

## Counterculture

No one was injured when the old school bus rear-ended Dad's car on that drizzly May afternoon in 1968. The occupants of the bus were a bedraggled young couple in dirty bell-bottom jeans with frayed hems. She wore a wrinkled peasant blouse and buffalo-skin thong sandals. He was shirtless and shoeless. Both were scrawny and in their eyes was the look of hunger.

The van's driver was on the verge of tears. "Sorry, man, I just lost focus when I dropped my joint." His female companion exuded hostility, a scowling subscriber to the "Don't trust anyone over 30" mantra. I stood aside, fascinated by their filthy feet and their tear-inducing body odor.

I was only 15, but Dad was far into the suspect age. And the look aimed at Dad by the emaciated girl hippie was poisonous. I couldn't understand that antipathy. Dad was smiling, conciliatory.

"Do you want to get estimates of the damage?" he asked the young driver, who paled at the mention of repair costs.

"I know I owe you for this, man," said the scrawny stranger. "I'll do the right thing." His companion glared, first at her boyfriend, then at Dad.

Then to my shock Dad invited this pair of strangers to come home with us, have supper and stay the night.

What? These smelly aliens in our house? At our dinner table? Overnight? I was embarrassed and uneasy. I couldn't see how this could be a good idea.

As soon as our two-car caravan got home, Dad was on the phone with his friend who had a tree-trimming service, arranging a job for the young man to fund repairs for the car and gas for the bus.

Mom was less congenial than Dad. Her smile of greeting was paper-thin. Suddenly she needed to stretch dinner to feed five, fluff the spare bedroom and find fresh towels. I suspect she also spent a bit of time hiding pawnable objects.

But she rose to the occasion as she had done many times with Dad, whom she called her collector of lost souls. She added another can of beans to the meal, and Dad kept the dialog moving with unintrusive questions about their lives. The young man, who called himself Don, said the couple were on their way to The Farm, a commune near Summertown, Tennessee.

Around the supper table, Don and Dad found common ground. Dad spoke about his faith in the divine. Don said The Farm was a spiritual destination. The girl, who had by now provided the name Daisy, offered to help clear the table. Mom began to thaw at this gesture.

Early the next morning, I heard the hippies quietly leave the house. I watched through the kitchen window as they headed out to their bus. Then I saw Dad appear in the driveway carrying an armful of books: a Bible, something by C.S. Lewis, Viktor Frankl's memoir and a few other inspirational texts. I recognized this gesture as classic Dad. He knew this couple was making a getaway, and he intended that they should not leave without fuel for the soul.

That encounter faded from my young mind, except for vague speculation about hippies and how they seemed so alienated from all I considered normal. Only much later did I realize what a sheltered childhood mine had been. Viet Nam, protests, LSD – none of those topics had occupied conversation space at my parents' 1960s dinner table. Only much later did I realize how my ignorance had robbed me of wisdom.

One fall afternoon decades later, as my 85-year-old dad and I sat watching his maple tree shed its brilliant golden leaves, I asked if he remembered the day the hippies smashed up his car.

“Like yesterday,” he said. “I believe that young man was sincere about making it right.”

“But you never heard from him again, huh?” I recalled.

“It didn’t surprise me. The counterculture didn’t engage with the establishment. I represented all that was wrong with the world.”

“How did you feel about being stiffed?” I wondered.

“The whole incident made me sad. I wish I knew how life turned out for them.”

I recalled the Tennessee Williams line about the kindness of strangers. Dad had treated those young strangers with such decency, and he hadn’t borne a grudge when their own humanity failed them. It made me proud to be the child of a do-gooder.

A year later at Dad’s well-attended funeral, a couple I didn’t recognize singled me out. They were an elegant 60-ish pair. His look was comfortable and confident. Her vibe was sincere and discerning. The man said, “We’re Don and Daisy Larson. One day long ago your dad showed us the meaning of kindness. We’ve never forgotten, and we came over from Summertown to pay our respects.”