Chauffeurs.

A short story

by

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As a kid I enjoyed peering down from the dizzying heights of hotel balconies to the streets below, my small chest balanced precariously over the railings. From there I could observe, undetected, the chauffeurs milling about, chatting with each other and protectively fussing over gleaming corporate automobiles. Handkerchiefs would emerge, almost in unison, from long navy wool coats and having been dabbed in a bit of saliva, would be used to meticulously wipe door handles and side mirrors. A tire would inevitably be kicked and inspected for wear or a hood propped open and the oil filter extracted and carefully examined. This was all for show of course, a sign to passersby that the automobile in question was in the most capable of hands. Once this small ritual was performed, the dust would be shaken off the fingers, the gloves came back on and the chatting resumed.

     I used to brag to my friends that we had, in fact, two drivers. One that would take my father to work and another who waited in the car with the motor running all day long in case my mother felt the need to go shopping. This was essentially true except for the fact that our chauffeurs were employed by my father's company, not by us. They were merely one of several generous perks accorded to the senior vice president of a large corporation. My father, the vice president, worked hard for the company from the ground up for the better part of his life. By the time I was fourteen he had put in fifty years of service with his company and during that period of time our corporate chauffeurs and their families would come to rank amongst my most endearing and trustworthy childhood friends.

     The first driver out of the pool to be more or less permanently assigned to us was a half Belgian half Flemish chap by the name of Ferdinand. My mother dismissively referred to Ferdinand as a “character", whatever that meant. As I grew older I came to realize that a more accurate description could not have existed. She often complained to anyone with a sympathetic ear that he smelled and although it might have been commonly known throughout the family that he drank, no one except she ever uttered a word about it.

     To my father’s way of thinking the only important criteria for a company chauffeur was that he be able to drive at steady speeds and smoothly enough so that you could barely detect whether the car was in motion. This type of skill was at a premium for executives like my father who tried to accomplish as much paperwork as possible from the fold down tray in the backseat. For this reason it was essential that none of the sacred documents be jostled about in any significant manner. After these initial requirements came loyalty, adhering to strict meal times and being able to diplomatically handle drunken business associates whenever they needed a ride home.

     Ferdinand was an acknowledged expert in all of these areas and the subject of much admiration by his peers but to me none of this mattered. He was the first person to enlighten me about the opposite sex. It was he who conspiratorially slipped a 1965 issue of Playboy magazine from his navy coat into my eagerly awaiting hands, making me the envy of boys in my neighborhood for at least the entire year. It was also customary of Ferdinand to switch to the car’s low beams occasionally when driving around Paris in the evenings but only if he felt that a girls legs were pretty enough to warrant closer scrutiny when she crossed the street.

     My first dates out of European public schools were often chauffeured to the house; some, as I was to find out later, over mortified protests. This was due in part to the deed being cemented over the phone parent to parent, usually without the girls consent. Others of my young girlfriends positively reveled in the experience and couldn’t wait to tell me about friends who stared with mouths agape while the drivers pulled up to their dilapidated neighborhoods and jumped out to open the doors.

In contrast to our other European chauffeur friends, the corporate drivers in London England were always in a class by themselves. A no-nonsense breed of highly trained footmen. The consummate usher who always knew his place and who made sure that you were in the right one at all times. Though extremely friendly and endearing, they acted less like what my parents referred to as “familiar”. Being a kid I never knew what that meant and as an adult I’m even less sure.

Two of the most charismatic London chauffeurs, Johnny Green and Tom Two, became an extended part of our family. They doted on us but they also watched our backs and protected us. Johnny, good naturedly, substituted as my babysitter on many occasions and kept me in stiches for hours with his funny stories while my parents attended lavish parties. "Tom Two", so named to avoid confusion with another driver in the organization, enjoyed rock and roll. Whenever my parents were let off so that it was just the two of us in the car, both of us would scramble to find a good London rock station and turn it up full blast.

My last evening as a resident of London England before we moved permanently to the U.S.was enjoyably spent in the company of Johnny whom I’d known since childhood and who was like an uncle to me. My parents had actually waited a year before moving to the States because their friends told them about a large concert called Woodstock that was about to take place and they were worried that I, at the tender age of fourteen, may have been swept up in the burgeoning movement of young people who were united and braving any obstacles in their paths to see it.

After much groveling sometime later I begged to see the Woodstock movie which was being shown in a relentless series of tantalizing clips on British television. Although too young to be admitted to the movie theater, I finally persuaded my parents to allow Johnny to go with me.We had a great time and joined the audience in thunderous applause after it was over.

      I was the most elated of all because I would soon be leaving for the America.

My father’s retirement and my family’s move to the States signaled the end of our chauffeured experience. My father mostly drove himself and when he became too old my mother took over the job. Though I have not kept in touch, I often picture the chauffeurs today in my mind going about the many thankless routines their employers never see. I think about them with nostalgic fondness and infinite gratitude.