Forces

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By Charles Corry

The turn-of-the century red granite post office sat atop the highest hill for miles around. Surrounded by shrubs, iron hitching posts, and weathered benches shadowed by rugged oaks, the building was a holdover from a more romantic time. The Grundy post office was also the daily gathering place for retired farmers and tradesmen who shuffled along the scuff-gravel paths in an almost ritualistic fashion, weather permitting, to sit and whittle and swap knives and stories under the umbrellas of the massive trees.

From the post office lawns, those leathery old men held a commanding view of all corners of Grundy, Texas, and the lawn they occupied at any given time depended on the wind, the hour, and the season. During the course of any given day, the troupe, most of whom were World War I vets, might rotate lawns and benches several times to take best advantage of sun or shade. I remember an abundance of lazy summer hours spent sitting quietly on one of the wooden benches with Tommy Joe, my best friend, sipping tall RC Colas and quietly soaking up chilling accounts of the war against the Kaiser. Those crusty old yarn-spinners loved an audience—any audience—and in our presence, adventures of epic proportion rolled like quivering, shaped notes past tobacco-stained grins and grimaces as the old vets enhanced distant glories. In retrospect, I have often questioned the sagacity of my willingness, even at age eleven, to so readily accept as fact many of the colorful accounts of the Great War.

If a stranger stopped for directions in Grundy, a typical reply might be: "Well, let's see, now, young feller, if'n I'as you—ye say it's Uncle Jess Johnson yer lookin' fer?--well, from the post office, I'd take me a—ain't ye one o' A'nt Bessie's gran'kids—I thought ye kinda had a familiar look about ye—"

In defense of the sleepy Texas community, Grundy was not a one-horse town in 1958; there were several horses, as a matter of fact, along with numerous milk cows, assorted livestock and fowl, and almost two hundred people. The buildings of note were the school, the post office, Herman's General Store, and a Magnolia gas station with its flying red horse beckoning travelers from the state highway. Two streets and a farm-to-market road crossed Grundy from east to west, and railroad tracks with a rusty siding (not used since the days when cotton was king in North Texas) ran north and south on the east side of town between the post office and the school. Trains no longer stopped in Grundy; they had not for several years, and the lumbering giants barely slowed and gave only token toots of the whistle to alert local folks that a train was passing through.

The post office with its resident yarn-spinners, the roads crossing town, the Magnolia gas station, the school house, the railroad track, and one Whizzer-bicycle-conversion-motor-scooter that belonged to my teenage brother, Booter, are all central to the story of my eleventh-year adventure. It all took place on a warm autumn Saturday, the first weekend of the Texas State Fair. Booter was gone to the fair with friends, and my parents were visiting a hospitalized aunt in nearby McKinney. Tommy Joe had spent Friday night with me, and we were left at home, alone, and on our own.

I had transportation of my own, a classy green and white Firestone Five-Star General bicycle, and although I considered myself quite adept in the operation of two-wheelers, Booter's motor-scooter was strictly off limits. Not only were my mother's admonitions to "stay off that piece of junk" firm and clearly understood, Booter had reinforced the matter with threats of the kind of unmentionable horrors that only an older brother can conjure up, if I ever so much as sat on the seat of his wonderful Whizzer.

But I was eleven. There was an adventuresome autumn spirit in the air. Booter and my parents were gone; and there **it** was, leaning against the wall of the open garage begging for the road. And in self-justification, I must add, it was really all Tommy Joe's fault, anyway. What eleven-year-old can walk away from a best friend's dare? Besides, I could handle that motor scooter—I knew I could. The only difference between it and my Five-Star General was the motor mounted in the open triangle of the bicycle frame; and, of course, it had a throttle; and, of course, it would go much faster; but the grandest distinction—that which set it apart from the shiniest Firestone Five Star General in the world—was the magnificent "var-o-o-o-m" sputtering from the rattling, chrome tail pipe. The music was irresistible. So, at Tommy Joe's dogged insistence, in spite of my better judgment, I reluctantly rolled the amazing two-wheeled wonder into the bright autumn morning sun. For a long moment, I solemnly stood beside it in much the same attitude of a gallant knight about to mount his spirited steed. Tommy and I decided that I would do the driving (after all, it was **my** brother's scooter), and I straddled the seat with all the determination of Snoopy atop his doghouse in anticipation of impending battle with the Red Barron.

The bicycle-conversion motor-scooter, a makeshift forerunner of modern scooters and cycles, was not equipped with an electric starter or even a kick starter. The only way to get the machine moving under its own power was to take a running start and push it until sufficient compression was reached to crank the engine. With a stout-hearted effort, Tommy Joe ran and pushed and huffed with all his young might while I expertly manned the controls. When the scooter finally awoke to our efforts, Tommy Joe jumped on behind, and we were off.

It was only after we gleefully puttered down the farm-to-market road headed away from town that we discovered that the brakes were not working—at all. At the time, we did not consider being brake-less a major problem. Our speed was sufficiently slow that with the combined efforts of dragging our feet, we could slow the scooter or bring it to a halt, at will; so, we decided to continue our escapade with a ride around the school house, and after several sputtering, giggling laps around the deserted school, I aimed the marvel of modern engineering past my house.

It was magnificent. Never in my life had I experienced such elation. The plan was to go west to the railroad tracks, turn around, return home and safely park the motor scooter. By not going into town and past the post office, we would create little attention, and no one would be the wiser; and at school the following Monday, well! Tommy Joe and I would have tales of adventure that none of our friends could possibly hope to surpass. Little did we know.

As we neared my driveway, however, misfortune bared her toothless grin. The throttle wire broke and opened the gas just enough to keep us from being able to stop by dragging our feet. To compound our woes, as we sailed by my house, my father appeared on the front porch. He stood, silently staring, while we scooted on down the road desperately dragging our feet in a futile attempt to halt the runaway Whizzer. We varrooomed around the curve, across the tracks, and out of sight, leaving a haze of sneaker smoke lazily drifting above the asphalt pavement.

Although we were far off any record pace, and without intent to set one, our speed had reached sufficient velocity to where there were but two places in town with a wide enough turn area to accommodate the sputtering, speeding Whizzer without risk of crashing. One was east of town around the curve past my house, and the other was at the Magnolia station west of town where the main streets converged at the highway. From one end of town to the other, from the highway back to the railroad tracks, we doggedly and uselessly dragged our feet without having the slightest hope of bringing the runaway scooter to a halt. On the second pass past the post office, the whittlers began to take notice.

At the east end of the circuit, we whizzed past my house again to the turn-around. By this time, my father was sitting on the porch leisurely rocking in the love seat swing, watching with an air of casual amusement as we fluttered by.

"Having fun, boys?" he yelled above the popping din of the scooter as I sailed on with a white-knuckle grip on the handlebars, staring dead ahead, Tommy Joe glued to my back, ever-tightening the bear-hug around my waist. In a desperate attempt to do something—anything—I leaned forward and reached for the carburetor in an attempt to turn off the gas as we rounded the curve, headed for another run past the post office. My well-intended ingenuity yielded but a new burst of speed as we leaned into the curve.

Once past the insensitive post office gawkers, I made another attempt to shut off the gas, and this time I touched the spar plug. Tommy and I shrieked and shuttered from the electric shock.

We held a quick conference. Considering my unsuccessful attempt at doubling as engineer and pilot, and considering the successive string of setbacks, we had no difficulty reaching consensus agreement to ride it out until we ran out of gas. At the time, we failed to consider that a Whizzer gets approximately one-hundred miles-per-gallon, and there was a fair amount of gas sloshing around in the tank.

Fate cracked an ill-smile on us that Saturday. On our next eastbound lap across the tracks, I could see smoke rising from a distantly approaching northbound freight train.

"Tommy," I yelled over my shoulder into the ever-strengthening breeze, "a train's coming!"
"Oh-o-o-o . . ." was his rattled reply.

As we recrossed the tracks and started back past the post office, it was obvious that all normal activity had come to a standstill. The whittlers, aware of the oncoming train, were lined up on the north lawn, waiting. Things were getting out of hand. Out of pubescent frustration and some deep-rooted primordial urge to avoid horrendous embarrassment at any cost, I made another stab at shutting the throttle down; and once again, our luck ran true to form. We both screamed and jolted in a burst of painful disappointment, and once again, the scooter picked up speed, much to the glee, I might add, of the knee-slapping post office yard birds, hooting as we scooted out of view.

By this time, our overwhelming concern had graduated from fear of facing my father—or even Booter—or even making another embarrassing trip past the hooters at the post office. Our attention was focused solely and intently on the soon-to-be-reached point in time when we would be forced to compete with the train for right-of-way at the railroad crossing. Quick but rough calculations on my part put or speed at approximately the same as that of the train, and the distance of our uncompleted lap back to the tracks about the same as the train's distance from the crossing. With just a little luck, I felt we could perhaps possibly pass in front of the train on the next eastbound leg; and then, with a great deal of luck—if the train was not a long one (really, it needed to be a very short one)—the train would clear the crossing by the time we reached the tracks on our return westbound round. We needed something to be optimistic about.

On the ensuing westbound trip past the post office we were greeted by an ever-larger crowd, including Mr. Herman, the grocer, two grocery customers, and the postmaster. Commerce in Grundy was at a standstill. All stood waiting with anticipation on the north post office lawn. Excitement over our upcoming eastbound leg was reaching an apex. Not since Ma Ferguson stood on the post office steps while stumping her way across Texas in the 1922 governor's race had such a furor been raised in Grundy, Texas. Everyone was waiting to see how we would fare in the race for the railroad crossing right-of-way.

On that final eastbound leg, as we rounded the curve that put us on the east side of the post office, parallel with the tracks, realization's sharp teeth sank deeply in. It was glaringly apparent that my calculations had been in error.

The crowd had moved to the east lawn. The stage was set. As we began the southern approach, we were running neck-and-neck with the second engine. The curious engineer waved genially at the onlookers and gave a little toot of the whistle, as if to celebrate the occasion. Tommy Joe's head was buried deep into my back. Decision time was at hand. We could not stop. The train could not stop. We had less than two short blocks

before the road turned east across the tracks.

I clinched my teeth and with all the will power I could muster, again reached for the carburetor. Even today, I sincerely believe that I could have held on to endure the murderous voltage until the motor choked down, but Tommy Joe was a lesser man. Immediately, he let out a hair-raising scream and begged me to let go: better to be run over by the train.

Less than a block to go before the crossing. The lead engine had pulled slightly further ahead, and I knew that there was no way that we could miss crashing into the side of that northbound freight train. Then it suddenly dawned on me that there was but one thing to do: abandon ship and take our chances.

After the noise, dust, scooter and our bodies settled, and the train rocked lazily on up the tracks, we got up and gingerly brushed ourselves off and checked the scooter. To my amazement, it was, as we were, not in total ruin. The handle bars tilted at a queer angle, and the broken head lamp loosely dangled by a wire. But that was all. We were in a similar state of disrepair. Some areas of our bodies were not garnished with bruises, abrasions, or contusions, and in spite of slight limps, we could both still walk. For days, however, we were to wear our battle mementos with much the same humility as a less-than-pure Puritan girl once wore her scarlet "A."

The deepest wounds, however, were to our pride. I will never forget having to push the Whizzer on past the post office gathering toward home and my waiting father, nor the open sport for days to follow in the sleepy community of Grundy, Texas, about "them crazy kids on that dang-blasted contraption." But now, thirty years later as I stare out the window on a blustery, autumn day, I can't help but smile.

Charles Corry

Puberty

I feel the shock of sheer cloth
Slice the dark over satin skin
— Satan's delight — enter
The lion's mouth — desire surges
  trembling hands on

I am alive and must — must not
Am I branded the Sinner? — I am

My heart races past thought
The flood in my groin denies God
Dilutes reason with hot lust
Drowns thick guilt in rising
  pressure of blood

I am alive and must — must not
Am I branded the Sinner? — I am