

April 6, 2014

The Vegas, a car story

On August 15, 1975, a photograph appeared in the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, first page, second section, captioned "He wasn't hurt badly; new car was". I had purchased my first new car nine days earlier on my birthday, August 6. It had 329 miles on the odometer and then it was gone.

The next day I received a call from Ricky who I hadn't heard from in about five years asking if I was ok. I said yes. That was the last time I talked to Rick. Ricky lived two short blocks away on Columbus when we were growing up. We had a business shoveling snow in the winter. If you lived in Minnesota it could be quite lucrative for twelve year olds. We figured out that two of us work faster and better as a team and of course make more dollars. But we were friends before we were business partners. How did I meet Ricky? I really don't remember which is not so strange since it was 50 years ago. I just know we used to do a lot of boy stuff together. We made model planes, model cars, flew kites, played board games and just hung out. We would have all weekend long Monopoly games or play Square Mile which was a real estate development game. It could be quite hot in my room in the summer as it was in the attic but sweat be damned. I have no idea why we were so fixated on those games. Maybe it was the dice, the idea of imagined riches or just hanging out with your buddy. We also used to make model rockets. Engines from the Estes company. They still make them today. We made single

stage, two stage and also multiple engine missiles. They would go up and then come back down via parachute. We became fairly skilled and all or most of our snow shoveling and paper route money would go into rockets, planes and cars. We once got so crazy that we strapped an engine to one of our model cars and ignited it in Victor's basement. Not very smart. Ignition and we have lift-off. We'll not really. We had smoke, a plastic car careening wildly across the concrete floor. Figure eights and a flip. Crashed into the basement wall, spinning until it burned out after narrowly missing the water heater. We were lucky this time. Normally we were more responsible and went to the park to launch. However, there was one more episode that gave us the willies and cured of us a certain level of irresponsibility. We had just finished a new kit and wanted to fly it. No walking or biking to the park today (it was all of a distant four blocks and ten minutes away). Accordingly, we decided to launch from my backyard. Everything was fine until it took an easterly direction and started coming down somewhere towards Chicago Avenue. The parachute deployed and we searched but couldn't find it. We were pissed as it was a brand new kit. We didn't think anymore of it until the next day. We woke to discover there had been a fire overnight at Anthony's, which is you guessed it, was on Chicago Avenue. We were sweating bullets for a few days until they had determined the cause and said the fire started in the basement. We hid all our rocket stuff for awhile but to this day I still wonder.

Rick and I lost touch in high school. He went to Vocational High back when they still were trades that you could aspire to and get a decent job out of high school. He also bought a red Ford 1966 Galaxy 500 XL convertible with a 289 Windsor V8. It was used but it was a beautiful car with a white interior. I remember he got rear ended and the car was totaled so that's why maybe he called me to commiserate.

My unplanned meeting with Violet Porter. Oh, that was the name of the driver who decided that I needed another new car. Violet Porter was 68 years old. She was from out of town and apparently unfamiliar with the street lay out in downtown Minneapolis. They are alternating one ways. This one was 10th street. She was heading the wrong way from the point it turns from two way to one way which was about three blocks from the point of collision, at about 35 miles per hour. She said later that she never saw the light. Well, of course not, because you were going the wrong way and there are no signs or lights facing in your direction. She was driving a 1973 Ford Torino station wagon. Same car as driven by the legendary duo of Starsky and Hutch but a wagon. I was always partial to wagons,.....driven by me. Let's see, Ford Torino wagon, about 4000 lbs, Chevy Vega about 2000 lbs. Not much of a contest. She hit me square in the driver's side door; pushed me across three lanes of traffic where I was hit by a second car before hitting a light pole which fortunately did not topple over. I don't remember too much after the initial impact as I was out cold. I remember seeing her car out of the corner of my eye the instant before impact, knowing what was about to happen and thinking, "Is this it? On a humbug" then fade to black. No walking toward the light just black.

The reason I owned a Vega was partially due to Micheal. I have known Micheal since I was 12, as long as I had known Ricky. Micheal was into cars partially due to his brother Billy. Billy was about 10 years older than us and was gainfully employed and a car nut. Billy had a Jaguar XKE coupe and a 1968 Chevy Camaro Z28. Both those cars were ridiculously fast and zipping down Portland Avenue was absurd. Micheal in response, bought a 1974 Vega GT which wasn't nearly as fast but definitely more affordable for a young man just out of school. Vegas had a really bad

reputation and justifiable so as their early engines were garbage. Good design poor execution. They had a aluminum engine block for weight savings but a cast iron cylinder head. Cooling was not sufficient and with two metals having dissimilar expansion and contraction rates, problems developed with cracked blocks, head gaskets and other general nonsense which of course GM tried to deny. GM seems to have a history of this type of behavior. Maybe it's ingrained in their culture..... or maybe not.

Micheal lived around the corner and we and half the neighborhood of boys played ball on his garage hoop. I always used to forget that he was left handed and I was short. His Vega was silver and he left the new car sticker on the window for as long as he owned the car which was until 1980 when he bought a black Citation X11. I remember the day he got the Citation. He pulled out bill of sale to show me and I pointed out the window. I had just bought a new car also. We had a chuckle over that one in between hits. He also never washed the Vega in the six years he owned it, preferring to let the rain do it. If you lived in Minnesota, this was probably not the best idea. I remember Micheal driving in winter time with huge conglomerations of snow hanging off his back wheel wells. Micheal was kinda weird that way and I have no idea whether he got anything in trade when he bought the X11. My best guess would be no.

Micheal had a Vega so I got a Vega. The first one I bought was used. A 1972 hatchback in orange with low miles for \$1295. What I didn't realize the low miles was a bad sign. The 72's had the bad engines which of course the dealer didn't disclose. I found out when the car quit running on Lake Street and Hennepin due to the loss of compression, due to a cracked cylinder

head. In those, days it was a little more Wild West in the car selling business which is why most states have "lemon laws" today.

There was also another reason I had to get a new car. Up until that time I had been driving a 1968 MGB GT in British Racing Green. The car actually belonged to Lynda, the woman I had been living with. Her father had bought the car for her when we moved in together. I was 23 and Lynda was 20. That car was named Alexander. Alexander? Yes, Alexander. When we rented the apartment, the owner had listed "Alexander Westerburg" on the mail box as the occupant. We thought who the fuck is that and decided after deliberation, it had to be the green MG. The apartment faced Loring Park, then known in Minneapolis as the home of inter racial couples and gays but in those days, the references were not as polite.

Lynda was a beautiful girl. I had met her when I worked for her father. As a friend of mine said, "Look at you D, married the boss's daughter". Never thought of it that way. She was the receptionist and I was the youngest guy in the office. Remember, this is 1973 and we baby boomers were just entering the workforce. We just started hanging out together because, other than the kid who made deliveries, we were the only two under 30. One thing led to lunch and which led to a few dates, one of which wound up back at my apartment. My first apartment which was in Loring Park also was a small studio. At times, we would do a nooner as it was within walking distance of her father's office and our workplace. Turns out later, that after a while, we were the office gossip. People were wondering what was up as we both were always gone at the same time and were always busy during lunch and couldn't hang out with the rest of the crew but they never saw us leave or come back together. Look, we were trying to be

discrete. I was 23 and her father totally intimidated me for a number of reasons and I didn't want to lose my job. The jig was up one Saturday or Sunday morning. I had spent the night at Lynda's, we're in bed and I hear a male voice and I'm thinking it's her father. Again this is 1973, premarital sex, interracial coupling and cohabitation was not as easily accepted as today, so I'm thinking what would I say or should I let her do the talking. The door opens and it's her brother. So one issue didn't need to be addressed that day but it was clear that whatever secret we thought we could keep had to be dealt with one way or another. I shouldn't have worried both her brother and her father were cool.

Lynda had a roommate who moved out. After deliberation, we decided to move in together. So we went apartment hunting and found the place in Loring Park. The expectation was that we would be getting married, I'm not sure whose as I don't recall ever discussing it with Lynda but my memory has faded. But that's what you did in those days, you got married and you had kids. Our children would have been gorgeous but it didn't work out that way. I was young and impetuous and she was much wiser than I gave her credit. If we had gotten married, I would have been disloyal and we would have wound up sniping at each other for twenty years if we lasted that long. Speaking for myself, I had no clue how to be in a relationship, what would be expected of me, my expectation of her or our relationship. Relationship or marriage counseling wasn't there yet unless you went to the minister and that wasn't an option or consideration. In your twenties, you sometimes think of relationships as disposable, not understanding that every connection is unique and important. They need nurturing and whatever it was that brought you together is a gift that should be honored. We lasted two years. I was an ass and she moved out.

She went back to school later got her degree and married an Israeli. They have two children. I always wonder but we were too young.

I still see Lynda every now and then. Her brother moved to California and we've stayed in contact and maybe the point of the whole thing was for Mark and I to become friends for forty years but I doubt that. I've seen her father and mother when they visit Mark so you can't escape your past even when you don't want to.

Last November, I was in Minneapolis for my father's ninetieth birthday. Her father still lives there in the same house and she was visiting. They invited us over for dinner. Hungarian goulash and it was fabulous. A couple of things happened one before and one during dinner. She was Skyping her daughter who was in Japan studying. Her daughter was 22. They were discussing boyfriends and realized that she was the same age that we were when we were together. She said simply, " We were too young". I thought I detected a note of wistfulness in her voice or maybe I imagined it. Good thing Chere interrupted and said to me, "that's what you always say" before I could say something really stupid. Lynda and I looked at each other, part regret, part guilt, part thankfully having dodged a potential bullet and turned away.

Later during dinner, after wine we were discussing the old days. I mentioned to Del that he always intimidated me. He seemed surprised. I'm thinking, dude, are you serious? You were the boss; I'm shagging your daughter. Ice can't get too much thinner than that. The conversation turns back to Alexander and Lynda says she doesn't remember the mail box story. Del looks at me and he was still pissed about that car. He thinks I should have bought it. I didn't and forty

years later I find out. Well, I didn't want the car because at the time I didn't want any reminders of Lynda. I just wanted to be on my way. Of course who would have known that we'd still be connected after forty years. I didn't say that but just mumbled something about my accident and being lucky.

I always say that Lynda ruined me for everyone else. It's only partially false. I never lived with another women until I got engaged and married which was twenty-four years later and many relationships in between. I realized that relationships were funny and serious and unless you are committed to play, it's best not to.

In life there are always "what ifs". What would have happened if you had chosen another path? This is one of those cases where you know exactly what the other path would have held. If Lynda and I had stayed together, I would have been driving the British Racing Green MGB GT when I had my date with Violet Porter. I would have been killed. Ford Torino versus Chevy Vega, no contest. Ford Torino versus MG, vehicular manslaughter. The MG didn't have side intrusion protection meaning guard beams in the doors and the seat belts were ungainly in the early years so I would not have been wearing mine and the car was a tad lower which meant I would have taken a clean body shot to the upper chest, neck and head. Not a pretty outcome. I would have lived fast, died young but not made a good looking corpse. Life's ironies; splitting up meant that we could continue our relationship but under different circumstances over the next forty years when staying together would have meant done in three years.

Back to the Vegas. The salesman and the dealership who sold me the original orange Vega did me a solid. They took the 1972 back. They should have, my father had bought four cars from them. A blue 1962 Biscayne, a maroon 1966 Impala, a green 1970 Caprice Classic with vinyl roof, a maroon 1974 Monte Carlo, your personal sized luxury vehicle. I wanted a stick but they didn't have any on the lot so I picked out a blue 1975 Vega wagon with an automatic and cloth seats. The wagon was only \$100 more than the hatchback and it was more practical. Been driving wagons ever since. They asked me if they should take the sticker out and I said no way, I'm imitating Mr. Dye. He left his on for six years, mine was on for six days.

Micheal, Wayne and I used to listen to records. He lived at home until he didn't. His room was in the attic where in the summer it would be ridiculously hot. Micheal never sweated. We'd be sitting smoking weed quizzing each other on liner notes and Wayne and I would be dripping wet but not a single bead on Micheal. In those days we saw every concert we could. Concerts were cheaper than records. Our favorite venue was the Guthrie theatre; Led Zeppelin, Duke Ellington, Steely Dan, Doctor John, Miles Davis at least twice, Weather Report, Boz Scaggs, Bruce Cockburn, Pointer Sisters, Devo, Graham Central Station, Talking Heads, Roxy Music, Mahavishnu Orchestra, they all were there and then some who I can no longer remember. Next door was the Walker where I took drawing classes as a youth and I saw an Anthony Braxton concert. Dude is seriously odd. Just my kinda guy. I ran across him in Venice, Italy once and invited him to lunch. He declined as he had other plans. A year later after the concert, backstage, he remembered and said his plans had fallen through and we should have done lunch. Then there was Orchestra Hall with Ella Fitzgerald, Joe Pass, Oscar Petersen, Bob Marley where I saw my brother dancing in the aisles and the maniac concert with Herbie Hancock. I was down

near the front and I see out of the corner some hippie looking dude racing down the aisle. Ok is this part of the show or what? He does a perfect superman, no seat grab however, across the top of Herbie's keyboard and knocks his glasses off. Stage crew rushes on and drags dude off stage. Herbie sits down unfazed and picks up where he left off. Crowd goes wild. Whole incident took less than a minute if that. Dexter Gordon and Santana on the U of M campus. Dexter had us clap for the horn. Sun Ra and Lou Reed at Duffy's Rock and Roll Emporium. There was a memorable show at the Art Institute with Cecil Taylor versus a nine and half foot Bosendorfer Imperial grand piano. The Imperial has 97 keys as opposed to the 88 keys of the standard grand piano and has a unique sound, a sound approaching melancholia. Normally sets are 45 minutes long but his first set ran an hour and a half. He was on top, underneath and around. He was determined to bend the piano to his bidding and get every sound possible or probable. It was the ultimate test of wills. It was a vendetta, a blood feud. At one point he had the piano sounding like a swarm of locusts. It was exhilarating and exhausting. We didn't stay for the second set, one was enough. The next day he was quoted as saying he had gotten lost in the instrument and didn't know he had played that long. My response was no shit.

Micheal came to Oakland and we saw Miles at the Paramount about a year before he died. Miles had signs with the names of all of his band members and he would hold them up when they soloed. He has one that said "me" for himself. We traveled to Mexico and ran across a Michael Jackson impersonator because Derrick McKey is Micheal Jackson, for some absurd amount of pesos. We declined. On the way back across the border, they stopped us and Micheal didn't have a passport even though one wasn't required. They asked him stupid questions like who won

the World Series and who does so and so play for before they let us reenter. This was before 9/11. Today he might not have been so fortunate.

We knew music from Varese to Xenakis to Zappa, Coltrane to Mingus and Joanie Mitchell Hendrix and all the spaces in between. Micheal had a Sony reel to reel and we spliced tape and made music concrete. He also bought an Arp Odyssey one of the first affordable synthesizers. As guys do, we were going to start a band. Me on horns, Micheal on electronic keys and Wayne on drums. It never happened. Micheal was kind of a recluse. He spent hours in his hot little room not interacting with the world with his Dual turntable and JBL L100's. We called him mister secret. He would always be slipping off somewhere but never say where. Turn around and he would be gone.

Five years ago Micheal had a major stroke. They didn't find him for three days until his co-workers got concerned because Micheal always came too work. They had to remove part of his skull and his speech was affected. He is in a nursing home now where he's the youngest person by about twenty years. He could probably get better in a situation that was more conducive to rehabilitation but I'm not his guardian. It is a regression to his room in the attic. He shares a space divided by a curtain with a soon to be dead person on the other side; he has his music and tapes from twenty years ago but he can't move forward; he's frozen. It pains me every time I see him because I remember him as he used to be. There is nothing I can do but I have to see him whenever I am in Minneapolis. He is my friend and our friendship compels me. At times I think it might have been better if his co-workers had not been so caring.

After the impact I was out. I don't know for how long. The next thing I remember was a woman peering through the windshield and then running away. I presume it was Violet Porter. Then it was fade to black again. The sirens of the ambulance woke me again. I remember a swarthy looking guy yelling through the missing driver's side window, "I saw everything, she hit you man." Odd thing, the paramedics would have injured me worse than the accident if I hadn't come to. They jumped out in all undue haste and started to pry the door open. I yelled at them to stop as they were crushing my ribs. By opening the driver's door they were forcing the point of impact further inward and against my ribs. After my vociferous complaint they recognized the situation and went around to the other side and pushed the door open from the passenger's side. I've always wondered after that how many accidents victims are injured by their rescuers lack of communication. They extracted me which entailed cutting the seat belt and lifting my ass out and providing a short ambulance ride to the hospital. Other than a few bits of safety glass in my elbow, I was good to go. The hospital was in Loring Park so I just walked home after they released me. The news of my accident traveled fast as it was only two blocks from my office. I had stopped working for Lynda's father about nine months earlier. In that context, nothing had happened, I had gotten a better gig. First impression was "did you see that accident on Portland, that car was jacked." Second impression was, "that was Damien, is he ok?" Susie Burchill stopped by first with some killer weed, then Micheal, then Wayne, then Charlie. We're sitting around red eye blitzed and there is this knock on the door. It's my Dad. Someone has enough sense to cover up the bud as if the smoke and vapors weren't a dead give away. I try have a coherent conversation, no luck. My dad who was a pharmacist asks me if I needed any pain medication. I said pops I'm good because I was feeling no pain at that point and he had the graciousness to leave. Susie decides it time to go. At that moment my new girlfriend is bringing

her bike up the back stairs and Wayne says "What's up with you dude, you got chicks leaving the front and new ones coming up the back?"

The following day the sun rose and I had a severe head and body ache. Decided I needed to go see my car which had been towed to the dealership. I had not seen it nor had I realized the scope of the accident until I read the police report a few days later when I needed to get it to my insurance company. I was under the impression that it could be repaired. The salesman had seen the car and was shocked that anyone walked away without major injuries. The driver's side was caved in and the rear axle was broken with the right rear wheel tucked under. Of course he asked if I was thinking about buying a new car.

Wayne had driven me out there in his Vega. He had a green hatchback. Our group was going to be called the Vegas. We had discussed it. Our shtick would have our Vegas outfitted with amplifiers and speakers, drive them on stage, open the rear hatches, jump out and start playing. Corny? Yeah. Never came to pass. Wayne had ulterior motives in driving me out as we had been burning a little greenery the night before and he thought he had left some in my car. He wanted to make sure that there wasn't an excuse to say that somehow it was my fault. He was amazed that I wasn't dead after seeing the car. So was I for that matter. We didn't find any forgotten weed.

In Violet Porters honor, and as it saved my life, I ordered a new 1976 Vega from the factory. It was a blue wagon also, a darker shade. The F41 sport suspension, radial tires, roof rack, hounds

tooth sport cloth interior in blue, white and gray and a 5 speed manual transmission. There was a little miscommunication in how long it would take to arrive but when it did, the first thing I did before I left the lot was to remove the window sticker. I wasn't taking any chances. I kept that car until I sold it to buy a 1980 Fiat 2000 convertible.

It also turns out that Violet was an interesting character. She didn't have any insurance and gave the police a fake policy number. She high tailed it back to Wisconsin and tried to burn her house down to collect the insurance money. That failed and she went on the lam with her boyfriend. My insurance covered me under my uninsured motorist clause. I never knew what happened Violet. I was always curious.

I knew what happened to Ricky. He died. Not in a car crash but a death of his own choosing. He was a Jehovah's Witness, you know the annoying ones who show up on your doorstep. He wasn't that way but he believed. About a year later, he had come down with appendicitis. He would have needed surgery but blood transfusions were not permitted according to their dogma. Eventually his parents who were Witnesses also took him to the hospital but it was too late. In some ways I respected Ricky more than his parents as he chose to follow through on what he believed. I'm no authority on their dogma and whether his interpretation was correct but he chose. When I used to visit my mother who still lived around the corner, every now and then I would see the them in their yard. I would always stop and speak. I don't know if it was painful to them to see young men who they knew as boys while they could no longer see theirs. But I had to stop. He was my friend.

You may believe what you choose, but dogma is not the essence of spirituality. Dogma gives license. It says, it doesn't matter what you do as long as you believe and if you believe, you are saved. Some of the world's great criminals have been saved. We would have been better served to have been saved from them.

At forty, I got my first tattoo, a penguin. In honor of my mother's passing four years later, I had a serpent tattooed on my right leg along with three hexagrams from the I Ching. The serpent in the King James Version is the evil tempter who leads Adam and Eve astray. In other cultures, the serpent is the symbol of wisdom and knowledge. I think the way we were taught the story is a fundamental misreading of the allegory. What did the serpent bring Eve? The serpent brought self awareness. Eve is the mother of knowledge. We have become conscious individual beings because of our mother, Eve. As individuals we can act on the world, move mountains and do many wonderful and horrible things. The other side of that coin is separation from each other, the world, alienation, the loss of the garden. We have been cast out. We are no longer one with each other and the world, we are separate. We are alone in our nakedness and pain.

The only reminder I have of Violet Porter other than a faded yellow newspaper clipping and my memory are a few scars on my elbow. Some scars are visible, some are on the outside, some are on the inside and some are hiding in plain sight.

We spend our lives trying to escape aloneness. We try to touch and be touched. Only the brave or the foolish try to pretend otherwise. The wise admit to their weaknesses. The hexagrams are a

reminder. They say with knowledge we begin, we persevere, then we can create. On the way home from Minneapolis and my father's ninetieth birthday party, I wrote this poem.

Who is to say if we had never met
I would be who I am today
If I am not who I am today
Would I have had any interest in meeting you
The same is true of you
A chain that was begun is not ended in passing
We think we are the reason
We are only the intermediaries to a future destination
A manipulation of some other destiny
For a reality that we will never know
Or need to know
We assume we know what was
But we find pieces unknown to either of us
At each reflection
A mirror that changes the future and the past