contraption driving down the road in our "new" car. The mood inside the car was tense. Ahab's crew wasn't planning a mutiny, but the only person who spoke was my mother and it wasn't a pep talk. Just a relentless full-court press in the form of a "have-you-lost-your-mind" type monologue. Dad just stared ahead and said nothing. Our fearless captain.

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My mother worked on my dad the whole time, trying to break through his obsessive-compulsive state of mind and save him from himself. Nobody can spin a “what-if” doomsday scenario better than my mom, even if you’re just stepping out the front door or crossing the street. I found myself agreeing with her, which scared me more than the prospect of driving cross-country in a car where I could see through a hole in the floor. Dad pulled the car over to the side of the road. Silence.

I can only imagine what was going inside my dad’s head. For dad to pull the rip cord on this crazy scheme and abandon his quest for the great white whale he had obsessed over for almost two decades took some doing. Summit fever is real. I should probably find an Ahab quote from *Moby Dick* to capture my dad’s mindset, but “from hell’s heart I stab at thee” seems a bit dramatic for a guy fixated on an elusive white vintage car rather than lifelong revenge against a great white whale.

I hesitate to psychoanalyze my dad, but considering he was about to turn forty-years-old, I sometimes wonder if this pursuit was about more than just a car. A true journey of the heart.

He was longing for something whose time had come and gone, but never coming back. In that moment while my mom delivered her nonstop Judgment Day sermon, it all finally struck home and hit him hard. He was chasing after a time and a place more than an actual car.

Without saying a word, dad turned the car around and we headed back. What happened next is part of family folklore, depending on which person’s account and version of the story you believe.

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Dad parked in front of Herb’s grungy house and took a long look over to the barn where Herb stood with a shady-looking friend, who had one of those long faces that made him look like the human version of a rodent, but with a five o’clock shadow. Dad turned to me, wheels turning.

“You better wait here with your mom.”

“No way. I’m coming with you.”

“I said, wait here.”

Dad walked across the gravel driveway while I stewed. I considered myself one of the guys. I certainly wasn’t going to stay with the women and children. I pretended he said “cover me, I’m going in” instead of “wait here with your mom.” The indignity of it all. I had his back.

I shadowed my dad and watched the encounter from a short distance. Herb still spoke like his jaw was wired shut and his friend looked anxious and nervous. That’s when Herb did something that any self-respecting Italian from our neighborhood would consider a formal declaration of war. He made the fatal mistake of stepping forward and pointing his finger in my dad’s chest.

My dad is not a big guy. But in his younger hot-tempered days, I was told he developed quite a reputation with his “you have to kill me to stop me” approach to any street fight. Just like Cool Hand Luke, he won’t “stay down” until carried from the ring. It’s part of what made him a local folk hero and football star. Not quite Joe Pesci from *Good Fellas*, but still a guy you don’t want to fuck with.

The rest is a blur. Before I could blink, Herb was subdued and shoved up against the barn, but somehow already bloodied even though I didn’t see a punch thrown. My dad’s forearm was wedged under Herb’s chin with a raised fist poised to strike. As for Herb’s weasel companion, he turned several shades of white and saw his life pass before his eyes. He didn’t sign up for this.

Years later as part of a public speaking training course, my father delivered a videotaped five-minute speech about his Mercury Sun Valley “personal experience” and he says matter-of-factly, “we haggled for a while and reluctantly, he gave me back the check.” Okay, that’s one way of putting it I guess. It’s another version of the story that likely plays better when delivered to a corporate audience of managers and executives in some generic company conference room.

We spared my mother the details and hightailed it out of there, ready to blow out of town. There was just one problem. We didn’t have enough money to fly back to Pittsburgh. Rudderless in Seattle.

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New plan. Hard pivot. My dad had enough money to buy three train tickets to Chicago, but that was it. Once in Chicago, my Uncle Jim would wire us money for three bus tickets to Pittsburgh where he'd pick us up. This was a travel plan held together with duct tape and bubble gum.

Dad was officially winging it and making it up as he went along. Flying by the seat of his pants. No time for careful deliberation, but a train ride seemed far better than the backseat of that jalopy.

For some reason, we rushed over to the Space Needle after we checked out of the hotel. I guess my mom and dad felt guilty about not turning this ordeal into some semblance of a family vacation. We stood atop the Space Needle, admiring the view of a 1975 skyline destined to serve as my future home, but also completely transform in the next few decades. This one-company town belonged to Boeing for now, but a plucky startup named Microsoft had just formed and would eventually make its corporate home in nearby Redmond. Nothing would ever be the same again.

I don't recall much about our departure from King Street Station, but many years later when I walked into the train station to greet my wife and oldest son who had gone to Portland to visit colleges, I felt a chill go down my spine. I just stood there and couldn't move.

I stared into the train concourse with an overwhelming déjà vu feeling. I swear I could almost see my dad standing in the far corner, making his ticket purchase as if it was 1975 all over again.

As we boarded our train, everyone's mood was upbeat, almost buoyant. We were living out *The Hero's Journey*. We had gone into the inmost cave and faced our greatest fear in the supreme ordeal.

In my family, there's nothing harder for anyone to do than admit when they're wrong or made a mistake. In that sense, we seized the sword even though the object of our pursuit was left behind. And dad passed a test of a different sort.

Dad was returning with the elixir of knowledge and wisdom. A true conquest even though the guys at Johnny's were still going to give him some serious shit. Small-town ridicule for all his days.

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The two-day train ride left in the early evening and felt like a transcontinental victory lap. A whistle-stop campaign tour. Dad should have delivered celebratory speeches at each scheduled stop.

All I could think about was staring out the windows at the mountains and every otherworldly sight imaginable. Years later, I would do a memorable hike through this same central Cascade mountain range, trekking across The Enchantments with my two sons and older sister.

By daybreak, while my parents struck up conversations and hung out with other travelers, I was happy to sit alone in the Observation Deck and stare at the passing landscape. The Mercury Sun Valley was already a distant memory, though my dad had a ready-made ice-breaker conversation starter for his fellow train passengers. As for my mother, she hit it off with some psychologist from Minnesota and they would become regular pen pals for all their days.

I had no time for idle chit chat. I was mesmerized by the passing scenery as the train knifed its way through the mountains and terrain of Montana. I was living out the opening monologue to the old Star Trek series to “seek out new worlds and boldly go where no man has gone before.”

Before this trip, I only ever set foot outside Pennsylvania twice. Our only family vacation to Niagara Falls and the always boring drive across Ohio to visit cousins in Valparaiso, Indiana.

When I overheard someone say, “just wait until we reach the Continental Divide,” I had this image of a large gap or crack that split the country in half. I envisioned the train making a death-defying crossing, as if traversing an ice crevasse like the Khumbu Icefall on Mt. Everest.

On our final day, the journey reached the northern Plains and things started to get a bit tiresome and monotonous. Fortunately, I encountered a fellow adventurer who helped pass the time.

I don't know or remember how old she was. I'd guess anywhere from seventeen to early twenties, but to me, she was wise and sophisticated in a world-weary way. She carried a backpack and didn't really seem to have a permanent home or address. Hippie vagabond? Runaway?

She had long brown hair with a few freckles. Young Cissy Spacek vibes. A bit of Susan Day from *The Partridge Family*. She was just a free spirit on the open road. I'd never met someone like that. Better yet, even though she was much older, she didn't talk down to me or treat me like a kid.

We hung out in the Observation Deck and talked for quite a few hours. I'm sure I was a bit smitten, but can you blame me for having a school boy crush on this new bohemian friend? Conversation came easy and we shared the same sense of humor and liked the same stuff. She even seemed interested in my life back home. Or maybe she was just bored.

"What grade you in?"

"Going into ninth."

"That's a big one. Older kids."

"It's okay. All my friends are older than me anyway."

"Not surprised. You seem like one of those old souls for just a kid. No offense."

"You, too. I mean, you been around. Seen places... other stuff."

"Just trying to follow my heart, ya know? Some people don't understand."

"I wish I could do what you're doing."

"Someday. You got plenty of time."

I don't recall the stop when she said good-bye and disembarked the train. Somewhere between Fargo, North Dakota and La Crosse, Wisconsin. She grabbed her backpack and a black "Billy Jack" style cowboy hat that looked like the iconic black wool hat Jimi Hendrix used to wear.

I watched her through the window, sauntering along the platform just rockin' her Hendrix hat. She looked so fucking cool. As the train pulled out, my last image was watching her wander toward the distant prairie. I sometimes wonder who she was and how her life turned out.

The Observation Deck suddenly felt like a lonely place. I made a beeline to my parents, who were talking to another couple. I moaned to nobody in particular: "How much longer to Chicago?"

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I don't remember much about our Chicago arrival or late-night bus ride to Pittsburgh. I recall a scary confrontation in the Chicago bus terminal. A large woman was swinging her handbag at some guy, like it was a lethal weapon. The handbag looked heavy, as if it were loaded with bricks.

Another far scarier incident occurred somewhere between Chicago and Pittsburgh when I stirred from my sleep and witnessed a guy pulling a knife on someone in the aisle of the bus. I have no idea how it started, but somehow the situation was defused before it could escalate.

The allure of the open road and traversing across the Wild West had now given way to the harsh realities of everyday life and urban living. I was ready to return to the tedium of my small-town life.

Upon arrival in Pittsburgh, Uncle Jim greeted us and couldn't resist. He flashed a knowing smile and asked, "How was the trip?" Dad seemed pretty chill, like he was ready for all the good-natured teasing that awaited him. He was cool with the whole thing. Wore it like a badge of honor.

Over time, I think dad actually enjoyed the attention. Despite being the object of derision or butt of the joke, everyone still viewed him with an undercurrent of unspoken admiration and begrudging respect within his circle of cronies. The common refrain was usually "that took some serious balls."

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In my dad's version of the story in his corporate video, he ends with a cautionary message and rueful reference to "the embarrassment in my son's eyes toward his father," which is a shame he felt that way or was worried about how I might have viewed his actions during our Seattle sojourn.

Sure, it was absurd. A bit whacky. Batshit crazy in all the best ways. All those things and more.

It was also one of the greatest things my dad ever did, as far as I'm concerned.

I always remember it as the time he decided to follow his heart rather than his head.

And I got to share my greatest boyhood adventure with my dad, which is pretty fucking cool.

Come to think of it. Maybe... it was his greatest adventure, too.

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## Epilogue

The 1954 Mercury Sun Valley was once called “the dream car of tomorrow,” as if it were something ethereal and more of an illusion or fantasy. Like running through the fog of a dream and chasing something unattainable. I think my late father might agree.

That’s how my Seattle adventure of fifty years ago sometimes feels to me. The fog of a dream. Just cloudy memories. No photos. No tourist keepsakes. Just a train timetable and a map.

I’ve now lived in Seattle for almost thirty years and the irony is not lost on me.

I always tell people I’ve never set foot in the Space Needle, but tend to forget about those final hectic hours in Seattle fifty years ago. It’s still the only time I’ve ever set foot in the Space Needle.

I now have two grown sons in their twenties and living on their own, but when they were younger, we used to take them to a Seattle park along Puget Sound called Golden Gardens. It has a beach and a grassy field adjacent to a parking lot alongside a set of train tracks.

Anytime a freight train rumbled past, my boys always stopped whatever they were doing. Once in a while, we’d see the evening Amtrak train, bound for destinations across Montana and beyond.

I’d gaze at the faces pressed against the windows and let my mind drift far away. Lost in a daydream, as if staring at younger versions of myself and my parents waving from a past life.

The train would pass, but I could never shake the faces in the windows of the passing train. It made me think about my own train ride fifty years ago. When I passed this same park, who did I see out the window? Maybe I was waving to my older, future self, flying kites with my sons.

All that’s left from my greatest boyhood adventure is an Amtrak timetable and tattered foldout map of Seattle. Both are now precious family heirlooms. Symbols for doing something bold and daring. A reminder that once in a while, it’s okay to take a leap of faith.

And follow your heart. Even if it’s batshit crazy.