



Highway 53 Revisited

Abe said, "Where do you want the killing done?"
 Ood said, "Out on Highway 61."
 Bob Dylan "Highway 61 Revisited"

O-dark thirty, Friday morning, the 11th of February, '94. Ab Childress tosses me a rag to wipe condensation from the windshield of his road-worn '71 GMC pickup. Frost rimes his pea-gravelled driveway. At 7 am the neighborhood rolls over in bed, winter ink dominating the sky. A wisp of steam curls from my coffee cup. I slouch low in the truck's seat, cheerful as a frozen turnip.

"Hand me that screwdriver on the dash."

Ab lurches outside the cab, lifts the hood, arcs the screwdriver across the starter motor at the engine, and we have ignition. A few sputters later, we achieve roar-up.

"Must be water in the gas tank", he barks to me above the garbled staccato of the C.B. radio stowed in the glove box.

We angle onto Highway 101, scuffing icy gravel, tools rattling and thudding in the truck's aft section.

On Friday, January 14th, elephant boulders cascaded down the slopes of Neahkahnie Mountain, clogging Highway 101 and staunching traffic flow north and south on our coast. Some say the Ancient Ones, Kani, patron of the mountain, Ice, Wild Woman, Wild Man and others who inhabit the mountain's nether regions, were expressing displeasure at man's activities below. Of that I cannot speak.

I can tell you that for Ab and myself the highway blockage was most untimely. We began constructing a home in Manzanita late in January. We found ourselves commuting for an hour-plus each day from Cannon Beach to Manzanita and back--a bleached-knuckle affair down Highway 53 that has neutralized the pigment in my hair and sent my blood pressure raging.

This morning, the 11th of February, as we rattle east toward Necanicum Junction and the rising sun, I taste my nerves in my throat. Black ice sparkles as we fork south on 53. I feel like Slim Pickens in the movie "Fail Safe", riding through the sky on a nuclear warhead.

We edge southward past Horecny's spread and Hamlet Road. Dawn tries desperately to climb over the eastern hills and warm the Nehalem Valley. The coffee dregs threaten to form a skin of ice at the base of my cup.

For log truckers, the trip down 53 is a cat and mouse, hound and hare affair--the road a scrawny string of chuck-holed, shoulderless pavement, blind corners, and treacherous winter footing. In our old truck with its slick condom tires, an icy morning is a run through the gauntlet, a flight down M.I.G. Alley, a march with "the 600" through the Valley of Death.

"Loaded logger, northbound, Milepost 3," we hear over the C.B. "Slippery as greased whale snot this morning, Tim!"

"Yeah, did you see that boat that launched itself out through the trees back there? Trailer must have left the road when it hit ice and went airborne."

I cross myself and hunker lower in the seat.

Highway 53, like the rock song title of the '50's, traverses "20 miles of bad road." Some drivers stop completely as they approach the most dangerous curves in the higher areas between the Nehalem Fish Hatchery and the Sunset Highway. Chuck holes gutter the pavement; tire tracks appear high on mud banks adjacent to the pavement, delineating the vectors selected by prudent, terrified drivers.

We growl south through angular hills and watercourses: Bergsvik Creek, Jack Horner Creek, Soapstone Creek, and the Nehalem River. The river and its valley debouch from between mountains and lead south to the sea. The dangerous travelling is past. Ab and I yarn a few stories and relax near the grace of God's Valley just north of Mohler.

If those of us who've been forced to commute back and forth on Highway 53 due to rock slides survive maiming or death, I will entertain the presence of the miraculous. I commend the general citizenry and the log truck drivers who proceed cautiously and courteously--folks thrown together in a hard place at a bad time.

A loaded logger moving north today stated the situation clearly on his C.B. radio as he approached the end of the detour.

"Loaded logger, Milepost 3. Headed north."

"Loaded logger, Milepost 2. Headed north."

"Logger, loaded, Milepost 1 and Goddam glad of it!"

When Highway 101 opens again, I assure you, readers, I will be most grateful.

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Quincy Sugarman left this world Feb 2nd, 1994. She had it in her will that if it became counter-productive, someone should pull the plug. Quincy had Lupus. She died as she lived, honestly, passionately, and with a minimum of bullshit. Quincy, when I met her and until her death, worked for OSPIRG, Oregon State Public Interest Research Group. We worked together for about three years, and the last time I saw her was when she came to visit me at the bookstore here in Cannon Beach, with her huge white dog, A Great Pyrenees or something. She had lost a lot of weight, again, and I didn't recognize her for a moment. It scared me a little, perhaps my heart knew.

Quincy loved Cannon Beach, and would always find ways to come down. She got a lot of help from the active environmental community. We were working on Measure 6 -- the Recycling initiative -- with the Cannon Beach Energy folks, Mary Anne, Rippey, Jim Hannen, the regulars. We were doing a raffle and fund raiser in Bill's and everybody was having fun and we made money, and I felt at home. Quincy had driven us down in her truck. She always had a name for her trucks. Mary Anne arranged for us to stay in that tiny cabin right on the beach in front of Haystack rock. I moved down soon after. I took several road trips with Quincy, we worked the Oregon State Fair in Salem together, talking recycling. On the drive home we talked about Grateful Dead shows we'd seen, and the sixties, and stuff we did and stuff we hoped to do.

Quincy was the Science person at OSPIRG, she could tell you which companies in Oregon were good guys and bad guys and back it up with data and explain the chemistry. MIT taught her a lot.

Quincy was respected in the Oregon State Legislature and in the Environmental Community of Oregon for her hard work, her great good humor and her honesty. She lobbied and researched and wrote and did news conferences. Everyone in Oregon who worked around the Environmental Folks had at least heard of her. She was legendary for having seen the Grateful Dead live over 300, or 400, or I don't know if anyone but Quincy knows how many, times. I'm sure she had plans to see them this spring.

Quincy reminded me of the Jewish aunt I always thought it would be nice to have. Emma Goldman of the 80's and 90's. She had a sense about her, a style of her own. She was a sister of the Feminist Movement, and happily, a sister to the men she worked with. She gave respect when it was deserved, and commanded it always. She will always have mine.

I would like to suggest that Quincy's friends at OSPIRG and USPIRG, and throughout the Environmental and Political Community, set up a fund to provide a scholarship in the Environmental/political sciences for a challenged young woman, and ask the Dead to kick it off. And call it the Quincy Sugarman/Grateful Dead Memorial Scholarship for the Environment, Politics and Rock & Roll. We need to write a grant. We have lost a champion.



February again came through with a very necessary dose of sunshine. Comes the year when, after a sodden Nov. thru Jan., February fails to provide a sun break, we predict an immediate 50% drop in state population with the survivors all indicted as ax murderers.

February's final weekend dated Newport's annual Seafood and Wine festival. Local (and not so local) wine makers and seafood purveyors gathered in an immense tent on the far side of the bay to peddle anything from a taste to a truckload of their respective wares to approximately 20,000 visitors and a small coterie of shell shocked natives. Notable this year was the expanded number of vendors offering the festive an opportunity to indulge in that quintessential Northwestern seafood delicacy, the Vietnamese Spring Roll.

Terry (Terrible Terry) Thompson, Newport fisherman for some 30+ years, has announced he is running for State Rep. from this district. He hopes to replace the Hon. Hedy Rijken who has announced she doesn't intend to run for re-election.

The Honorable Terrible? Why not? Works for me.

Early to bed and early to rise, & etc. is probably a good and rational way to run a life. However, live so and you miss some of the most entertaining things that occur in this old world.

Two thirty in the ay of em we find ourselves out of the devil weed, tobacco. So off to the local QuickyMart to get some.

Immediately in front of us in the line is an attractive lady of some 25 or thirty summers. Ahead of her a youth of Jr. High vintage. The youth asks the clerk for cigarettes.

CLERK: "I can't sell you tobacco unless you're 18 and have ID. You got to have hair on your chest to buy cigarettes here, boy."

Youth mutters something and stomps out the door.

YOUNG LADY (smiling) "May I have a pack of El Ropo Grandes please?"

CLERK (also smiling) "Well, I don't know. Got hair on your chest?"

YOUNG LADY (smile widens to gaudy grin) "Yes! Regularly!"

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