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After The Fire

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Abstract
The truck left the highway going seventy. It might have slid to a halt innocent screech of brakes on the pavement, muddy tire ruts on the soft shoulder of the road—if not for the pull-out approach it encountered in the ditch, which it took from the side. A twenty-six-foot Ryder truck full of our three-man road crew and our equipment was vaulted into the air. Ninety-five feet it flew, the police say.

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AFTER THE FIRE

Debra Marquart

Three Fargo members of a rock band escaped injury when the rental truck in which they were riding left the highway, tipped, and burned early Sunday morning. The accident happened about 10 miles north of Edgeley on Highway 281 at about 5:45 a.m.


The truck left the highway going seventy. It might have slid to a halt—innocent screech of brakes on the pavement, muddy tire ruts on the soft shoulder of the road—if not for the pull-out approach it encountered in the ditch, which it took from the side. A twenty-six-foot Ryder truck full of our three-man road crew and our equipment was vaulted into the air.

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Gravity took over, pulled the nose back to earth. The right front wheel landed first, then a shutter of glass, a crumple of hood. The equipment shifted forward, rode heavy on the separating wall at the backs of our road crew. Here the axle broke free of the drivetrain, the lawyers would later estimate—a groan of iron, a hairline fracture explosion of the windshield—then the truck collapsed onto the right passenger side and slid eighty-five feet before coming to a halt in the stubble of a late August wheat field.

Someone at the rental company had put a piece of plastic and a rubber band over the opening. As they circled to inspect the truck, Quest pointed out the missing gas cap to the Ryder man.

The rental agent said, "Just pick one up somewhere on the road. We'll reimburse you."

The truck landed in a wheat field. Top was now side; side was now bottom. Quest was on the passenger side, now the bottom. He braced his arms and torso like a hammock to keep the three people in the front seat inside the truck. Dirt and grass slid by the opened passenger-side window for eighty-five feet. Francis hung onto the steering wheel. Mike, sitting in the middle, felt his weight press down on Quest.

Behind the truck, as they slid, something sparked—wheat stubble, grass. The little piece of plastic and the rubber band came off of the gas cap opening. By the time they came to rest, fifty gallons of gasoline had glugged...
out in a fuming trail behind the truck. The fire was quick. It caught up to the cab even before it ceased its slide.

Quest said he felt the heat of the flames inside the truck. To get out, they needed to climb up, out the driver's side door. They pushed and kicked. It was jammed. Finally Quest looked forward and realized the windshield was shattered. They smashed out the last shards; then, one by one, they pulled each other out and up, scaled the hood, then ran along the top of the truck, previously the side of the truck with the Ryder logo on it.

At the back, they saw that the loading door was off its track. The weight of the equipment was jammed against it. They tugged, but the flames were already spreading around the cargo. Quest got too close; his hair was singed. They feared an explosion, they told us later, so they fell back, retreated to a small embankment at a distance. They sat like this for the next few hours and watched the bonfire of our gear.

At some point, a farmer passed in his pickup. People went to town. Authorities were called. The sheriff who arrived to document the accident found the little piece of plastic and the rubber band in the grass.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Oh, the rental company put that on because there wasn't a gas cap," Quest said.

"They could lose their license for renting a truck without a gas cap," the sheriff said.

THINGS WE LOST IN THE FIRE:
Yamaha 24-channel mixing board; Alesis EQ and effects rack; three 800-watt power amplifiers; two monster JBL PA stacks (including 2 ten-inch speakers; 2 fifteen-inch speakers; 1 eighteen-inch speaker per side; plus the horns, woofers, tweeters, and super-tweeters in each stack); four monitor cabinets; 8-channel Tascam monitor mix board; twelve microphones (including several Shure SM58s, an Electro-Voice Cardioid mic, and three Sennheiser condenser mics).

THINGS WE LOST IN THE FIRE:
Four guitars (a Gibson SG double neck; a 25th Anniversary model gold top Les Paul; a Fender Stratocaster; a Rickenbacker Bass); two 100-watt Marshall stacks; two Fender keyboard amplifiers; one Ampeg double stack bass amp; two keyboard stacks (Wurlitzer Piano and a Fender Rhodes; a chopped-down Hammond B3 organ with rotating Leslie speaker cabinet; and synthesizers—a Korg, a Moog, a Roland).

THINGS WE LOST IN THE FIRE:
8-piece Tama drum set—double bass, mounted toms, two snares, two floor toms, roto toms, cymbals (Paiste, Sabian, Zildjian—the high hat, the ride, the splash, and the crash). A five-foot drum riser and light show racks—PARs, cams, spotlights, follow spots, fog machine, strobe light, flash pots. Microphone stands. Anvil cases and sturdy trunks full of electrical cords, speaker cords, guitar cords (dozens).

QUESTION: When sparked, what is the temperature at which fifty gallons of gasoline will burn?
ANSWER: Somewhere around 900°C (about 1,650°F) with fluctuations measured up to 1,250°C (about 2,280°F).

QUESTION: At what temperature does cast iron melt?
ANSWER: Temperatures ranging between 1,175 and 1,290°C (2,150 and 2,360°F).

QUESTION: What is the value of a truck-full of rock-and-roll equipment?
ANSWER: $60,000 (1980 dollars).

QUESTION: What is the replacement value of a truck-full of rock-and-roll equipment?
ANSWER: Difficult to calculate. Impossible to know.

The day after the fire, all our equipment charred in a ditch and blown to ashes, the thin axle of the truck lay on its side like the burnt-out frame of a dragonfly.

Everything else was cinders, except for the few dozen speaker magnets from our guitar amps and PA columns now strewn about the scorched periphery. The only things made of materials strong enough to survive the fire, the speaker magnets had dropped wherever the fire had burned them free from their more ephemeral housings, the cabinets made of wire, plywood, speaker grills, and fabric.
The morning after the fire, we gathered on a circle of old couches at our band house, most of us sitting forward, faces in our hands, our hair uncombed and matted during the long morning of waiting for news.

We who had the power to make so much noise, sat in this new quiet, our eyes studying the worn swirls in the carpet as the sun dialed its way around the room, disturbing only the dust motes that floated through the still air. We did not speak then of debt or creditors. Outside traffic rushed by, the quiet interrupted only by the clatter of passing trains and the honk of an angry horn.

In voices ringing as flat as the many roads we'd traveled, we tried out the new words the fire had left on our tongues—foggy night, soft shoulder of a country road, gasoline spark. We were lucky, we agreed—no one was hurt. It was no one's fault.

Finally, someone stood: the tall blonde guitar player, long-legged and wobbly in his black boots. In the circle of couches, he raised his thin hands to his face and blew out one long exhale. It hissed through the room like a wild balloon losing air.

When all the wind was out of him, he took one deep gulp, swung a long arm like a knockout punch through empty air, and said, Fuck.

It was only one word. It was inadequate for the moment. But it was a good place to start.

NOTES OF INTEREST:
• Our case against Ryder was driven by simple logic—our equipment would have survived the crash, if not for the fire.
• Ryder's corporate headquarters is in Miami, where a team of lawyers stands ready to keep litigants busy for months, possibly years, with requests for lists, depositions, and further documentation.
• Ryder hired Dan Vogel from the most politically connected law firm in Fargo.
• Our lawyer was our drummer's brother, Chad, who ran a two-person law office in International Falls, Minnesota.
• International Falls, Minnesota, rarely gets national attention. When it does, it's usually because it's the coldest spot in the nation.

After the fire, I found myself stalled out in Fargo. Not a fate worse than death, but close.

I holed up in the basement efficiency apartment that I rented for seventy-five dollars a month on the north side of town. Long days and sleepless nights walking circles in the carpet followed. Morning bled into afternoon, then into evening. It was as if someone had bored a very narrow hole and lowered me into it. I turned in the darkness and stared up at the pinhole of light on the surface. I was twenty-four years old, claustrophobic in my own life.

My plan to be a musician was dramatically amended that night in August, 1980, when my rock band lost all of its equipment in a truck fire. So much for Plan A. It has taken me thirty-two years to say this.

I don't know why I picked up a pen and paper. Somewhere in those hours it occurred to me that while I had lost everything on the material plane, the idea of those things was still alive in me. I had the words for them. Already I felt separation from that life. Already, I was reciting descriptions and stories about the strange people I'd known and the odd things that had occurred before the fire.

The pen I reached for must have been the only thing around that didn't cost money. I lit a small candle on the table. I stared at the tongue of flame in the dark room as it weaved and dipped on its wick—a tiny emissary of the conflagration that had destroyed my life.

"Okay," I addressed the fire, "you got my attention. Now what were you trying to tell me?"

And then I sat in the darkness and listened—for the cue to begin singing, for the audible world to tell me what to do with the rest of my life.

These were the first moments of what I know to be my life as a writer, and I mean to say here that I've tried to keep listening, to drag down into written language the words and phrases I would have preferred to sing, but am happy now to write.

I hope there's still evidence of singing in my writing. And I hope there's evidence of fire, a feeling that my sentences burn to be written—that they are forged from the strongest materials, and that they are capable of surviving any rendering power, just like those charred speaker magnets we found intact that August morning among the wreckage of our burned truck.