

Randy's Rants

Road Kill #28

My parents had not had the heart to tell me the truth at first. They had been away on a trip, and my brother and I had been staying with our grandparents. Our car had no sooner pulled up in front of our house, than I was out the door, running to the back yard to see my beagle Frisky. But he was nowhere to be seen, and it was then that they told me that he had been hit by a car and had died at the vet.

It was my introduction to road kill.

Road kill has come to describe more than some animal that made the mistake of crossing the wrong stretch of road at the wrong time. We use road kill to describe defeated political candidates, sports teams and the losing sides of divorce battles and lawsuits. We have road kill cook books. In literature Carl Hiaasen's crazed ex-governor of Florida turned eco-terrorist, Clinton "Skink" Tyree, lives off road kill.

The official road story in America is about freedom, adventure, and romance. Yet this story hides a grislier reality. Almost forty-two thousand Americans end up as road kill each year. Since 1900, our love affair with the automobile has killed almost three and a half million Americans. No one talks about the romance of that.

I was almost hit by a car when I was a child. I darted across the street. I can still see the huge chrome grill of the Oldsmobile as it screeched to a halt just inches away from me. As a child you are just another small animal taking your chances while crossing a road.

As a teenager, you graduate to full participation in the carnage. The 50s and 60s had the genre of the car crash song. Songs such as "Teen Angel" and "Dead Man's Curve" immortalized adolescent annihilation behind the wheel of a car. *"The cryin' tires, the bustin' glass, the painful scream that I heard last!"*

In my home town, the previous night's wrecks were taken to a scrap yard behind the bus station. Being natural born ghouls, we teenage boys would visit the site, just to see the wrecks. "Yeah, Rich lost control of the Vette at 90 miles an hour. They said that it flipped, slid and drove his head down into his chest!"

"Nah, I heard it just scrapped his head off. The troopers were cryin' and throwin' up."

Charlaine was a friend of mine. I had a massive crush on her. The first accident reports described her hard top Camaro as a Mustang convertible. All the undertaker's skill could not hide the fact that the rear corner of the bus had taken off the top right quarter of her face. She was barely eighteen. She was one of 53,763 Americans who died that year on the road. That same year 14,594 Americans were killed in action in Vietnam, inspiring massive protests that ripped through the society. There were no protests for Charlaine.

In the lethal mixture of high velocity, hard objects and soft bodies, not all the casualties are human. It is estimated by The Alliance for Transportation Research Institute that a million animals a day are killed by traffic in the US. We spend millions to save endangered species and protect wildlife. We spend billions constructing more and better kill zones to mow them down in.

The language of the car salesman is not the only language we hear about our auto centered world. Road kill, road rage, car chase, car bombs, drive by shootings; all are included in a lexicon of mayhem that describes our world.

I was a weird child. My parents must have thought from time to time that I was an animist. Any non-venomous snake that wandered into our yard was under my protection. Our garage was a rescue and rehabilitation center for baby birds. Late at night, they would hear the clump, clump of box turtles I had captured and put in the basement to eat bugs. I drew a picture of the battle of the Alamo where all the

characters were turtles. The pockets of my jeans usually contained at least one dime store turtle in critical condition. If we were on a trip, and my father hit a box turtle crossing the road, he would be instantly indicted, tried and convicted of murder in my court. I was inconsolable, and demanded exorbitant tributes and reparations in presents – usually in the form of rubber snakes or toy turtles – before the father/son relationship was repaired.

Like father, like son. We were rounding the corner to our house, driving back from a canoe trip, when a rabbit ran under the wheels of our car. “Poor Bunny! I hope it wasn’t Jack!” My wife said. Jack is her catch all name for any rabbit we host in our yard. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw Jack dragging its crushed hindquarters to the curb. I felt like shit, but at least I didn’t have a smaller version of us in the back seat, bursting into tears and refusing to talk to me for days.

Every square foot of whatever little of the remaining natural world is subjugated as well. The insatiable nature of capitalism that drives the motorized rec industries has unleashed mechanized divisions of ATVs, snow mobiles, and jet skis on the world. Nothing is safe. Pristine streams are polluted from bank erosion caused by ATVs. Sensitive desert landscapes are rutted, and woodlands are shredded by the vehicles. The snowy quiet of a winter’s day? Forgetaboutit.