

2-16-00

Fearless in Seattle

George, seventeen, Roland, fourteen, and I were on our way to join Paul in Anchorage, Alaska. We stopped in Seattle for a short visit with my brother Roland, his wife Pat, and their two small daughters, Stacy and Kim. Since his Navy flight days in the post-Korean period, we were getting accustomed to calling him Tom. The family lived in a lovely two-story house on the side of a steep hill which descended to the shores of Lake Washington.



Tom had planned a number of fascinating ways to entertain his teenaged nephews. The first was a small boat that, with a minimum of instructions, the boys could sail by themselves, a big thrill. They also had an evening tour on Lake Washington in the forty-five foot sailboat which Tom had built himself in his basement. Their cup was running over.



At lunch the next day, George regretted that he had not packed any guitar strings. He hoped he would be able to get some in Anchorage. (Don't all seventeen-year-old boys take their guitars to Alaska?)

Tom knew of a music store in Seattle where George could get some strings and suggested that George could drive to get them. Now Tom's car was a beautiful, old, shiny black Mercedes Benz, of which he was inordinately proud. He called it his "Hitler car." George's eyes shone with excitement. Driving that car could easily become the highlight of our visit. BUT he had never driven a standard-shift car. AND the car was parked on a narrow driveway more than fifteen feet above and behind the house. MOREOVER, he had never driven on any hills to compare with those of the streets of Seattle. Tom overcame my fearful objections before I could express them by disappearing with George, ostensibly to show him the car. While they were gone, Tom instructed him briefly on how to handle the standard shift and described the route to the music store. And George was off on his big adventure before I knew he had started. I tried not to show my horror of Tom's trust in George, but the next hour was torture.

George returned happily with his guitar strings, leaving the Mercedes in the very spot he'd started from.

"How'd it go?" I casually inquired.

"Oh, fine," he replied.

"Did you have to stop on any hills?" I wondered.

"Oh, yeah," he said.

"Any trouble with the clutch in starting up without stalling?"

I know how impatient, honking horns had bothered me when I had stalled.

"No, I just shifted into neutral, set the brakes, got out, and raised the hood. When the cars behind saw that I had engine trouble, they left, and I got back in, eased into first gear, and took off."

"Oh, of course, I said. "Good thinking." Why had I been worried?