

Danny the Dishwasher

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This story is as much about a car as a person. Or rather, it is what happened with a car as it passed through my life and entered into another person's life. That person Danny, is an important part of the story. Before I begin the story proper, let me remind you that we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of individuals, and we respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. The story exemplifies both of these principles.

The car in the story was a 1966 white Vista Cruiser Station Wagon with red interior. This model car had a "vista roof" which was a permanent sun roof for the passengers in the first rear seat. The reason for this design, I am told, was that the transmission was large, and consequently the rear seat was higher. The vista roof merely accommodated for what would have otherwise been a lack of headroom.

I received the car from my father's paramour — I can't bring myself to call a woman who was in her late 40s early 50s when I was a teenage a "girl friend." She was his companion after his second marriage had failed. My mother died in 1967 when I was eleven years old; my father remarried in 1969; my step-mother kicked us out of the house in 1972. The break-up with my step-mother is not part of this story though. After several months of attempted courtship, my father made a sufficient impression on Tollie Hartsfield so that they began a relationship that lasted for the remainder of her life. Tollie's second husband was William B. Hartsfield of whom you may have heard. He was the mayor of Atlanta for many years before he retired with the purpose of marrying Tollie. There are good reasons that the Atlanta Airport bears his name.

Tollie's identity was wrapped in being Mayor's widow. She drove a 1971 black Lincoln Continental (not the suicide door model, but the one that came later). The Lincoln had a phone in the front seat.

Tollie was generous. She often let me borrow the Lincoln — a privilege that I am ashamed to say, I abused. Her other car, the dog's car, was the Vista Cruiser. Sometime during my junior year in high school, Tollie let me have what had been the dog's car. My father and the dog had become good friends, and the dog often rode in my father's car. So maybe she no longer needed a car of her own.

There are many fantastic stories about Tollie Hartsfield, but today the story is about Danny.

During my high school and early college years, especially during the summers, I worked in a very nice Atlanta restaurant that was called *The Sandpiper*. It was on the west side of Piedmont Road just south of the intersection of Piedmont and Pharr on the edge of what we call Buckhead. The restaurant was a two-story affair with two bars, live music, and on a typical Friday or Saturday night, we served between 400 and 600 dinners.

Among the restaurant employees, dishwashers are the least respected in the operation. As a rule, they are unreliable. They earn minimum wage. The job is dirty, sweaty, steamy, and generally unsavory. I spent three or four summers as a dishwasher, and often worked in the dish station on the weekends during the school year. I really enjoyed the job.

Here are some of the dishwashers with whom I worked: my best friend at the time, Dan Ewing; the Pass brothers, Marvin, Jerome, and Jerry three comical black guys who all had the same speech impediment that made them sound as if they had marbles in their mouths; a mean black guy named Mack Brown, who, when you were catching dishes, would maliciously stack them in awkward ways, so they would not be clean and they would get stuck in the belt, and who would subsequently shout at you, "Let it roll down, there." Yes, just as in prison, there were pitchers and catchers. I didn't think about it until now, but the dom/sub rolls were much the same. And there was Danny.

Let me say at the outset, I had no great love for Danny. I didn't dislike him as I did Mack and his gang, but Danny was a strange fellow. I continue to respect him for what he was, and maybe still is. We were not destined to be great friends.

Danny was a short strong white fellow about 22 or 23 years old. He could have easily been a Vietnam war vet. He was not very smart, or rather he didn't have a lot of book learning, but he was, if nothing else, resourceful. His resourcefulness is part of the story. He had Jesus length long hair. I remember he had a bit of a temper, but I don't ever recall him losing patience with me. I, a goofy high school kid, could have easily made him angry. I am sure others did, and I seem to recall vaguely a potential incident involving light weapons — pocket-knives or some such. The fight never occurred.

Danny used to wear his own apron. It was very nice, vinyl or something. He might have topped it off with one of the plastic or fabric aprons that we all would wear. My friend Dan (not Danny) and I would wear jeans, converse all-stars, a tee-shirt, an apron, and maybe a cap or visor to keep the sweat out of our eyes. Yes it was hot. Even with aprons, we wound up at the end of the night soaking wet and filthy. On the catching end the water temp was, when everything was working right, 180 degrees Fahrenheit. The catching end was less dirty than the dirty dish end. Danny had his own apron, and I think he often wore industrial rubber gloves. Probably, he wore cowboy boots as well. Danny often did pots and pans, sorted silverware (really cutlery), and loaded the dish washer.

One evening at the top of the shift, a very pretty waitress asked Danny in a very sexy voice, "Oh, how do you keep so clean?" Danny was a Steve McQueen/Humphry Bogart rugged looking kind-of-a-guy. I take a shower at my girlfriend's house before I come to work!"

The Vista Cruiser served me well. Twice in its tenure as my car, it got hit on the fender

and front door — first on the left, then on the right. At both times, I was bidding my time, sitting at red-lights waiting a turn signal to turn left with my friends in the car. The accidents are also good stories, but they take us too far from Danny. The car now was a wreck. One reason that Tollie had given it to me was that its transmission slipped ever so slightly. I adjusted to this by adding a quart of transmission fluid every two or three months. Once every two months became once a month, and soon at every fill-up.

A car that age learns to respond to its driver, and the driver learns to respond to the car. Its choke was unusual. It was easily flooded but just as easily, the correct rhythm on the gas would make it crank. It sported a powerful 327 V8 engine. Beware of suburban moms in station wagons. Beware of their teenage children or virtual step-children.

At night in the Sandpiper parking lot, my buddies and I would ice down bottles of Miller High Life and leave them in the back of the station wagon for the end of the shift. We discussed the meaning of life, and we planned our lives. My friend Dan (with the blue jeans and the Converse all-stars) planned on being a restaurateur. He is, and he is very happy.

As the transmission leak got more and more serious, keeping the tranny from slipping became impossible. One night, the car would go no further.

I began to talk to Danny about buying the car. He needed wheels. He also saw the sagacity in having a station wagon. For the price of one-month's rent, he could put a mattress in the back, sleep in the car, and have a vehicle and a place to live. We began price negotiations about \$100 apart. I had no stake in a profit: in fact, my profit in having the car was as a gift first, but also from the accidents that I collected upon, but never repaired. Still one likes to get what a car is worth. The car sat in the restaurant parking lot for about 2 months.

I got rides from my friends or walked to work. Danny and I often worked different shifts, so the price negotiations, and the development of the myth in his mind that it was a good economic decision took several weeks.

Eventually, restaurant owners don't like bashed up cars cluttering their parking lots. So I settled on a price with Danny, and collected the money from him over the course of his next two paychecks. The car remained in the lot, but the manager could not blame me. They asked Danny to move the car, and he had saved enough to get the transmission fixed, but he had trouble starting it. It was that tricky oscillation of the right foot to get the choke just right. I went out to start the car, and when I did I awoke his girl friend and their dog. All three of them had already moved into the back of the car. I guess saving on her rent also paid for the new transmission. The car started, the summer ended, the title was in Danny's hand, I had another \$125 dollars in my pocket. And I thought that was the end of the story.

About 18 months later, Tollie called me up to tell me that there was a notice on my father's apartment that said that his dog was going to be taken to the pound. A dog, it seemed, had jumped out of *my* car and had bitten someone. Well, I didn't have a car, I didn't have a dog, and I was living in Athens at the time. My father often took Tollie's dog to his apartment for a bath. Lady, the dog, didn't much like baths, but my dad liked Lady to smell nice, and they seemed to be pretty much OK with the arrangement. Tollie

was petrified that Lady would be picked up at my dad's apartment. Of course, the dog was Danny's. Danny had never gone to the trouble of transferring the title of the car. Clearly doing so was an unnecessary expense.

About 3 years later, my friend Steve, who had been a cook at the Sandpiper was a bit down on his luck and was working in an IHOP. Danny walked in looking for a job. Steve told the manager immediately, "Hire him!" You see Danny was a good dishwasher. He arrived to work on time, worked long hours, and hardly complained about his lot in life. He was a good man. In my mind, he was, and always will be a dishwasher. And I mean that with no disrespect whatsoever. He seemed honest. He was resourceful. And he took care of his girl friend and their dog. I don't know what happened to the guy who was bitten. I like to think that he deserved it.