

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Thurs., May 20, 1965

ACROSS THE ISLAND

Flaming Death Waits For Highway Victims

By NEIL A. MATHESON
Provincial-Farm Editor

I SHALL be on vacation when this column appears, but I wrote it last week in the hope it must do something to shock even a few of those who drive so carelessly on our highways, and with such complete disregard for the safety of everyone, including themselves.

The language is not mine. It is taken from a Reader's Digest printed almost 30 years ago under the title "Sudden Death". It was sent to me by my friend, Dan MacLean, a former Kings County man who lives now in Vancouver.

The writer, J. C. Furnas, noted that highway casualty figures, even when they are in the millions, never jar the motorist into the cold realization of the several tons of sudden death he steers along the road.

Pain, Horror, Mutilation

MERE FIGURES "exclude the pain and horror of savage mutilation . . . what is needed is a vivid and sustained realization that every time you step on the throttle, death gets in beside you, hopefully waiting for its chance.

"No artist on a safety poster would dare depict the torn and mangle bodies in full detail. The picture would have to include motion-picture and sound effects, too – the flopping, pointless efforts of the injured to stand; the queer grunting noises; the steady, panting groaning of a human being with pain creeping up on him as the initial shock wears off.

"It should portray the slack expression on the face of a man drugged with shock, staring at the Z-twist in his broken leg, the insane crumpled effect of a child's body after its bones have been crushed inward, a realistic portrait of an hysterical woman with her screaming mouth opening a hole in the bloody drip that fills her eyes and runs off her chin.

"Minor details would include the raw ends of bones protruding through flesh in compound fractures, and in the dark red, oozing surfaces where clothes and skin were flayed off at once."

I'm including here the more startling shocking excerpts from the Digest bit of 1935 for I haven't nearly enough space to use it all and I've changed a word or two here and there, in the attempt to make this warning even more realistic.

Those are all standard, every-day sequels to the modern passion for going places in a hurry and taking chances on the way" said the Digest. But that was written 30 years ago when the speed and the power of even the new cars didn't begin to compare with today's highway monsters whose speedometers are calibrated to 120 miles and even more. The hazards of the sort of criminal negligence we see on our highways mostly every day are infinitely more serious today.

Facts Revolting, - So Is Death

“I CAN’T help it if the facts are revolting”, Furnas wrote in 1935. “If you have the nerve to drive fast and take chances, you ought to have the nerve to take the appropriate cure. You can’t ride an ambulance, or watch the doctor working on the torn and twisted victim, but you can read.

“Enthusiasts tell you the automobile makes 65 miles per hour seem like nothing at all,” Furnas wrote 30 years ago. But he was talking of 1935 cars – their power and speed didn’t even begin to compare with 1965. Now the speed fiend would cry “pussy cat” and “chicken” at anyone who didn’t exceed 65. Today’s speed fiend won’t even admit he went anything close to that slow.

There’s infinitely better engineering know-how built into today’s cars. They’ll corner and do many other things much better at high speeds than the comparative antiques of 1935. But the occupants are just as dead when the modern cars crash head on, or in a dozen of other ways that crashes occur. I looked out the office window as I was writing this and saw a young lad on a bicycle crash into the side of an automobile at the Prince Kent Streets intersection. It wasn’t the motorist’s fault that time. His car was stopped for the red light at the time. And nobody was hurt.

Wood Splinter In Mother’s Brain

BUT THAT’S unusual. The Digest story said “a wrecking crew pried the door off a car which had been overturned down an embankment – and out stepped the driver with only a scratch on his cheek. But his mother was still inside, a splinter of wood . . . driven four inches into her brain as a result of her son’s taking a greasy curve a little too fast.

“No blood – no horribly twisted bones – just a grey-haired corpse still clutching her pocketbook on her lap as she had clutched it when she felt the car leave the road.

“On that same curve a month later, a light touring car crashed a tree. In the middle of the front seat they found a nine-month old baby surrounded by broken glass and yet unhurt. A fine practical joke on death – but spoiled by the baby’s parents, still sitting on each side of him, killed instantly by shattering their skulls on the dashboard.”

Head-on crashes are the most spectacular, perhaps. Unbelievably they often occur on straight stretches of highway. “The sudden vision of a broad straight road suddenly tempts many an ordinarily sensible driver into passing the man ahead. Simultaneously, a driver coming the other way swings out at high speed. At the last moment each try to get into line again. But the gaps have closed. As the cars in line are forced into the ditch to capsize or crash fences, the passers meet, almost head on, in a swirling, grinding smash that sends them caroming obliquely into the others.

“A trooper described one accident . . . five cars in one mess, seven killed on the spot, two dead on the way to the hospital, two more died in the long run.

“He remembered it far more vividly than he wanted to – the quick way the doctor turned away from a dead man to check a woman with a broken back; the three bodies out of one car so soaked with oil from the crank case that they looked like wet brown cigars and not human at all; a man, walking around and babbling to himself, oblivious of the dead and dying, even oblivious of the dagger-like sliver of steel that stuck out of his

streaming wrist, a pretty girl with her forehead laid open, trying hopelessly to crawl out of a ditch in spite of her broken hip.

Mother, Girl, Shattered Broken

“IN A recent case . . . they found the old lady, who had been sitting in the back, lying across the lap of her daughter, who was in front, each soaked in her own and the other’s blood indistinguishably, each so shattered and broken that there was no point whatever in an autopsy to determine it was a broken neck or a ruptured heart that caused death.

“A leg or arm stuck through the windshield will cut clean to the bone through artery and muscle like a piece of beef under the butcher’s knife, and it takes little time to lose a fatal amount of blood under such circumstances.

“You hear picturesque tales of how a flying human body will make a neat hole in the windshield with its head – the shoulders stick – the glass holds - and the raw, keen edge of the hole decapitates the body as neatly as the guillotine.

“Or . . . going off the road into a post-and-rail fence can put you beyond worrying about other injuries immediately when a rail comes through the windshield and tears off your head with its splintery end. Bodies are often found with their shoes off, the shoes still in the back seat, completely laced.”

I’ve seen this sort of thing myself. I recall an accident scene at a railway crossing at Napanee, Ontario where seven people in a car died in one flaming instant of destructive terror. A pair of child’s shoes, still tightly laced, were sitting side by side on the pavement, mute evidence of the death that came so horribly to the little girl that had worn them.

There are many ways of meeting death in automobile crashes, but all of them are horrible. They all leave the victim dead. That victim could be YOU. Won’t you think about it.