

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Tom Sheehan

Independent Rig Runner, 18 Wheeler Character Study

JERRY M. WAS BRIGHT, he was brash, he was brave and he knew his way around a tough traffic circle, a long haul through tough road cop territory or, moreover, a curious clause in a written contract and the weak spot in a banker's vanity. He started out as a trucker, hooking a ride with a neighborhood trucker because he loved the sound of a Mack or Kenworth starting up, purring, and then with unerring power commanding the road. Some kids liked trains pounding through town or those seen with the great legends and logos on the sides of freight cars, with dramatic or compelling interest; the early graffiti like the Saugus Branch, Boston & Maine, Rock Island Road, Route of the Phoebe Snow, Yazoo Valley & the Mississippi, Alleghany & the Susquehanna, Delaware & Lackawanna, Lehigh & New England, Wegee Branch, Eagle Lake & West Branch, and the Soo Line at the other end of the continent, ad infinitum.

Some boys, at the touch of a ball of any kind, are hauled into sports and the excitement that such contact inspires or generates.

But Jerry, like I said, loved hearing an old Reo warm up, an old International, a Brockway, an Autocar, a Peterbilt or a Walter Snow-Plow in mid-winter, the roar of pistons grabbing him as good as fists. The chromed Kenworths stuffed into a dealer's lot on Route 1 in Saugus, ever taunted him and his imagination, thinking about being outbound to Maine and Canada, and the whole damned continent, all the way to Mexico, eventually to haul illegal shrimp, and never to go anywhere with his rig empty of some saleable goods.

He ended up as a dealer in land, selecting sites, arranging purchase deals, not revealing the final aims of such purchases, for a large developer of large malls back in the days after he came back a hero from Korea, nearly killed two times.

But between the different occupations, he was a story maker, a dealer in conning scale men, county sheriffs sitting on hillsides and watching for smoke pouring from diesel exhaust stacks as they labored uphill heavily overloaded.

I rode with him on several occasions, watching him swing his rig into outbound roads, his hand pawing the shift lever with adroitness, his feet tap dancing on clutch pedal and gas pedal, a magician at the task, in command.

I guess I'll back up here and go to the time he was 18 and went into a bank in Malden, MA, the town just down Route 1 from us, and asked for a loan of \$15,000 so he could buy a better rig.

"What kind of collateral do you have, son? The banker said, smiling at the audacity of the young man sitting in front of him, handsome as movie star, great smile on his face, blond as he could be and spreading the sense of confidence about the whole room like it was a perfume or some male nectar the banker soon found working on him.

"I have a couple of tired rigs, which I know I can sell, but I have an opportunity for a long-haul contract from here to Long Island, taking lobster

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down there and bringing potatoes back here, and never going anyplace with my rig empty. I do need a better rig for the constant runs, which I figure to be about 12 a month, but could be more."

He was moving without driving, at the wheel of the discussion.

"Is that all the collateral you have, Mr. McCartney?" the banker had said, and Jerry told me later it really got him pissed off when the banker displayed a ludicrous grin on his face like he was laughing at him clean up from his socks.

"That's it, sir, but I do have a good reference from a significant financial source."

"Who might that be, Mr. McCartney?" the banker said, like he was ready to hear a whopper of a lie.

Jerry said, "If you'll pick up your phone and call Mr. Collins, president of the Great Bay State Bank in Boston, and ask him for a reference, I'm sure you'll be satisfied."

The call was made, and the Malden banker said, "John, I have a young man in my office who's looking for a \$15,000 loan with only a few old trucks as collateral."

He waited for a response, and got it, and then said, "Yes, that's his name, Jerry McCartney." A strange look crossed his face. Then he said, "I understand, John. Perfectly, Yes."

He hung up and said, "The loan's yours. Mr. Collins said if you want to make it \$20,000, we could handle that."

"The 15's good enough," Jerry said.

He was off and running.

He bought another rig, made his first run to Maine to haul lobster to Long Island, hauled potatoes to a place down south, then peanuts to Oklahoma, and some garden crops to a friend in Texas, then went over the border into Mexico and hauled shrimp back to New York.

Once I rode with him to Gloucester to pick up a load of lobster. It was very early in the day, false dawn not yet visible on the skyline, and I was groggy yet. At one point at a wide turn in the road I became conscious of the hastening speed we were attaining, knowing the road we were on.

I said, "Jerry, how come you're going so fast?" I was a little leery of the speed.

Jerry said, pointing out of my side of the cab, "I'm trying to beat that thing to the corner."

The trailer was in a jackknife mode before he was able to straighten the rig out before the whole of disaster came around the corner.

From there on, I was not afraid to take a ride with him, and learned how to handle a rig.

Or the ladies.

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Once we pulled into the heart of Malden Square, smack-dab beside the library. He made some universal gesture to a policeman that he was at delivery, and we walked into the hush of the library. Jerry quickly spotted the table with half a dozen girls at their books. We sat at the far end of the table, Jerry smiled, I smiled, they smiled, and then he slid his key chain, containing pictures of the rig out front and his blue convertible in the yard at home, down the length of the table.

One of the girls, blonde, fair as all of Norway or Sweden, curious, outspoken, picked up the key chain, looked at the vehicle photos and said, "Yours?"

"Yes," Jerry said, his voice reaching across the room.

"Which one?" she said, her eyes pale green, like an evening pasture.

"Both of them," Jerry said affirmatively, no coaxing in his voice, no blarney, just the bare facts.

As it was, the stories grew about him, some of which I experienced myself, but on a lesser scale, some of them coming out of his earlier days, all of them establishing his *modus operandi*.

As a real young driver of 16, without a license, driving a Chevy panel truck in 1944, I used to haul live or cooked lobster from the Lobster Pound in Lynn, MA to big stores in Lowell, Lawrence and Haverhill, all north of the Lobster Pound. One road was through a one-cop town and I was instructed to off-load a basket of lobster buried in seaweed to a car on a special point of the road. The boss at the Lobster Pound saying, "It's the one cop in the town and we have to take care of him. It's the best road to those three big stores and he'd grab us for speeding or something else if we don't take care of him."

I learned my lesson," he had added.

Jerry knew that business depended on him never going empty, never going without the maximum load he could haul, being aware of what was on the route, but that often meant being overloaded. It made the money.

There was, for example, the stop he'd make on a hill in Indiana to off-load a crate of lobster he was hauling, the black smoke swirling noticeably out of his stack signifying his load parameter, and the sheriff's car sitting on the side of a lonely hill with its trunk door opened when Jerry pulled up beside him.

Or the place in another mid-western state where he'd speed past a weigh station, drive into a pre-arranged location in a local community, switch trailers, and go back to the weigh station, saying, "Hell, I was damned near sleeping when I went by. Sorry for that," to which the weigh station gent said, "Go get the trailer you had on when you went by." Which Jerry did, now somewhat unloaded, drove it back, waited a night, and drove on again the next morning, before the sun was up, his whole initial load again intact.

Once, approaching a state line and the weigh station, he had a second driver aboard, who was instructed to thumb ahead, make sure he was at the weigh station looking over a map with the weight station manager at

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a set time, his arm around the manager, when Jerry went past the place as fast as the rig would go. The way station man merely said, when he heard the rushing rig storm by, "Ah, the hell. Let him go. I'll get him next time."

Jerry's cohort thumbed a ride from another rig and met Jerry somewhere in the next state.

Once, with the Memorial Day race at Indianapolis coming on, a man called police and said a truck just went up the hill near his home and fire or smoke was pouring out the exhaust stack. The police knew it was an overloaded rig, sped up to Jerry's rig and made him drive back to their headquarters, where Jerry was fined \$1500, which he didn't have and couldn't get wired out of Boston because of Memorial Day. They took the keys away from him, and left him free. When they all went to cover the race day activity, Jerry started the diesel rig without a key and started out of town. When he heard police sirens, he pulled into the driveway where a man was working on his lawn and said he'd give him \$20 if he could park there for a few hours.

"For \$20 you can stay all day," the man said.

The police nabbed him again, of course, and all but one had taken to the gutsy 19-year old trucker. Jerry offered all of them, except one bitter cop, some of his lobster load. He did not move until the holiday was over and the fine money came by wire from Boston

Jerry eventually saw bigger dreams, in real estate, only to have them curbed for a while by service in an infantry unit in Korea I mentioned earlier. He was twice wounded, twice recovered wounded comrades, and was separated from the army after a couple of years.

He started a new career by finding what was hot, what was in plans of big chain stores, managing to find his way to the side of several young secretaries of big shots, and had early knowledge of big business ventures, most of which were malls being planned in the very early stages of mall developments like the huge North Shore Mall north of Boston.

Jerry died too young, being found in the hall of a million dollar home he was going to show a potential buyer on Nantucket Island. He was only 29 years old.

But the young trucker, loving the power in big rigs, owned a couple of Kenworths in his time, and traveled in a fast lane that caught up to him too fast; his heart, as tough as it was, apparently had a weak spot for such a tough kid.

But he showed valor as a comrade, smarts as a businessman, and guts as a driver at the big wheel of an 18 wheeler heading west with the sun, often long before that sun caught him from behind, like his heart caught him from behind. That heart was good enough at one time to get him twice out of a valley in Korea carrying a wounded man and returning to the hot spot to retract radio and weapons; it enabled him to negotiate a killer curve as his rig jack-knifed; and set him up as a memorable friend and comrade so difficult to let drift away even when death called more than half a century ago.