Of Nightingales and Leaden Chains

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Abstract

One January evening in 1947 I thought I heard a nightingale. I wouldn’t have heard the bird were it not for Father. It would have been the evening of an ordinary travel day in our migration east were it not for Father. We would not have been in the car heading for Chicago at all were it not for Father. It had been his idea to accept the call to St. Stephen’s Lutheran Church...
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by

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English 4

One January evening in 1947 I thought I heard a nightingale. I wouldn't have heard the bird were it not for Father. It would have been the evening of an ordinary travel day in our migration east were it not for Father. We would not have been in the car heading for Chicago at all were it not for Father. It had been his idea to accept the call to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church.

We had gotten up early that morning to cross the mountains and, with luck, all of Arizona. It was daylight long before we saw the sun above a mountain. The air was clean and cool. Black Beauty, our 1937 Pontiac, had, during the last ten years, taken us 120,000 miles. That day it started with its usual smooth performance. I was reading; Hans stared out the back window; Marie was on Mother's lap; Paul leaned forward, trying to tease Marie.

Suddenly Paul said, “Look, Father!” We all looked. Ahead a gray 1931 Buick was stopped on the road. I thought I saw Mother's shoulders droop momentarily, and then she took a breath, straightened, and lifted Marie into the back seat.

Father, of course, would stop. His calling was people who needed him; the more “down-and-out,” the greater the call. From experience we knew these calls would eventually involve us all. It was during these “calls” that I often caught Mother looking as though she were sighing inwardly.

As Father got out of Black Beauty, a man came forward, followed by his wife, holding a baby. There were three other children in the car. The car itself was piled with all the family's worldly goods. I had recently finished Grapes of Wrath, and it was as if these people had walked out of the book toward our car. No one I'd ever seen, not even the prim Danish ladies of St. John's, wore skirts that long. No children I knew, however poor, wanted for soap like those children. The man was another matter. Most of God's Unfortunates—at least the ones He gave Father—looked as though life had been
pounding on them. The family was all thin, and wore resignation like another garment.

Father was an impressive figure, standing there waiting. His 250-pound frame stood six feet and was crowned, even then, with a fine white mane. Under bushy brows his intense blue eyes could darken like a thunderstorm or shine like a trout stream. As for clothing—well, he agreed with Henry Ford about suits and cars: any color was fine, as long as it was black.

"What seems to be the trouble, Brother?" Father's voice had a deep confident resonance. Now, however, we all knew Father wasn't sure he should have stopped. When he felt he controlled the situation, he always addressed his Unfortunate as "friend." At other times his term was "brother."

"Well," replied the Brother, "th' clutch is out in m' car—in all three gears—en' in reverse, too."

In those days I didn't know an awful lot about cars, but I did know there was just one clutch. If it was out, it sure was out in all four gears! Father had sensed right. This was a "brother" whose ability to reason was limited. He wasn't a "friend" whose problem could be quickly solved.

As if to verify my thoughts he got into the ancient Buick and stepped on the accelerator, putting the shift lever through all gears. He was right, too. The car didn't move anywhere. It just sat there, blowing blue smoke back at our car.

At that, Father did have a certain kinship with this Brother. He didn't understand cars well; they weren't his calling. He did empathize with the burned-out-clutch syndrome, because he had the problem frequently.

The Brother got back out of the car, shouting at the back seat, "Shudup! En' stay in thet ther' car!" He turned to Father. "I'll tell ya'. I got me a job in Phoenix fer sure if I show up temarro mornin'. I gotta have thet job. I gotta git ther'. I got this idee, see. See thet ridge over ther'? Not th' firs' one—th' nex' one over. If I could git over ther' I could coas' on into Phoenix."

A job! That put a better light on things. And all we had to do was pull him to the second ridge. Father looked relieved. "Get the tow chain, Eric. We'll pull this Brother to that ridge."
Digging out the chain I pondered the degree of Father's relief. I noted that the man was still a Brother.

Hans and I hitched the cars together. Father supervised, then checked our work. He ordered everyone into the cars with special orders for me to kneel on the back seat and watch the car behind.

We went slowly up the hill to the first ridge. There the road sloped rather sharply down before it rose again to a greater height where, I hoped, one might indeed coast into Phoenix.

We headed down the long hill at a sedate pace. I anxiously reported to Father that there was slack in the chain—and it was getting slacker. The hands on the steering wheel behind us had gotten blue, with white circles where the joints belonged.

Then it hit Father. That fool—er, Brother—behind us was not only without clutch, but without brakes as well. Father's foot pressed harder on the accelerator, and we moved ahead. I still reported slack. We moved faster. At last it became a race to see if we could beat the old gray Buick down the hill.

We won! And started pulling our Brother up the hill so he could coast to Phoenix.

At the top we children tumbled out of Black Beauty. Even Mother got out. We all wanted to see Phoenix rising out of the desert sand.

We stared. No one said a thing. Pair by pair, eyes turned to Father. Seeing his disconcerted look, our eyes followed his—back to the view before us.

"Which big hill is Phoenix, Father?" Paul wanted to know.

Mother put her hand on his head to quiet him. But the words were out. And all of us agreed. Like the boy viewing the emperor's new clothes, none of us saw Phoenix.

Hans, who had ducked into the car, now stood importantly beside it, waving Father's old Rand-McNally. "You can't see Phoenix because Phoenix ain't there!" ("Isn't there," Mother corrected absently.) "Isn't there. We're in the Big Horn Mountains, and we just came through Hope Pass. There are 70 miles of mountain roads before anybody sees Phoenix!"
Silence. All eyes again sought Father. Father's eyes sought Mother. "Have you looked at this map, Gertrude?"

"Yes. This morning. Alfred, I'm sure Hans is right."

Of course Hans was right! We all knew that! Just like we knew that Father's calling wasn't navigation.

Well, if Mother trusted Hans, Father trusted Mother. He nodded with one downward jab of his chin. He surveyed the winding mountain roads that lay ahead, and the cluster of people standing near him. He finally fully comprehended the enormity of the situation he had precipitated. His face was a study in confusion. He'd had to stop; he'd had to help these Unfortunates; it was his calling. But he'd had no right to involve his family in what began to look like an ominous journey.

His eyes were dark thunderstorms; his face was stern. The silence lengthened. Then Father turned to Mother. They didn't speak. I don't think there was the wink of an eye or the twitch of a lip. But it was clear that my parents had communicated and reached a decision in that long moment.

Mother hustled us children back into the car, cautioning complete silence during the coming drive. Father walked up to the Brother. He had been standing alone, outside our circle—a dust ball fatalistically waiting to be blown whichever way Father's wind sent him. I don't think he had lied about coasting into Phoenix. I just think navigation was not his calling, either, and he had wished not wisely, but too well.

"Well, Brother, we've a long way to go. It would appear that your brakes are also malfunctioning."

The Brother looked startled. "Ma' brakes er' wat? Wal', ma' brakes don' work much —only onct in a wile."

"Yes, well, most of those curves are downhill, and you must try to make them function as frequently—ah, make them work as often as you can."

The man nodded at the ground and moved toward the Buick. Father got into Black Beauty, instructed me to return to sentry duty, and gave Mother a long look.

Then he put his foot on the clutch, turned the key, and pushed on the starter. He moved carefully forward. We slowly executed a curve and headed down the first long grade.

"The chain is slack," I reported. Father speeded up. "It
still is." My voice was louder. "Father, it's so slack that it's dragging on the concrete and making sparks! Go faster!" Now I was shouting.

We didn't make bad time to Phoenix. What we lost going uphill, we more than made up going down.

It was a frightening ride, even for boys who loved excitement. The cars jerked so badly going down and round curves that numerous times both cars would have been lost if either bumper or the chain had given way. Father's shirt was wet. His vest clung wetly to his shirt. His black jacket showed ever-growing dark circles under the arms. His knuckles, too, were white. His anger at himself was so intense that no child risked speaking for fear that anger would be turned on him.

The road finally straightened out. The signs proclaimed the advent of Phoenix. Father had pulled it off! He and the Lord were quite a team, especially paired to help Unfortunates. As far as I could tell, neither knew very much about driving.

I had begun to wonder how much farther we would try to go that day, and was on the verge of asking Hans how far the next town was, when I noted the low hum in our rear end. Just when I decided it was getting louder, Father told me to signal we were pulling over. He needed directions on where to tow the family.

I watched the discussion at the door of the Buick. Father asked a question. His Brother answered the ground. Father digested the answer, and again questioned. Again an answer, directed toward the ground. In five minutes Father was sliding behind the wheel. The door closed a bit too gently.

"Alfred?"

A sigh. "Gertrude, they're penniless. No money for a place to sleep or food for those children."

"Don't they know anyone here?"

"No. But he does have the factory address. Gertrude, I told him I'd tow him to a boarding house near there and pay for a night's lodging."

"Yes."

"And, Gertrude, we can't let those children go without food."

"No."

It didn't seem the time to mention rear-end hums. This
time when we started up there was a certain clunking noise beginning. But Father, having gotten us safely to Phoenix, was now totally reinvolved in his calling.

We found the factory. They would be hiring tomorrow—temporarily. Two blocks away there was a decent boardinghouse, in front of which we left the Buick. Hans and I jumped out, removed the chain and put it in the trunk, while Father negotiated for beds and food.

Father came out of the house, obviously satisfied. He shook hands with the three children, patted the baby on the head, shook the wife's hand, and, clasping the Brother's hand, said, "Well, Friend..." Hans and I looked at each other. We didn't hear the rest. We didn't need to.

As we started up, the rear end made loud, sickening clunks. Within a block it was terrible. "Eric, we have to have that looked into right away. Let's find a service station."

The man my father found defined the problem immediately. "Your rear end's going out. You need a new rear end."

We all looked at Father. Even Mother looked at Father. "What will we do?" Father was suddenly lost when the adversity was his. Mother looked at him a moment longer, then turned her attention to the station attendant. She explained where we were headed and why—and that we had to be there before Sunday services.

"Do you know any competent man that could work on this yet today?"

He did know a good mechanic, and he directed us. Mother thanked him, and then poked Father. He started the car, and we rattled down the street.

The mechanic met Father's expectations. Where doctors should be clean, mechanics should be greasy. If they were competent, their shops were caked with old grease and dirt—and they had a tendency to chew and spit tobacco, a habit Father sternly condemned in other men. The two men took to one another immediately. Father so plainly showed his admiration that the mechanic magnanimously offered to let Father stay to watch the surgery.

Seeing Mother's concerned look, Father said, "How much will this cost?"

The man's right index finger figured on his left palm.
"Well—65 dollars, and I'll stay tonight until I finish."

Sixty-five dollars! We watched the silent discussion between our parents. Somehow, Father was spending an awful lot of our money today. Phoenix was still a long way from Chicago. This time we saw Mother sigh. We children knew there was no choice. We also knew we'd be asked to help out with our savings before the trip was over. We didn't mind; Father would write notes and pay us interest. It was just—oh, well, it was just Father sometimes.

Mother and we children took the bags we needed, and walked to an old hotel down the street. Father remained behind to watch the surgery on Black Beauty.

The hotel, though old, was clean, and we had rooms on the front that looked toward the little city park across the street. We opened the windows, and lay on the beds, letting the cool breeze relax us as we contemplated the day.

“You know what, Mother?” Hans asked.

She shook her head.

“If we came across people like that tomorrow—right away tomorrow—he'd help them out. Even though we just got done having that awful ride—and we're off schedule—and the car's broke down.” (“Broken down,” Mother said absently.)

“Broken down. And we're gonna be awful tight on money, and—and—and everything,” he finished lamely.

Silence.

Mother nodded.

“Why?”

Silence.

Hans is right, I thought. Father would do it all over again tomorrow—even if he knew how it was going to end. Except, Father was oblivious to all unpleasant aspects of a call—any call. Tomorrow if we talked about the Brother, Father would never think to connect him to our car’s rear end. It was not so much his inability to change, as his refusal to see men and situations out of any other eyes.

Father awakened us all for supper. We were to celebrate Jens Andersen’s birthday. Andersen was one of Father's few friends who gave instead of borrowing, and Father loved him. He was a bachelor, and Mother always fixed his birthday
dinner. This year he'd have to celebrate without us, but Father made sure we remembered.

Afterward we walked into the little city park. Father suggested we have evening devotions there, contemplating the many blessings we had been given. The suggested topic brought little response that night. The time was somewhat strained. Mostly Father talked. And we sat in silence.

"Listen!" It was a command from Mother. A bird not far away was singing.

"That's so beautiful, Mother. I never heard it before. It must be a nightingale!"

"No, Eric. Nightingales live in Europe. This is a thrush. They belong to the same family."

We sat for — oh, perhaps half an hour — listening.

Marie was on Mother's lap. "Mother, Mother. Why does he sing so much?"

Silence.

Then — "Because he's a song bird. He was born to sing. He doesn't realize what he does. He just feels he has to do it. I don't suppose he could stop even if he tried."

Mother's voice was directed toward Marie, but she was looking at Father.