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The Roller Coaster

Last night I slept through the latest casualty caused by The Roller Coaster on which we live. Therefore, I can only relate the skimpy facts as they were relayed to me and based on the history of our residence here. But I add them to a long history of wrecks on our front yard or nearby which I did witness.

The Roller Coaster, or The Dips as some people know it, is the name by which many people know the narrow, hilly street that runs approximately half a mile from Forest Hill Avenue to our house at 2626 Stratford Road. It has three fairly deep valleys followed by three hilltops with steep approaches. No one warned us beforehand of the reputation of that stretch of road, but we learned the hard way that it constitutes a challenge to many young men and women who are just beginning their driving careers. We've heard it identified by young and old from the area all the way up to Fredericksburg and down to Chesapeake as the place to race up and down hills for thrills.



Our acquaintance with the hazards began very soon after we moved in, first by the necessity of replacing our mail box – some seven times in the first few years we lived here. Paul began watching for sales and laid in a supply of inexpensive boxes so that the mailman would always deliver our mail. Unfortunately, crushed mail boxes were the easily replaced victims of the Roller Coaster. We began to become acquainted with the sound of an automobile crashing into the oak tree or the telephone pole by our driveway, sometimes both. If the telephone pole was a victim, we had to comb the neighborhood to find a working telephone in order to summon the rescue squad. We soon learned to appreciate those hard-working, dedicated volunteers who arrive quickly, ready to aid accident victims. We also admire the police who arrive promptly to regulate traffic and to stay around to be sure that the street is cleaned up after the injured are taken to the hospital. The severity of the injuries has varied from not-very-bad to very severe indeed. One midnight, Paul had to stand supporting the dangling upper body of a boy whose legs were pinned by the motor. That was probably the worst. We learned roundabout later that he had been hospitalized a long time as a result of that wreck. Within a week of his

release from the hospital, he had a fatal accident in his mother's car out on Route 5 in Chesterfield County.

Last night about one thirty, Paul was awakened by a deep crunch/thud which has become familiar to us as residents on the Roller Coaster. It's the crushing sound of a single-car accident, the result of a high-speed race from Forest Hill Avenue up and down the multiple hills that had originally attracted us to the area. Our house is on the north side of Stratford, slightly beyond the top of the last dip of the road, just as the road veers to the right dropping off suddenly on the north rim. A speeding car misses the curve and leaves the road as it enters the turn, leaving no traction for the wheels and usually bearing the speeding car into the sturdy but now defunct oak tree and a telephone pole, just short of our drive way. Last night, however, the car came to rest in the driveway across the street. It appeared to have spun back toward Forest Hill Avenue, flipping over, and coming to rest on its crushed roof. The crashing thud was followed by loud yells, not screams of pain. Paul could see little until the Wiggins, our neighbors across the street, drove their car to the end of their driveway to shine their headlights on the upside-down car. Soon a police car arrived, followed by a fire truck which illuminated the scene. No ambulance came. Later two wreckers arrived, making considerable noise in removing the car from the ditch and taking it away.

This morning, Loretta Wiggins told us that by the time she and her husband got to the car after dialing 911, the occupants were gone, guilty of leaving the scene of an accident. The police said that they had determined that the owner of the car is a Henrico resident, that they had tried without success to contact her to see whether the car had been stolen. We'll have to wait for additional detective work to learn the rest of the story.

Needless to say, the episode revived many memories of night-time excitement over the years we've lived here. The severe wrecks which took place usually involved young people from all around the area who wanted to test the Roller Coaster. It seems to be a kind of rite of passage, an irresistible challenge, to come out, generally after dark, to test the skill of the driver and the nerve of the passengers. Usually, we carried blankets to the scene to cover the injured until they were rescued. I learned to start the coffee pot for the police whose clean-up duties took them several hours.

Along with the trauma of helping injured youngsters, we had two or three amusing episodes. One night we were awakened by a policeman holding a very reluctant boy by the collar. The officer said the young man wanted to pay for the mail box. (We already knew it was down, for we had heard him hit it and then back up over it to see what sort of damage he had caused). Paul said "Three ninety-five" the amount he had paid for one of the bargain boxes. The policeman said "Nonsense!" and directed the hapless boy to give Paul ten dollars.

Another time on a Sunday afternoon, we found a boy with his parents at our front door. They wanted to thank us for taking care of their son. The young man, who apparently knew he was going to have to pay for the telephone pole he had broken, said he was sorry he had not hit the oak tree. That he hadn't was responsible for his uninjured state.

Except on those three occasions, we never knew the result of the injuries. We did feel that the accidents could be prevented by the proper signs on the street and Paul found the City Traffic Engineer was always cooperative, first getting street lights for our stretch of road and then adding signage reducing the legal speed to fifteen miles an hour, warning of a curve, and later highlighting the area of the curve with zebra delineators. The accidents began to diminish with each improvement, and in fact, the accident last night was the first in at least ten years.

