

The Watermelon Car

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When my sister Pam and I were still kids in single digits, we got very excited when my grandmother would come to Greensboro to visit us on the weekends. We could hear her vehicle coming blocks away because of a squeaky engine belt which would echo down the block with a patterned squawk like an angry blackbird. It drove us all crazy at the time, especially as a passenger but she refused to get fixed - she just turned up the radio and ignored it. After a time, she didn't even hear it anymore - she just got used to it.

Eventually, everybody else did too.

For months she drove around town chirping like a sick pigeon was trapped under her big Chevrolet hood - at least until she got to highway speeds. Then, the squeaking quieted and the eight cylinders kicked in with a roar, the faster the better.

That's probably why she got so many citations from the North Carolina Highway Patrol when she visited. When she complained about her 'heavy foot' after yet another speeding ticket, I thought it was a real medical condition. It seemed a likely explanation, as my Grandma had some seriously scary bunions on her nasty feet, but I digress.

Once Nanny got settled in, Pam and I would absolutely beg for her (and her gimpy foot) to take us on a drive in her gigantic noisy dinosaur car. Eventually, after an all-out verbal assault by us whiny kids, she gave in and we all would pile inside her ugly suburban tank, seatbelts optional.

A 1970 Monte Carlo was an odd choice for my tiny grandmother - a beige metal behemoth with shiny seats, heavy doors and always a full ashtray. To me, Nanny looked out of place driving the thing; a pixie elder atop her Fuchsia pillow, straining to see over the dashboard. I discovered later that the furry donut was her hemorrhoid halo as well, but as a kid all I saw was an old lady elf with glasses on a hot pink mushroom struggling to control an 18-wheeler. When she cranked up the thing we peeled off with the familiar sound of an irate crow chasing us down the street.

Back then, the North Carolina countryside was a fairly rural place outside the Greensboro city limits. County roads often followed old tractor lanes or wagon trails that weaved around the hillsides. These were twisting, turning roads that represented a challenge to even the most experienced driver. Alarming signs warned the good people of Greensboro about the dangers at every turn, some with flashing yellow lights and raised pavement markers - yet my Nanny was undeterred.

In a move that would horrify most enlightened parents today, my 1970s grandmother went out of her way to take us down the worst of these hilly lanes, Kiss-Me-Quick Road in Guilford County. This route was famous for its extreme little hills which had caused more than a few cars to 'catch air' and 'bottom out' like the Dukes of Hazzard.

This carnival ride was delightful to us, tumbling around in the back seat like shoes in a dryer – we loved it. Occasionally I'd hit my head on the roof or Pam would land upside down, but it was all in good fun.

In truth, my grandmother was making up for what was happening at home - specifically my parents' breakup. During this time, their bickering had become more frequent and Pam and I were becoming affected by it. Grandma's biweekly visits from Raleigh were a welcome respite from our situation and driving like a maniac was Nanny's way of shaking things up - quite literally. Plus, it was obvious she liked piloting her junior tank crew across the hilly old battlefields of historic Guilford County.

These crazy rides eventually became a tradition that my mother tolerated so that she and my father could argue in an empty house at full volume. But the ritual became a lot more interesting with 30 pounds of rotting fruit in the trunk and a car filling with live bees! Strap in folks, it's going to be a bumpy ride.

One summer day my grandmother had gone to the farmers market in Raleigh and picked up three Basset Hound sized watermelons that were just ripe enough to be amazing. She had the farmhand toss them in her trunk, paid him a few dollars and left. Unfortunately, Lola got another speeding ticket just outside of Greensboro and she was fit to be tied when her squeaky ass finally came down our street late in the afternoon.

By the time we had our regular joyride through the farm roads of Guilford County, Nanny had forgotten all about the melons. It was a rough ride for all of us, especially our three new friends in the luggage bin/rock tumbler. One can only imagine the damage and mayhem going on back there, but we never heard a thing over the radio and that Chevy engine. These bodies in the trunk remained undiscovered for another couple weeks.

Now you would think half a month in the Carolina sun would create enough odor that it would draw Nanny's attention to the situation in her vehicle - but somehow, this did not happen. Perhaps it was because she really didn't drive that often and when she did, she was generally puffing Camels with the side window cracked. This wasn't to say there weren't *any* clues. Nanny *had* noticed the house flies in the car - more than the smell - but these tiny green monsters were easily raptured to heaven at fifty-five miles an hour with power windows instantly.

And so it was that in the luggage bin of a American sedan, three once proud watermelons were now headed back to Greensboro – half-rotted in the heat decaying into a jiggling cesspool of fruitmeat. And once again Nanny was stopped for her speed, but she cried her way out of it this time. Nonetheless, we didn't make it to Kiss-Me-Quick Road until Sunday dinner, allowing my grandmother's secret terrarium another long summer weekend to get overripe and disgusting.

After dinner, it was time for our crazy ride! Once in the Chevy, Pam noticed the smell immediately, but dared not complain for fear of jeopardizing our joy ride. Remember we still didn't know about the 30 pounds of hot fruit cocktail in the boot that was about to get shaken, not stirred.

I think it was the third hill when it happened. The Monte Carlo had bottomed out and Pam grabbed the center arm rest for dear life, yanking it out of place. This exposed sunlight through a small fold in the seat and suddenly bees flowed out like trapped miners into the gyrating car - pesky little bees! We screamed! Pam recoiled! Nanny slammed on the brakes.

We all tumbled forward.

The car skidded to a stop on the gravel shoulder and we all sprang out of the Chevy like our hair was on fire, over-reacting to a half dozen confused honeybees that had escaped. But my grandmother was shaken and had this possessed look about her.

"I know I bought those melons like, oh my god, three weeks ago?! But where did I...Oh no, it can't be, no way..." she was pacing around having a weird discussion with herself in whispers. Then she had the big realization right there on the side of the road – but she didn't tell us until we got back home.

If memory serves, it was getting dark when the whole family was poised around the trunk for the awful reveal. Nanny's' crazy driving had pulverized the remaining fruit into an unholy slurry of putrid warm mush, moldy rinds and creepy little sprouts. The rancid smell like bad Sangria knocked us back, so we knew fermentation had begun. Then a swarm of drunk bees and hyperactive flies were suddenly freed and surrounded us, even as we waved them away. Even more revolting were the tiny twisting maggots, glistening in the streetlight, feasting on the disgusting sludge.

Using dishwashing gloves and salad tongs, adults moved the stinking remains into three Winn-Dixie grocery bags, rolled closed tight but quickly soaking through the paper sacks. The concern was it would be rotting in the trash can with flies and worms infecting the other garbage. At some point someone suggested we "just bury it in the backyard behind the shed" and everybody seemed ok with that.

I don't remember who offered the bribe, but I was offered a quarter if I would bury the liquid evil. I loved digging in the yard and I would've done it for free, but at 6 years old without disposable income I gladly made the deal. It was still dusk (and still fun) when I started, but by nightfall I was already tired of it with one bag left. I was so lazy I just jammed the remaining sack into our woodpile and covered it with logs to be buried later. Of course, that never happened.

The watermelons were pretty much forgotten about, but it wasn't over. It turned out that the Bradford Watermelon is an invasive species with aggressive underground vines that spreads like Kudzu. During the dog days of summer and into the mild fall, the plant was secretly growing under our back lawn at an alarming rate. Worst yet, our woodpile was taken over by creeping runners like an alien and even it sprouted a few flowers in the early spring. Somehow my parents didn't notice, probably because they were preparing to sell the house in the divorce or maybe they just didn't care.

In either case, by the following May the backyard was full of insidious, verdant vines – each with the potential to create several giant watermelons. For a while my dad played whack-a-hole trying to control them, but he found the lawnmower was much more effective. Mowing delayed their progress, so the vines shifted to hugging the patio, climbing the shed and escaping under the fence – anywhere the dreaded lawnmower couldn't reach. The log pile became another story entirely.

The heap of twigs became a thick tangle of constricting green vines and large furry leaves with dozens of potential heavy watermelons. There was no sign of wood anymore, which was a problem for our real estate agent - he insisted we clean it up. But that never happened because an offer came in and before I knew it the house was sold and the family split apart.

Maybe twenty years later, in the 1990s, I drove past the old homestead in a nostalgic moment while visiting friends in Greensboro. The woodpile was gone, but there was a patch of vegetables in its place. I pretended to turnaround in the driveway so I could see the garden was full of Bradford Watermelons and I laughed out loud. Maybe the roots were just too deep - if you can't fight the evil, embrace it!

[Footnote: Around 2009 the property was again resold and the garden was paved over by extending the driveway, so the evil is finally entombed - for now]

