

The Hitchhiker

By Charles Williams

It is Sunday, June 15, 1958. Bill and Fran Gooding are in their brand new blue-and-white Ford Fairlane 500 two-door coupe driving home from their Perryville church. This is the first new car they've had since their old black 1943 Oldsmobile. They are heading south down US Route 1 from Perryville to Charlestown, Rhode Island, a 20-minute drive on the old two-lane state highway. There is no crime here, just town folks. Everyone knows everyone.

Most live their entire lives in this small part of Rhode Island, and venture out only for brief visits to family in parts elsewhere in the country, or to visit children attending universities in or out of state, only to return to the part of the world they know best. It is a quiet time in our history. The talk is mostly about the end of World War Two and baseball, since it is summertime. The sixty mile per hour traffic is sparse on Route 1 this Sunday afternoon, and just a few trailer trucks dot the roadway carrying their loads from Providence and north, southward towards the cape. Bill and Fran are in their usual pleasant mood, having been married for 47 years, and after 3 grown children, and 7 grandchildren. They truly know peace with each other, and with all others. It's 72 degrees at the beginning of a long humid summer in New England.

Bill says, obviously enjoying his new car, his left arm resting outside on the window frame of the car door, "I was thinking about Dad back there in church, Fran, and how much he loved the Red Sox! You know, for years he had an old ball cap with the red and white 'B' nearly torn off the front. He loved that old hat. I wonder whatever happened to it?"

Fran responds, "Why don't you look through those old trunks in the attic when we get home? I'm sure it's still there somewhere. You never throw anything away, Bill!"

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Momentarily, they both see a young boy standing by a Route 1 highway sign on the right side of the roadway, thumbing a ride. The boy is wearing a tattered red checkered shirt, blue jeans, and an old ball cap akimbo on his head. Under the cap is a mass of curly brown hair. The boy raises his thumb in earnest, as Bill's car approaches, almost pleading for them to pick him up. Bill slows down and pulls onto the berm several yards ahead of the boy. Bill muses aloud to Fran, "That kid looks like somebody I know."
Fran says, "Could he be one of cousin Marjorie's kids?"

"I dunno," says Bill.

The boy races to the car, leans in, and asks if he can hitch a ride. Bill says, "OK," and tells Fran to let him in.

"Thanks Mister," as Fran opens her door, pulls her seat forward to let the boy climb into the back seat.

"I've been standing there for over an hour waiting for you," the boy says jokingly.

Bill says, "Where are you going, son?"

The boy replies, "Charlestown, are you going that far?"

Bill and Fran laugh, and both say in unison, "Yes, we live there!"

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Bill increases speed from the berm, turns back into the traffic lane and resumes his drive to Charlestown. The three of them engage in light conversation, mostly about the Boston Red Sox! It seems the kid is up on all of the stats, old players and dates of play. The boy recounts his experience with pitcher Denton True "Cy" Young, who won the 1903 World Series. He said he got Cy Young to autograph his ball cap's brim. Bill chimed in saying that his Dad had meet Young once after a ball game, and he, too, had gotten an autograph from Cy Young!

At that instant, Bill clutched his chest recoiling from a sudden pain. He tried to get air, but he couldn't breath. The pain was incomprehensible. He couldn't even talk. He felt like an elephant was standing on his chest, and he grabbed for his throat struggling to get air. Meanwhile, his foot slipped onto the gas pedal instead of the brake, and the powerful Ford V8 engine sprang to life with a rush of acceleration, faster, faster, 70, 80 miles per hour. Bill fought with the wheel trying to stay in his lane and steer clear of oncoming traffic in the northbound lane to save his dear wife, Fran, but couldn't. He tried desperately to step on the brake pedal, but couldn't move his foot. A huge trailer truck was speeding towards them in the northbound lane, horn blasting again and again. Fran screamed, as she was being tossed from side to side in the front seat and saw the truck's grill looming in the windshield. The boy in the back seat lunged into the front seat and grabbed the wheel from Bill. Later, Fran would say the boy moved so fast, he seemed to lunge "through" the front seat, not over it. He spun the wheel and cleared the oncoming truck by mere inches, twisting the steering wheel right and shooting across the highway onto the right berm. He slid the car into a sideways back to front spin down the sandy shoulder and into a small grassy drainage ditch where the car finally stopped facing the highway, no damage done to the car.

Rhode Island State Trooper, Dan Segovia, had been patrolling Route 1 that day on Post 8, a stretch of Route 1 from Wakefield, RI south to Shelter Harbor and back to Wakefield. He was about a half mile behind Bill and Fran, when he saw the Ford swerving back and forth in traffic lanes, nearly colliding with an on coming trailer truck. He watched in awe as the Ford shot across the highway onto the right shoulder and spun to a stop. He turned on his light and siren, and sped to the scene, exited his car, in time to see Fran hysterically screaming and beating on Bill's chest. At once, Trooper Segovia realized the seriousness of the situation, and pulled Bill's lifeless blue, oxygen starved body from the car's front seat, and laid him down on the grass by the front of the Ford. He ran to his patrol car and radioed for an ambulance. He threw the microphone onto the front seat and turned to go back to Bill's side, when he saw old Doc

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Drummond's black Lincoln Continental approaching in traffic. The trooper flagged the doctor down, and they both ran like purposeful old men to the scene.

"Oh my God, it's Bill Gooding!" said Doc Drummond, as he began life saving measures. Doc reached into his medical bag and filled a long needled syringe with some liquid from a vial and slammed it into Bill's chest sending the medication directly into Bill's heart. He told Trooper Dan to slide his arm under Bill's neck so as to raise his airway. Doc blew air into Bill's mouth several times, and pushed down hard on Bill's chest several times trying to revive him. Nothing happened. Doc then reigned blows with clinched fists into Bill's chest, and finally Bill's eyes popped opened, and he took in a huge gasp of fresh, humid, afternoon New England air into his lungs. Bill was alive!

The ambulance arrived and took Fran and Bill to the hospital in Charlestown, a really short ride with a siren blaring. Enroute, Bill's color came back, and he was finally breathing on his own, having had a real brush with mortality. Doc Drummond got back into his car and followed them to the hospital. Trooper Segovia left the scene when backup arrived. Bill's car was towed to his home in Charlestown. Trooper Segovia met everyone in the hospital's emergency room to write the incident report. Fran was calmer now, and tried to recount what had happened. The trooper listened intently, but could not understand the story. Fran asked of Trooper Segovia, "Did you see the hitchhiker we picked up? Where is he? We must thank him for saving our lives. He was such a hero! Why, he moved like greased lightning to grab the steering wheel. If it hadn't been for him, we'd both be dead! Trooper Segovia said questioningly, "What hitchhiker? There was no one in the car but you and Bill! I got to you right after the car stopped in the ditch. Bill obviously was able to get the car out of that truck's way and on to the safe side of the road." Fran paled, her mind raced back to the Route 1 sign post, and the young boy standing by the roadside thumbing a ride.

It was Tuesday June 17, 1958, a few days later. Fran went to visit Bill in the hospital as she had

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been doing every day. She kissed him gently on the cheek, as he laid in the hospital bed. His spirits soared when he saw her. He had suffered a myocardial infraction-a mild heart attack. With rest, exercise, and a little weight loss, he would be fine, and Doc Drummond had given the 72 year old man a clean bill of health. He would be released Thursday. Fran sat down at Bill's bedside, went into her purse, and pulled out an old color photograph. She gave it to Bill saying she had found it in one of the trunks in the attic at home. It was a picture of a young boy wearing a tattered red checkered shirt, blue jeans, and an old Boston Red Sox ball cap akimbo on his head, the red and white "B" nearly torn off the front. Under the cap was a mass of curly brown hair.

Bill sat straight up in his bed.

It was a photo of Bill's father at age 18, the hitchhiker.

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