

A History of Cars

Greg Sanders

His head was propped up on two or three pillows, affording him a view of his son reading by the opened bedroom window. Now in his mid-40s, his only progeny was lanky and thin, nearly bent double, his face in some old novel he'd picked out downstairs from the house's library. A light September breeze blew through that window, a breeze scented with the old conifers that had protected the house for 150 years. An atheist to the core, the dying man waited to be whisked away into the nothingness he knew awaited him.

He was best known as the creator of *An Illustrated History of Cars*, which captured the imagination of the world when it was published in 1978. The original cover, a portrait of a 14th century automobile, is as iconic today as that of *Catcher in the Rye* or *Where the Wild Things Are*. The book chronicled the evolution of the automobile, from "The Iron Age: Early Attempts at the Internal Combustion Engine" and "Cars of the Royal Court," on to contemporary times, which was the mid-1970s. The author, a formally trained commercial illustrator and the son of a mechanical

engineer and medical equipment salesman, drew all the book's illustrations with unflinching seriousness and panache. One could almost believe that the first fully functional automobile chugged along during the Court of King James I, that workable prototypes were built as early as the reign of Canute the Great (995?-1035). As evidence of the earliest of working vehicles, the book included a color plate of an 11th century tapestry that showed the horses and carriages of a royal procession; among them, a self-propelled four-wheeled cart can be seen releasing a plume of exhaust into the air.

For decades, the author had lived by himself in the family's rundown Victorian mansion on a hill overlooking the city of Yonkers. On pleasant weather weekends he fled the dilapidated castle for his bungalow in the western Catskills. The dense band of woods surrounding the mansion was littered with bottles, plastic bags, used needles, and the occasional corpse. Kids sometimes sneaked into these woods, waiting for him to make his weekly exodus, wanting to catch a glimpse of the mysterious man. And suddenly there he'd be, emerging into the shadows of the veranda with his stainless steel cane in hand. He'd close the rattling front door behind him and look around, like he knew he was being watched. A canvas mountaineering backpack from another era hanging from his shoulders, he'd duck under the perpetually broken gutter spout that leaned against the the sagging veranda roof. A tall man, he bent to get into his old Datsun as if it were a space capsule. They never knew where he was heading, only that it was somewhere "upstate." The vagueness of his weekly destination was part of the fun of spying on the old man—that and the fact that he'd once been famous in a manner that made him seem more celestial explorer than terrestrial writer.

He was a widower and thought often about Jennifer, a sharp-tongued and full-figured art historian, a disciplined grammarian with a dry wit and long legs. They wed a decade before the book's publication. It was a time of heavy rumination for him, a period during which he had begun to assemble his ideas and make sketches for the book, hunched over a drafting table in the mansion's basement, secretive and constantly over-tired. During this period, Jennifer would say to him, sometimes beratingly, that he seemed lost in another realm. Indeed, his wife had been onto

him, for on those late nights he *had* felt as if he were traveling to another world. He could see these strange vehicles and the oddball engineers clad in their medieval garb, half-naked smiths working iron and steel and copper with hammers on anvils lighted by great furnaces, all to fashion the components of engines, of axles and springs, steering boxes and ur-transmissions of copper gears and hardwood spindles. Jennifer held on for the ride. Each adapted to the other: she to his weirdness and he to her need for absolutism and unambiguous, staccato statements of intent, her censure of adverbs.

In the late 1960s, Jennifer bore them a son, Marvin (he by the opened window), who married and moved with his wife, Sari, to New Zealand. At the apogee of the author's fame, when his book was on the *New York Times* bestseller list, he was on a world book tour when Jennifer was diagnosed with metastasized melanoma. She was gone within a year. He had met many other women after her death, but was always reminded, always—of what he no longer had, not of what he might gain.

He often laughed and shook his head when thinking of his son's choice to relocate to New Zealand. It was such an obvious and cruel joke that the boy he once loved so much had so unambiguously fled from him, was as far away as he could get from his father and the cobwebs of his childhood home and the memories its walls enclosed. Sari, his daughter-in-law, also seemed thrilled to have left her clan behind (she hailed from Maine). She and Marvin had convinced themselves that their bond was the shared plight of the wronged and pursued, though the author believed it was but a fiction, for he and Jennifer had doted to no end on their only child, whose sullenness would have tested the best parents of the day. He sometimes imagined his son and Sari as minuscule figures moving along upside-down on the other side of the planet, doing their domestic chores as he puttered about the big house in the middle of the night, alone.

A familiar sentimental haze enshrouded the author on many evenings as he sat alone in his large library. Before him, filling one wall of shelves, were all the variations of *An Illustrated History of Cars*: bundles of sketches, uncorrected proofs and advance copies, first editions, all the reprints and translations, and finally the re-issues that came out in the mid-1990s. This book, it seemed,

would be his life's sole artistic accomplishment. True, creating it had come of deep inspiration, fixation and love, but he felt certain he would never again feel such energy blossom inside of him .

His melancholy was like an old gray-muzzled dog that followed him around the house and settled at his feet wherever he sat. His comparatively bright morning moods took hold, sparked by sunlight coming in between trees where it could, then pushing in through the dusty parlor windows. This would give way to a solemn lunchtime feeling during which he listened to classical music on the radio and ate a simple meal he'd make for himself—a sandwich or pasta with sauce from a jar. By evening, a downright oppressive mood got its talons into him, leaving him unable to take comfort in anything but the two tall glasses of scotch he took nightly. Yet he would not let himself become a full-blown miserable, nor would he allow himself the smallest slip into slovenliness. He drew himself a bath every other night, placed the second glass of scotch on a side table, then lowered himself into the steaming water with a groan the mice in the walls could hear. This, at least, was pleasurable, to warm the old bones, to be honest with himself about his pale body, the knobby, bluish knees, his silver body hair waving like gossamer threads underwater. For honesty—an unflinching assessment of self and environment—had always been important to him. But what good was this assessment in a vacuum? What good was it if you were still heading inevitably toward vanquishment and dissolution? Thus, the scotch was always welcome.

His weekend travels seemed to stanch the melancholic flow for a day or two. The process and labor of getting to the Catskills bungalow distracted him. The drive—along the Thruway, then to Route 17, and on toward the elbow of New York State—allowed him to observe the other cars on the road and the habits of contemporary drivers (they had stopped using indicators around 1984). When he arrived in the spring or summer, the long grass, crushed under the car tires, would scent the air; birds chirped and flitted away from the trees and under the eaves the moment he unlatched the car door. The house, nestled between a road and a high ridge, had a stream flowing through its backyard. The memories were sweet, of himself and Jennifer lolling away weekends in the garden or swimming in the Delaware River or Marvin overturning stones in search of critters to identify. At the peak of their lives there and

before Jennifer was stricken, they were a half-crazed trio filling the place with their frenetic yearnings.

During his latest and, as it would turn out, last trip to the house, the author became aware of just how diminished he had become. It was on an April evening, hours after he arrived, that a powerful thunderstorm broke the calm air of the little valley. The power in the bungalow went out because of an electrical surge due to a lightning strike. As the storm shook the house beneath a quivering night sky, he struggled to locate a flashlight, finally finding it in the cupboard under the kitchen sink. Its batteries nearly dead, it threw a yellow and shadowy light. It took another half-hour for him to find a replacement fuse at the back of the odds-and-ends drawer in the little alcove. He then had to find the key to the padlock on the Bilco doors leading to the cellar, where, as he recalled, the fuse box was mounted on the far wall.

The rain came down in sheets, the dying flashlight illuminating his arthritic fingers as he tried the odd assortment of keys on the door's padlock. After the third or fourth key, he was able to release the lock and, with some difficulty, lift the door. The flashlight was now dead and he felt his way down the dank steps, guided by the occasional flash of lightning. Once he set foot on the concrete slab, he moved forward in a straight line and aimed for the far wall. Memories and artifacts lurked down here in the darkness. He knew that his son's vintage Flexible Flyer hung on the wall to his right, its runners furry with rust; that the steel rim of an unearthed wagon wheel leaned against another wall; that his wife's ancient gardening implements—a faded straw hat, nested stacks of clay pots, bags of unopened manure—occupied a work table by the boiler. And he knew that other, less definable mementos of his past, bound together by an abstract contract, lay in the distant corners, in the crawl spaces and root cellar that branched off this main room.

He felt for the fuse box on the wall opposite the side he entered. Touching a surface-mounted steel cabinet, he remembered that the electrical service was upgraded nearly a decade ago, that a circuit beaker had replaced the fuse box he sought. The fuse in his pocket felt heavy, another reminder of his forgetfulness. He opened the little metal door, clicked the main breaker switch, and almost immediately saw a flash before his eyes. He felt his lower

back give way, heard his own yelp of pain, and fell to the floor.

He lay face-up, all but paralyzed. A shallow plane of cold water gathered around his body, for the cellar always flooded during torrential downpours. Electricity had not felled him, though it took a few moments for him to realize this. Instead, it was a herniated disc, an ancient affliction making a final appearance. Attempt after demoralizing attempt to rise even to his elbows failed. Each time he tried, a shock went through his body, and he saw flashes of blue beneath his eyelids.

As the water rose almost to his ears, the emergency sump pump in the far corner clicked on and drained the cellar, clicking off when its float dropped and humming into action when it rose again. Had he not flicked the circuit breaker on, he realized in a daze, he could very well have drowned there in his own cellar, among the artifacts of his past. On and on it went through the night, this tidal rise and fall of the water table.

Late the next morning, a neighbor saw the Bilco door ajar from a curve up the road and found him ashen and soaked, nearly dead with hypothermia.

It was as if his body awaited this one incident to begin its final cascade of failing systems. Before long, all his frailties came to the fore—his enlarged heart, his fossilized arteries, his hypoglycemia, his infections of the blood. He rejected a prolonged hospital stay, a “drug-induced idiocy.” When his prognosis was dim as could be, his son and daughter-in-law flew in from New Zealand and took up residence in the Yonkers mansion, hovering around the old man. At least he could manage in the bathroom on his own, but his son and Sari (who, he realized, resembled the boy’s mother) forced him to give up scotch, and now drew his bath and guided him to the tub’s edge before leaving him to his own devices.

He wanted to be fearless, for death—the process of his own dying—had preoccupied him since he became aware of its inevitability more than seven decades ago. The questions were as old as civilization, as painful to ask as a pinprick on the palm. How well would he manage to do it in the end? Would he not fall into an epic panic? This would be understandable. He had always imagined some variety of wretched pain along with a loss of perception then

of self, an end that was embarrassing in its bearer's ultimate lack of control. It seemed it would not proceed this way, at least not yet. His last days were spent lying in bed, fevered, unable to quite fill his lungs with air, his heart racing, his mouth dry, his vision playing tricks on him. He saw the tall lanky figure of his son, now reading by the open window, now looking at him, now holding his hand bedside. Sari would now and again embrace her husband but rarely approached the author on her own.

As he lay in bed during another unbearably quiet afternoon, he heard a car rumbling up the driveway. Its engine sounded open to the air, ticking and knocking loudly. He recognized the rattle of the valves, the whir of the engine fan, the banging of pistons, the lively chug of exhaust passing through a manifold. The engine stopped running, and he heard the sounds of squeaky leaf springs as someone stepped out of the car. In his mind, he walked to the window, parted the curtains, and looked down onto the driveway. The vehicle was one from his book, a roofless Spanish number from the mid-17th century. Its tires were made of bull hide, its engine's components forged and hammered at a special smithy outside of Toledo. It was entirely hand-made—there was no other option back then. A man wearing strange spectacles, breeches, stockings, and pointed shoes was standing beside the car. He looked up at the author. “*Buenas tardes!*” he said, raising his feathered hat into the air, then bowing.

“Christ,” the author said into the dark air of the bedroom.

Marvin called to his wife. “Sar’, something’s happening.”

“Christ,” the author said again as he watched the man walk toward the veranda, heard the front door open and the glass panes rattle. Then the hard footfalls moved along below him until they stopped at the bottom of the stairs. “Grandly entertaining,” he said into the air again, his breathing labored.

Marvin leaned over his father now, holding onto his wife's elbow.

Before long, the man with the cap came through the door and stopped at the foot of the bed. The room was filling up.

“I ask that you look down at the vehicle again,” the Spaniard said to the author, his voice gentle. “*Por favor, mira el vehículo de*

nuevo.”

The author went to the window, cocked his head and looked down. The ancient machine was quiet now, and sitting in the passenger’s seat was Jennifer, his lovely wife, resembling the woman she’d been three decades ago.

“Hello, stranger!” she said, looking up at him. “It’s been ages. Are you going to join us?”

What a sight he must have made, he thought, a tormented and oafish face sprouting silver hair, corneas the color of skimmed milk.

“Do I really have a choice in the matter?” he said.

She smiled, her teeth a little out of whack as always, her eyes bright blue, like gems.

“Such the reductionist,” she said. “I’ll be here. We’ll go together.”

“What’s it like?” he said.

“As you’ve always suspected, it’s nothing, nothing at all. Or, nothingness.”

Now he was on his back in bed again. His daughter-in-law stood on the right side of the bed, his son on the left. They held his hands. This was sweetness embodied, the warm human grip, his palm and fingers encased in the caresses of those who would inherit all of this from him. Maybe he was ready to let go after all. He could still see the Spaniard, who was now at the window looking down at Jennifer, nodding to her as if things were going swimmingly. The plumage of his absurd hat, which he held at his side, fluttered in the breeze.

Oh, that air really was wonderful. The author would miss the scent of the trees, so long a part of his perception. Typical, cliché, that that which you take for granted tugs at your heartstrings in the end.

The Spaniard turned toward him. “Are you ready to follow me? Please stand up and walk with me to the car. *Si? Ponte de pie.*”

A minute or so passed as the dying man considered the question. “Frankly, I’m not ready to go,” he finally said, having found his voice, having suddenly thought better of an expedited exit. He was in love with the air that came into the room, after all.

“No problemo. Haha, that’s what people say, yes?” the Spaniard said. “We have patience; we can wait.” Then he went to the window

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and gestured for Jennifer to join them. In a blink, she also stood at the foot of the bed, next to Marvin. Now the place was really getting crowded, now the author was beginning to feel at home. Maybe he would stick around for a little while longer. Maybe he'd surprise them all.

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