



ALL I NEED'S A FAST MACHINE

I've been a car guy my whole life.

It started with model car kits, when I would buy the latest Ed Roth plastic concoctions, ranging from his tricked-out '57 Bel Air or the more exotic concepts like the “Beatnik Bandit” or the “Mysterion.” I was never very adept at putting them together and usually got glue all over everything. When I messed up I would just go buy another model kit and try again.

As I got older I moved up to slot cars, which were very popular in the 1960s. There were even commercial track locations you could go to and race. I went with my own Batmobile based on the George Barris design from the hit TV show *Batman*, starring Adam West. The one slot car I really wanted but couldn't afford was the classic Aston Martin that James Bond drove, first appearing in 1964's *Goldfinger*, complete with ejector seat and rotating license plates.

What is it they say? The only difference between men and boys is the price of their toys.

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One of mine.

As a kid, I liked not only cars but also reptiles. I even considered becoming a herpetologist. That's from the Greek word *herpein*, meaning "nerd." (Actually, it's from the Greek word meaning "to creep." Same difference, I guess.)

One day Mom drove me to a pet store to pick up another slithering serpent to add to my ever-growing collection. We put it in a terrarium in the trunk of the car. When we arrived

back home, the snake was no longer in the terrarium. I couldn't find him, and Mom vowed never to drive that Ford Starliner again. But a few days later she had errands that couldn't be put off anymore, and with great trepidation she got behind the steering wheel and started off down the street.

At the first stoplight she felt something cold and smooth rub against her ankle. Mom leaped out of the car screaming, "There's a snake in my car!" A police officer happened to be nearby and came running.

But instead of my prodigal snake, what he found in the car was a hose that had come loose from under the dash and brushed against Mom's ankle. Long story short—I got the car. And I literally drove it into the ground, eventually abandoning it in an empty field in Santa Ana.

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Later I drove a banged-up Corvair, the model that made consumer advocate Ralph Nader famous for decrying it as a death trap on wheels. He would've run screaming from my car. Its headlights were so far out of alignment from an accident of mine that it looked cross-eyed.

My first classic car was a 1957 Corvette in Aztec copper, with a cream insert on the side and cream upholstery. It was "art on wheels" but a mechanical nightmare, and I got rid of it with a sigh of relief. Then came a 1957 Bel Air convertible in tropical turquoise, with a gold continental kit. As beautiful as it was, no one wanted to ride with me, for reasons summed up by my wife, Cathe, when she said she felt like she was in a parade whenever we drove around town.

I have a longtime friend and mechanic named Don Oakes who owns quite a collection of classic cars. And on my son Jonathan's wedding day, Don told him to borrow any car he wanted for the wedding party photos.

I recommended he take Don's perfectly restored Woodie, but instead Jonathan chose Don's 1967 Bullitt Mustang, a car that had been in his possession for many years and looked better than ever.

G-o-o-o-d choice. When Jonathan and his lovely bride, Brittni, climbed into that car, they looked absolutely stunning (though I confess, the Bullitt itself was almost as jaw-droppingly gorgeous, even without them).

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hit silver screens in 1968, theatergoers sat slack-jawed through that fourteen-minute thrill ride along the roller-coaster streets of San Francisco. Almost a half century later, it's still considered by many movie historians as the greatest car chase of all time on film.

When the movie came out, I was sixteen and driving around in that dilapidated two-hundred-dollar Corvair. But after seeing the movie, every time I got behind the wheel—even in the Corvair—I was Lieutenant Frank Bullitt, tearing through the streets of San Francisco in pursuit of bad guys.

But truth be known, I wanted the real thing. A pox on the stupid Corvair. I wanted Don's Bullitt car. But he wasn't interested in selling. And one that I tracked down in San Francisco was too expensive. I searched for two years and finally found one in Houston, where by providential coincidence I happened to be traveling on a speaking assignment. It wasn't cheap, but I bit the Bullitt (or vice versa) and got the car.

Cathe was not as excited about my extravagant purchase as I was, which was understandable. We had done little more than tread water financially since getting married. Cathe's father was a successful executive in the oil industry, and from the start he harbored strong apprehensions that I would be able to keep her up in the style to which she'd been accustomed—servants, world travel, beautiful homes. He had a lot of doubts about this young, hippie preacher his daughter had hitched up with. I'm sure some of his doubts stemmed from the fact that I had no decent role model for marriage, since my mother had been married seven times.

Cathe.

She and I had met in church. We were both strong-willed people but otherwise could not have been any more different.

She likes British shows on PBS; I like shoot-'em-ups.

She's neat; I'm messy.

She's sometimes late; I always try to be on time.

She's practical; I'm a dreamer.

Before we were married, we got into some pretty heated arguments, breaking up and vowing to never see each other again. It happened three times in three years—an annual event, like Christmas, only not as festive. After our last big fight, she and I got back together and determined to make it stick.

The jury was still out, though, on whether or not I was good marriage material. My faith in God was about the only thing I had then. Certainly it was what I cared most about and paid the most attention to. My clothes were so vintage they'd been in and out of fashion several times over. I taught a small Bible study at a church in Riverside, California, and had only been a believer myself for three years, so I hardly felt qualified to be a pastor. But I sure appreciated the regular paycheck, even if it was only a hundred dollars a week.

So in an effort to allay the misgivings of her very worried father, after we'd declared our intentions to marry, she wrote him a letter cataloging what she considered my most winning

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attributes. After a day or two of uncomfortable silence, Cathe's mom told her, "Honey, your dad got your letter. It was beautiful. We'll give you our blessing for your wedding."

On February 2, 1974, we exchanged vows in front of five hundred friends, most of them fellow hippies (a few even wearing shoes) who had also given their lives to the Lord. It looked like Woodstock West. Chuck Smith performed the ceremony. Besides being the legendary pastor of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, Chuck was a mentor and father figure. But even pastors who've performed hundreds of weddings can still make nervous, rookie mistakes, and when the time came to announce that the deal was done, he cried out: "I now pronounce Greg and Laurie man and wife!" Even my new father-in-law laughed. I got such a kick out of it, too, that I somehow found myself tangled up in Cathe's veil and almost yanked it off.

Four decades, two children, and five grandchildren later, our union remains an ongoing adventure, charted only by our enduring mutual love and respect.

But I'll be the first to acknowledge that sometimes my whims have given Cathe serious pause. The Ford Bullitt was only one of many.

It does seem now, though, that I was meant to have it.

Listen, I'm not trying to make buying a car a spiritual thing because it isn't. But this was the first piece of a puzzle that has resulted in this book and a documentary film about the iconic actor Steve McQueen, and what I believe was the most important moment of his life.

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her husband at the door with a kiss and a martini, and a tough guy squinted at the world through the smoke from an unfiltered cigarette, plugged into the corner of his mouth.

Now don't jump down my throat because I'm not saying we ought to turn back the clock to those days. Despite certain losses of morality and common sense in our culture, we've picked up positive yardage over the years in a number of obvious areas. But a half century ago nobody embodied the notion of what a real man was, or made a bigger impression on adolescent males, than McQueen. I was a full-fledged member of that club. He was a mainstay of my childhood and teen years.

I first took notice of him in the late 1950s, when he was one of television's rising stars on the CBS show *Wanted: Dead or Alive*. Like millions of others, I stayed up late on Saturday nights, sandwiched between my grandparents on the couch, watching McQueen, as bounty hunter Josh Randall, take on some really bad Wild West hombres.

This series distinguished itself from the usual cowboy fare by making McQueen's character the heavy. Oh, he had his virtues and lived by a code as upright and sterling as Marshall Dillon's, but unlike the savior of Dodge, ol' Josh was no boy scout. He didn't wear a badge and operated by a different set of rules, so lawmen loathed him almost as much as the criminals Randall hunted down for money. Of course at five or six years old, I didn't realize the fine line his character was walking. I just instinctively rooted for the guy.

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Within a few years McQueen became even bigger on the screen and in my life as he successfully transitioned to big-league movies, starting with *Never So Few* (1959). A year later came *The Magnificent Seven*, in which his portrayal of one of

the gunslingers hired to protect a besieged Mexican village stamped McQueen as a rising Hollywood star. In 1963, *The Great Escape* made him a one-star constellation.

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As the character Virgil Hilts, McQueen crafted one of film’s greatest screen characters, transcending the prototype of the strong and silent martyr. On the surface he cared only about himself. But McQueen’s performance was infused with an unspoken compassion that spoke louder than words.

The character and icon he created in that role has been infinitely analyzed and deconstructed but, as with many things McQueen, it really boiled down to that old expression, “What you see is what you get.” The character, the stare, the baseball and mitt, the motorcycle and the jump over the barbed-wire fence still resonate with audiences today, even ones that have seen *The Great Escape* as many times as I have.

Five years later came the defining McQueen movie, *Bullitt*. One of the big sayings in the ’60s was “Never trust anyone over the age of thirty.” There was one exception to that rule, however—Steve McQueen, who himself was inching toward forty. We dug and trusted him because, as the man himself once said, “I’m half farmer and half street person. I can look at both because I grew up on a farm and on the streets.”

The “Age of Aquarius” was a trippy time in history, for sure, with bell-bottomed longhairs flaunting their free love, flowers, protest signs, and affection for all things psychedelic. It was also a time of massive political volatility and upheaval, including the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy; the tear-gassed spectacle of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago; and the rise of groups like the Black Panthers, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Weathermen. Overhanging it all was the gruesome specter and spectacle of the Vietnam War, which sent thousands of college students into the streets to protest against their own government.

Like so many other young people at that time, my faith in our leaders and institutions was shaken. Nobody seemed to be in control of himself or events. So I preferred what I saw on a movie screen to what was broadcast on the TV news, especially when Steve McQueen, the great antihero of the era, was up there doing things his way, defying staid and rigid authority, following the dictates of his own sense of justice, and being unbelievably hip about it.

Even after God became the center of my life in 1970, Steve McQueen always rang my bell. Cathe knew that and, God bless her, she put up with it. But now—decades later—my new obsession with one of my favorite actors, fueled to the max by the discovery that he had also accepted Christ as his Savior, would really put her tolerance and understanding to the test. I wanted to find out how Steve McQueen, of all people, had come to embrace the Lord. And I was itching to take a cross-country trip in the Bullitt car to ferret it all out.

But doing so would put my wife and others who depended on me in a tough spot. I have an outreach operation that includes three churches, multiple satellite campuses, traveling crusades, television, radio, and podcasts, and more than fifty different ministries. If I was to go gallivanting around the country, the job of running everything would fall to our great staff. They're up to it, for sure, but my absence on a personal quest that strikes even me as quixotic, whimsical, and slightly weird would be a burden on them. I'd have understood, when I finally worked up the nerve to tell Cathe what I had in mind, if she had rolled her eyes and gently (or maybe not so gently) told me to get my head out of the clouds. But she just smiled and nodded, her face shining with love and understanding, and I loved her more than ever for it.

As men grow older, nature relentlessly siphons off our testosterone little by little. It's important for us to think we can do the same things we did in our teens and early twenties, despite realizing the foolishness of the notion. Laughable, we know, but common. We all grow older, softer around the middle, and, willing or not, we get in touch with our feelings. All the ingredients for a syndrome. But all it takes to reverse the process, at least in our heads, is to get together with other men to watch a football game or boxing match, look under the hood of a car, or . . . watch a Steve McQueen movie.

But it was late October when this wild hair got under my middle-aged skin. I didn't have time to analyze how or why it had me in its grip. I just knew it was time for this old dog to hit the road and start barking at the moon.

Glad to have you riding shotgun.