The Last Year of the Soapbox

My father used to tell me how to live. Always pay your taxes. Remember your mother’s birthday. Never jump-start a corroded battery. He believed in making things work and trying to avoid explosions.

Before I was born, he did a stint at Studebaker. He owned one gray suit, the same he would be married in, and traveled around the country as a freelance automotive engineer. Eventually he ended up in the northern Midwest, the rust belt, where he met my mother. My father, who had been raised in St. Petersburg, Florida, said it was cold, lonely work: courting a woman in Minnesota. Later, after he became respectable and middle-aged, after he settled in at a mid-sized corporation which specialized in suspension and exhaust, he told me to do what I want.

“You’re going to have to work all your life,” he told me. “Make sure it’s something you enjoy.”

At the time, I had just turned seven, and I like things to go fast. A few years ago, before I gave up racing for good, I placed twenty-third at Indy. The year Mark Donahue won, I was a kid hanging out in his pits. My father was showing me the ropes. “If you drive a green car,” my father explained, “they’ll have to tow you in.” Now everyone races a green car, and I drive for WAEC, Western Automotive Engineering Consultants, which I own. We’re based in Phoenix and work mostly with prototypes. I do some commercial work on the side.

Today we’re doing a shoot in Oak Creek Canyon, down
highway 89A—Arizona’s Scenic Highway, the sign says. And the premise is easy enough: I drive a forty-five-thousand-dollar black European sedan through the switchbacks. I drive hard but safe, goosing the clutch, avoiding disaster. I brake for two lonesome cows. I pass a green and yellow camper full of grandparents from Iowa on an outside stretch and drive on into town, Sedona, a town full of turquoise, pretty vistas and California license plates. Everyone’s staring wide-eyed as I pass through town in my black European sedan. At the three-way, I make a left and drive past the Circle-K to Poco Diablo, a golf and tennis resort stuffed with weeping willows, and by the time I pull up to the entrance, the car has been washed three times; the light is fading; Sandy, the director, is getting cranky; and when I finally get out of the car, it’s not me anymore. It’s a girl wearing a white dress with legs that’ll snap a tie-rod. She’s standing by the car near an overflowing fountain. The water is spraying, the bellhop’s blushing, the rising music a combination of jazz and new age guitar—and there’s this girl, all in white, looking like money and silk.

You want the road, the announcer will say. The road wants you. This is now.

It’s enough to make you hock your wedding ring, a commercial like that. Anything just to get a down payment and take that girl home and have her whisper in your ear, driving her home while she holds your hand in the warm space between her thighs until, later, when the car sits under your carport, compounding its interest daily, you start feeling spiritually bankrupt. A girl like that’s a fine piece of work. “A fine piece of engineering,” my father might have said, as if he’d designed the struts himself. “Just look at those knees!” and you know exactly where you want her to put them. You want her to put those knees on your chest, under the full weight of her body, until your breath stops cold.

In Homewood, Illinois, where I grew up, I was a fat kid. Weekly I’d get the crap kicked out of me by boys already
developed—the ones with muscles and a thatch of hair sprouting from their loins. To make matters worse, my father had agreed to let my mother name me after her brother who had fallen into a river at the age of three.

“Herbie,” my mother would say. “Come home after school.” She was afraid if I did not come home after school, I would be picked on. Also, I have since realized, had I not come home from school, my mother would have had no one to talk to: I was the Herbert she never had. We went grocery shopping together. While we had our own washer and dryer, we did laundry at the Highland Laundromat; the basement was too damp, she’d say. She never did read Betty Friedan. Instead, she took me to department stores and bible studies and always, if I ever complained, she’d attack with God on her side. Why was I so ungrateful? Why was I so selfish when I had what Uncle Herbert, that water-logged little three-year-old, never would?

Once, when she was convinced I was using heroin, she explained to me the dangers of syphilis and gonorrhea, diseases so pernicious and vile, she explained, yelling, that if you rubbed your eyes after going to the bathroom, you’d go blind and kill all your children. You’d even give it to your wife when she rubbed at her eyes after you gave it to her.

“Do you want to do that?” she screamed, in the car, where we sat parked in front of the Highland Laundromat. The car smelled like fresh laundry, and I had to go to the bathroom. “Is that what you want? To stick your little penis inside some filthy animal and die in prison?”

“No.”

“No! No?! Then what’s this!” She held up a pack of Trident sugarless gum, cinnamon, that she’d found in my pockets.

“It’s gum,” I said. “I’m trying not to be fat.”

It was an idea that had never occurred to her; my father had been spending more and more time out of town, in Europe, and California. Most people, especially heroin addicts, chewed gum to cover their breath. My mother had
read about it in a magazine. And even today my mother
expects me to forgive her these mistakes. She lives in
Ocotillo Gardens, where she gets reasonable medical care
and writes her memoirs, where I visit with her once a month
only if she’ll promise not to ask me any questions.

Because I’m Episcopalian, I spend most of each service on
my knees. In 1986, at Daytona, I buried a Camaro into the
third wall. I broke both knees, a hand, and was in Tucson’s
burn unit for six months. I have scars over most of my upper
body and neck and face. Usually, I wear turtlenecks, except
for summer when it’s too hot, and in church I pray for the
forgiveness of sins, I take communion, and I feel good about
the way my knees always ache.

Sandy, the director for the commercial, says she under-
stands. When her husband left, she wanted it to be his fault.
“Still,” she told me, “I know it’s mine.”

After the shoot, we’re sitting in the bar, Brandy’s, drinking
tequila sunrises. Hope, not her real name, the girl in white,
has changed into a t-shirt and jeans. The film crew is drinking
beer, and Hope explains that she changed her name for com-
mercial purposes. She’s going to be a television personality.

“What kind?”

“Oh, you know. The kind people have to think about a lot.
Like Madonna. Or Bjork.”

“Bert,” says Sandy. “Let’s stay the night.”

We both know Sandy’s a little drunk; no one spends the
night at a place called Poco Diablo without first considering
the consequences. From the bar you can see a putting green,
marked by a single flag.

“That’d be nice,” Hope says.

“Let us be grateful,” I say, holding up my drink, “for what
we have in hand.”

It wasn’t until the seventh grade that I learned I could fight
back. Tom Soper was picking on me in the locker room.
He’d pissed on me in the showers, and now, by my locker, he was snapping me with his jock. Barry Bloyd and Jimmy Jakel were throwing one of my sneakers back and forth over my head. Jakel was a skinny kid who smoked pot, and he was calling me *Herb the Perv.* I didn’t know exactly what a *Perv* was, but I knew Soper had stuck his hand upside Linda Carlisle’s sweater in the hall between third and fourth periods. I knew, too, that being a *Perv* couldn’t be a very good thing to be. So I pushed him, kind of.

“Look,” Soper said. “Herb’s getting mad!”

Everyone looked. Barry Bloyd laughed and threw my shoe at me. It hit me in the face and I began to cry.

“What are you going to do, Herb? Punch me?”

“Yeah, Sope,” Jakel said. “He’s going to punch you!”

Mike Ogata picked up my sneaker and gave it to me. Pierre LeClair, who everyone knew was gay, because he had a French name, told Soper to cut it out.

“Cut it out,” Pierre said, his voice unexpectedly deep.

And now everyone looked at Pierre, and Soper cut it out. But Jakel didn’t. He punched me in the stomach. He snapped my underwear, and I just stood there. I stood there by the bench while Jakel started slapping my head and I realized that I could punch too. He kept slapping at my head until Soper said, “Cut it out!”

But what I thought was, “No. Don’t.”

Every now and then, Sandy and I get together. We usually start out over dinner, talking about her divorce, and her husband, Wayne, who left her for an actress. In Phoenix there aren’t many actresses, most go to Hollywood, but what’s important, Sandy explains, is that the girl *wants* to be an actress. The girl has blond hair and does commercials for local car dealers. She has a degree in broadcasting and was a former runner-up for Ms. North Dakota, or Miss North Dakota. Sandy can never remember which.
“Besides,” Sandy will say, “I couldn’t give him what he wanted.”

“Which is?” I ask, politely, if I want the evening to carry on. Each time the answer varies. Sometimes it’s love. Sometimes it’s excitement. Sometimes, me.

When I don’t want the evening to carry on, I talk about my divorce. Everyone but Sandy seems to understand that the best way to shut down an evening is to start talking about old flames.

One night, after dinner, pizza, while my mother was drinking wine in her bedroom, and my father was drinking beer in his garage, I went outside to talk to him. I was in my pajamas and the cement floor was cold.

My father was cleaning a carburetor from an old MG he’d picked up at a junk yard for fifty dollars. He had a cigarette between his lips, his hands were soaked with gas, and I asked him to teach me how to fight.

“What?”

“You’re my dad,” I said. “If you don’t teach me, who will?”

He let out a stream of smoke through his nose, wiped his hands on a rag, and took the cigarette from his lips. He held the cigarette with his thumb and forefinger and pointed it right at me. “What you must understand,” he said, “is this.”

I waited for him to pick his words. I watched the cigarette in his hand, and now he turned and reached for his glass of beer, his back facing me.

“You will always be right,” he said. “You must promise me never to fight with her.”

I stood there, watching his back, the way the muscles in his shoulders moved, and realized I’d come to the right place—the garage. And then he turned, facing me, cocking an eyebrow. The glass in his hand was covered with grease, and whenever I want to remember him, I remember that eyebrow, and his eye, looking right through me.
“You’ll only lose,” he said.

“Okay.”

And then he set down his glass. He ruffled my hair and taught me how to make a proper fist.

In college, once while showing off in front of some girls, I broke my roommate’s jaw. We had been sparring, showing off, when my roommate popped me in the gut. Pissed, I caught him clean in the chin, snapping his jaw. After taking him to the hospital for x-rays, I drove back to school and moved in with my girlfriend; my roommate had his mouth wired shut, someone said, and he didn’t want to live with me anymore. I have also, to the best of my knowledge, done several others damage. I’ve broken two arms, multiple ribs, and three noses, one of which belonged to that same girlfriend, later my wife, Patty.

I’ve learned to call them accidents, traffic accidents, and now here I am in a Jacuzzi with Bob, the cameraman; Sandy, the divorcée; and Hope, the rising television personality. The night is black and full of satellites, the air quick as ice. My limbs feel like ghosts, even my knees don’t ache, and we’re all buck naked except for me because I’m wearing a t-shirt and shorts.

“This is the life,” says Bob, who’s lighting up a joint. The smoke rises with the steam up into the sky, and I’m thinking this is what happens when you drive the right kind of car.

“Bert,” says Sandy. “This is the life.”

“I love it,” says Hope, who is both stunning and ludicrous. Sometimes her leg brushes up against mine, her skin feels soft as water, and I want to ask her if she really understands what she is doing.

And I know Sandy doesn’t really think this is the life. She’s been around the block enough times to know this is just a Jacuzzi, full of drunk, lonely people and excessive chlorine. None of this is going to be on tape. After we get out, no one’s going to stick it in a VCR. And I know I’ll be the
first one out, regardless of Hope’s thigh, because the steam is thick and making it hard to breathe and tomorrow I’ve got to visit my mother. It’s her birthday. She wants a computer program called WordPerfect.

The way I look at it is this: if we don’t do what’s right because we want to, then what’s the good in it?

I’ve often wondered what my father thought of me, one of those kids only parents can love: the kind who tries hard, says cute things at the dinner table two, three times a week, and comes home with C’s on his report card. As I see it, my father had two choices. He could love me, or he could admit his mistake, which would naturally involve my mother. It was easier to love me and try not to notice my lack of coordination, and on the day I turned fifteen, the same day my mother drove her station wagon with a prototype exhaust to Denver, taking the good china along with, my father signed me up for the Soapbox Derby. He was going to teach me how to race.

“It’s all in the design,” he told me, tapping my temple. “It begins here.”

That was a good year for me. My mother sent postcards from Vail and had a platonic affair with her ski instructor, whom she had met at a function entitled Skiers for God, and my father began to come home early from work. We’d eat hamburgers and go down to the basement and make plans.

We had to use regulation wheels and axles and a steering mechanism. We had periodic inspections. We dropped thirty pounds of lead into the tail end; weight and gravity, my father explained, work best at the finish. After school I came home and sanded my car, inch by measured inch. I watched the muscles in my arms grow. The car was a layback design, wind resistance was something to be avoided, and in the basement, I’d sit in my car and dream about wind, and driving, and glory. By the time we were finished, the car was a deep blue. “Nothing gaudy,” my father said. “Nothing that looks fast. You want to take them by surprise.”
Then he asked a draftsman who worked at his company to
do the decorating: on the driver’s side, in small block letters,
my name; and on the other, Pollution Free Special! This
was, my father explained to the draftsman, to be the last year
of the Soapbox Derby.

I won fifth place.

My father died from a series of strokes during my senior year
in college. I came home after the first one to argue with my
mother and study for finals. I remember getting drunk a lot
and standing around in his garage. I went through his tools
and found his college diploma beneath a set of Allen
wrenches. I found a picture of him and my mother, circa
1957, at the beach. Even in the fifties, people could still be
beautiful, and when I returned to Pittsburgh, to that same
engineering school my father had attended, I told Patty I
wanted to get married. If she didn’t want to marry me, fine.
But I was going to do it.

“Women don’t get married like that anymore,” she said.
We were sitting at a bar in Shadyside, and she was trying to be
nice. “We go to New York,” she said. “To Manhattan? We buy
stocks and work in tall buildings and visit our lovers in their
country houses on the weekend.” The way she said that word,
lover, it was pretty clear she was going to want one someday.

“I want a wife,” I said.

“You don’t want to feel bad.”

Three months later, after graduation, we were married in
Connecticut, and I was offered a job for a third-rate team as
a mechanic. By December, I was driving my first stock car,
and Patty was doing a correspondence MBA. And every-
thing was fine: an entry-level position, a beautiful wife, a
manageable amount of debt.

By 1985, we were living in Cleveland, Ohio.

Don’t get me wrong, I’ve been kissed by the best of them—
though usually they’re wearing a bikini and too much
makeup. When I placed second at the Oakland 500, I received a trophy delivered to me by a former Ms. Hawaiian Tropic. She smelled like coconut oil.

I don’t think Hope wears coconut oil. Sandy is looking at me longingly, her hand in Bob’s lap—you can tell by the look on his face, and I’m just not as good with women as I should be. Hope sits up on the lip of the Jacuzzi now, escaping the steam, and puts her hand on my shoulder.

“This is fun,” she says, naked. “I feel like I’m famous.”

She starts to giggle and reaches down to kiss me, but I hold her off. I stand, swing her by the armpits over toward Sandy and Bob. Now she’s splashing in the water going for Bob because momentum is a hard thing to stop, and I’m up and out reaching for my towel. I’m toweling off in fifty degrees worth of weather. I want to take off my t-shirt because it’s cold. Sixty yards to my left is a room with a nice view in the morning and clean sheets. Two hours south, Ocotillo Gardens, and my mother. Patty works for a bank in Newark, she’s involved with some important decisions, and I’m smart enough to know I’m getting too old for all of this.

Everyone always wants to touch them—your scars—especially when it’s dark, and my mother never did learn to ski. The reason she left on my birthday for Denver was because she was convinced my father was having an erotic affair. She was going through his t-shirt drawer, counting his condoms, when she came up with two short. Actually, there were three missing. I know because I took them. I had gone into the backyard, behind the woodshed, and put them on. All three of them like socks in December. I put them on and waited for something to happen until it did. Three days later my mother left, calling my father an infidel and adulterer, throwing the remaining Trojans at him in the kitchen where he stood drinking his beer, quiet as salt. When she backed her station wagon out of the driveway, the glasspacks chugging like a hot rod, my father said, “Well, I guess she’s off to Denver.”
Even so, I never told him I was glad that she was gone. And he never told me that he’d had an affair. It was the kind of thing best kept inside of us where it belonged, man to man.

Now I’m wishing he’d told me—the big, scarred kid who didn’t learn how to fight until it was too late to do any good. I’m sitting on the edge of my bed, naked and almost content for the first time in months. I’m listening to the springs of some bed on the other side of the wall flex. It’s a comforting sound, really. I like to know that people out there, maybe some couple you see in a restaurant ordering orange juice and toast, are the same two you heard the night you couldn’t sleep—the night you passed up on Hope, the night of her first break. And the woman’s pitch is rising now, an engine winding out. Any moment, I think. Any moment now and that woman’s going to explode.

Back before the first war took place on CNN, and before the second war took place on FOX . . . way back when gas prices had bottomed out and people in Texas were swimming in oil, we entered headlong into the age of the fuel-injected V-6. But my father kept his stock inside the carburetor, something you could measure by the throat—home equity, career development, a college education for some kid you happened to let your wife name Herbert. He believed in self-sufficiency and the Alaskan pipeline.

Things which could be easily fixed, I guess. When he was dying, I visited him between strokes. Once, while he could still speak, I asked him why he never became a driver. It was an innocent enough question. The nurses were bringing him lunch, my mother was downstairs looking for a chapel, and the Indy time trials were up on the television.

And then he started crying. I had never seen my father cry, but here he was, staring up at Bobby Unser on the TV and crying.

Later that night I snuck him a beer, and the next morning
he had another heart attack. And then another. He became aphasic, paralyzed, comatose. It was the first time I’d ever heard that word in its proper context, \textit{comatose}. Three days later he was dead.

If I hadn’t blown a cam at Indy in ’88, I might have placed higher than twenty-third. This was to be the year of my comeback, though I’d never really been anywhere to speak of. Even at thirty, I was still making C’s.

Patty was waiting for me in the pits. She was wearing jeans and our team jacket. I peeled off my fire gear and she drove me back to our motel, before the race was over, and then she took me to bed without a word.

In the morning she had to catch a flight to Cleveland—a meeting at her bank. They were going to sell their GSL paper to a servicing company in Jacksonville; Shylocks with secretaries, Patty called them. She stood dressing in front of the mirror—a white blouse, a dark skirt. Her banking attire. She looked at me in the mirror and said, hopefully, “Well, at least it’s over.”

“There’s always next year,” I said.

“Why?” she said, spinning around. “Why!” and now she was in tears. She threw her hair brush at me, and then a glass, still wrapped in cellophane. The glass knocked over a lamp.

“You know why.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, no, no! Look at you!” she screamed, pointing. “Just look at you!”

And of course she was right. But how do you tell that to someone you love?

So I hit her.

There is one part of the story that never gets told. My mother, when she was yelling at my father, throwing all the condoms at him in the kitchen, calling him an \textit{adulterer}, and \textit{infidel}, while my mother was threatening to leave for Den-
ver, I came down the stairs to listen. I stood in the kitchen door, listening to her scream, knowing that I was responsible and that I could in fact instruct myself to be brave, even if it hurt. Listening, I made up my mind, probably for the very first time. I stepped inside the kitchen between my parents and said, “Mom, I already told you. I took them.”

She called me a liar, but I think my father must have already known. Certainly he knew there is no pain like that of a burn, which is pure and inviolable. At the burn unit, I remember Patty standing by me, dressed like an angel—a surgical gown, a white mask to prevent infection. Imagine that: being infected by your wife. Even now the thought makes me wince, makes all the dead skin over my body itch for its ghost.

And this morning, slid under my door is a note, from Sandy: Taking the Beamer, it says. Sorry about last night. Call. It’s typical of Sandy to try and keep things sensible. “It was a fluke,” she’ll say. “Like my marriage. You know you’re the only guy that’s ever turned me down?”

Given enough time you can explain anything. As for the morning, it’s bright as race day. The willows are green, the birds are singing, and even the coffee is fresh. In the meantime, I drink my coffee and listen to the breeze, and this is what I’m thinking: all over the world, people are doing the same thing.

In 1972, Chevrolet, the official sponsor of the Soapbox Derby, bagged out. Helping kids build cars was no longer an efficient use of corporate dollars: they were retooling for the gas crisis and foreign competition, they were looking into catalytic converters and more economical forms of advertising. And while there were a few scattered attempts afterwards to keep the derby going, the race had lost its momentum. You can only go downhill for so long.

My mother returned from Colorado a month before the big day, in May, when the snow had left all but the highest
mountains. She began to go to night school, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in English and wrote a long paper on *The Scarlet Letter*. Simply, she had decided to write her life story. Even now, when she’s not taking her walks or chatting with the nurses, she’s typing away on the laptop I bought her last Christmas. She says it takes a lifetime to figure out what one’s done. She’s very careful about her pronouns. She wants to get it just right.

So what did I get right? I got in my Pollution Free Special on top of that platform in Homewood, Illinois. I remember looking down at my first rush of speed and thinking this was the greatest day of my life—me in this car, with all these people watching, and knowing, secretly, that the guy on my left didn’t have a prayer. My mother had seen to that, and I went up on that block seven times. And when I finally did lose, to a kid thirty pounds fatter than me, I knew I had lost something no one else could. This was my life, and later, this afternoon, when I show up to visit my mother, at Ocotillo Gardens, she’ll be waiting in the rec room pretending to be busy. She’ll be wearing her new pink dress, her hair will be fresh, and for a while, maybe just for a moment or two, she’ll forget about her arthritis and autobiography. She’ll see me with candy and flowers and her birthday present, wrapped in newspaper, and then she’ll pick at some lint on her sleeve.

“Come over here and sit,” she’ll say. “You’re late.”