



Pop Cliff – Is He Dead Pop?

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Author's Note: This is #5 in the Growing Up With Pop Cliff Series

“Is he dead Pop?” I asked, tears in my eyes.

There was a wetness to Pop’s eyes too, as he gently laid him on the back seat. He didn’t look hurt. There wasn’t any blood or stuff like that. But he wasn’t moving either.

Pop got the bottle of Mom-mom’s heart pills out of the glove compartment and forced one in the dog’s mouth.

He was a yapper. He was also ferocious – ready to tear into anything around him that moved. Cars, people, even trains, it didn’t matter. If it moved he fiercely proclaimed he was going to eat it up.

Riding in the car with his front feet on the dash, and his hind ones on the seat, he surveyed “his” world as it whizzed past. In his eyes he was the biggest and baddest dog on the block.

Except there must have been something wrong with his eyes, because he was just a little dog – almost everything he barked at was bigger than him. Plus, when he wasn’t in the car, his ferociousness was scaled to match his proximity to the safety of Pop’s legs.

He said he was Mom-mom’s dog, but I wasn’t sure about that, because the only time he got to be with Mom-mom was at night when we got home. The rest of the time he stayed with Pop.

Everywhere Pop went – the dog went, except on the dozer. He didn’t like the dozers, and wouldn’t go anywhere near one. He barked like hell at them, but always from a safe distance, or the safety of the car.

I love dogs. I’ve had a dog, or dogs, in my life every since I can remember. But this dog was different. He seemed to only tolerate me because Pop liked me. He acted like I was not worthy to associate with. Anyway, we both understood we had to get along to co-exist in Pop’s world. I think that little dog looked up to him the same way I did.

He never ate dry dog food, (which makes for less stinky after-products), only table scraps and wet canned dog food, – and sardines. Pop loved sardines and crackers. That was his lunch almost every day. The dog liked sardines too, and Pop always shared. He would leave one little sardine in the can, along with the juices, and then give it to the dog. (funny, but for the life of me I can’t remember that dog’s name)

Which meant by the time we were ready to head home, that dog was primed and ready.

We were driving the long flat stretch of road through the marshland, from Deal Island back to Salisbury, with the mid-afternoon sun shining through the car windows. I had been half-doing with my head leaned against the door window, cozy in the warmth of the car and the rhythm of the tires on the road, when it hit me.

“Eeeww, he did it again Pop!” I complained. Seems like we always had a long drive to get to Pop’s jobs, and that was okay with me, if only he didn’t have to be with us too. Riding with his feet on the dash, he didn’t even look around. Mr. Innocence.

Everyone says it’s a “male thing” – finding humor in flatulence, but only when we do it. It’s nasty when someone else does it. And with that dog’s sardine diet, it was extra nasty. Pop chuckled, he thought it was funny. Not the fart, but my reaction to it. I had to roll down the window just to get a breath. Destroyed the whole cozy-car thing.

I spent the rest of the ride home thinking up ways to get revenge, the mildest of which was a cork. Some of the others were absolutely Machiavellian. Things like a dog’s gas mask with a tube connected to the offending orifice, or a spring-loaded thumbtack butt-smacker hooked up to a scent sensor. That dog was lucky I wasn’t as mechanically talented as I was mentally creative.

Another amazing thing was that he never knocked over Pop’s Redman’s spittoon. After he spit, Pop would just set that cup of nasty stuff back down on the seat, against the seat back of course, but nothing else to protect it. Cup holders in cars were still in the future.

When he wasn’t riding with his feet up on the dash, he was curled up on the seat next to Pop, and no matter how much that dog turned and moved, he seemed to instinctively know not to touch that cup.

Me, I knocked it over several times. To my chagrin, because Pop always made me clean it up, and then get out and look for another one on the roadside. Good thing it was his work car. I don’t think anybody but me or the dog would have sat on that front seat.

Pop did a lot of work on Deal Island, which meant I got real familiar with that long empty Deal Island Road, (the Deal Island Blackbirds will be another story), especially the little general store we usually stopped at for a Dr. Pepper and Lance crackers.

It was just after the marshes, (coming home, and of course just before if going to work), and there wasn’t anything else in sight. The only reason it was there was because it was at the intersection of the road that went to Oriole, one of the few hamlets that dotted the marshes between the island, and Rt. 13.

If Norman Rockwell’s subjects had been a little more Redneck, this little store might have been one of his paintings. There was a single gas pump, (dirt lot, no paving), and the front porch was strung with everything from wire crab traps to Smithsfield hams, and it seemed to be sagging

from the years of bearing these burdens. The store's front door was a wooden screen door that had definitely seen better days, and probably let in as many flies as it kept out.

Speaking of flies, those Deal Island Greenhead marsh flies were so big their bite could draw blood. I know!

The lady behind the counter liked me too. Even if I forgot to bring in my empty bottle, she wouldn't charge me the nickel deposit. She knew I would bring in an extra the next time. Pop usually just bought some Redman's, he didn't like soda, and always had an insulated water jug in the car for a drink.

This was also where he usually let the dog out so it could remind everyone he was the master of this domain, and let them know he was there to check up on his subjects – and to do his business of course.

And that's where it happened.

Pop was getting in the car, and had just called the dog to get in, (wish I could remember his name), when a pick-up truck turned into the lot to pull up to the gas pump. The timing was such that the dog came racing around from the side of the store and across the front towards Pop's car door – at the same instant the pick-up was pulling up beside the pump.

The pick-up didn't speed into the lot, or do anything wrong – just bad timing. I was just coming out of the store when I heard the tires slide, a thump, a yelp, then nothing.

I ran off the store porch and Pop ran from the car – we both got there about the same time. The dog, (damn! he deserves to be named), was laying in the dirt by the front tire. Not moving, apparently not breathing, and his tongue hanging out between the teeth of clenched jaws.

The pick-up driver was real sorry, he hadn't even seen the dog, just heard the thump and yelp. The lady from the store came out with a box and a towel – she had seen it from the front window, and she thought the dog was dead too.

Pop was kneeling down gently feeling all over the dog for broken bones and a heartbeat. He found one! Heartbeat that is, not a broken bone.

It was faint, and the dog was unconscious, comatose sounds more appropriate, even if it does mean the same thing. This didn't mean he was going to be ok, just that he wasn't dead yet. Pop couldn't tell how bad he was hurt because there were no visual indications. It just looked like he was sleeping – except for that tongue hanging out like it was.

He wrapped him up in the towel and gently laid him in the box and put it on the back seat. The closest vet was almost an hour away, on the other side of Salisbury. He didn't know what else to do. The dog still wasn't moving, or showing any signs of breathing.

That's when he remembered he had one of Mom-mom's heart pill prescriptions in the glove compartment. Could it help? Well, given the circumstances it didn't seem like it could hurt, so he got one of the pills and forced it in between the clenched teeth. There wasn't anything else we could do but head home. Both of us dreading having to tell Mom-mom.

It was a long quiet ride. Neither Pop, nor I knew what to say, so we just drove on, each of us thinking our own thoughts. I don't know what Pop was thinking, but I was thinking of a hundred ways I would try to be nicer to him if he would just wake up. He wouldn't have to even walk. I would carry him where ever he needed to go until he was feeling better. I didn't promise to like his farts if he got better, but I did promise, to myself, that I wouldn't complain about them so much. That may sound like a funny or odd thought, but it seemed serious enough at the time. At least to me.

I kept looking in the box, checking on him on the way home, but there was no change. The tongue was still hanging out, I couldn't see any sign of movement, and he didn't look like he was breathing. I stopped checking about half way home.

When we got home, Pop didn't pull up to the front door like he usually does, but drove back to the shop instead. I guess he was thinking it was closer to where we would bury him, or maybe that the walk to the house would prolong the telling of the bad news to Mom-mom. I don't know. Pop just had a determined look on his face when he got out and opened the back car door, and I just walked around behind him, waiting.

He set the box on the trunk and moved the towel to look at the dog. He stilled looked unconscious and wasn't moving, but... his tongue wasn't hanging out anymore! And if you looked real close, it looked like maybe he was breathing. Maybe. Well, we weren't going to have to bury him yet, maybe.

I followed Pop as he carried the box to the house and went inside. At first Mom-mom didn't know anything was wrong – Pop was always bring stuff home in boxes – until she saw that neither one of us was talking or looked very happy. Pop told her what happened.

She sat down on the sofa and took him out of the box and put him in her lap. Still wrapped in the towel.

It wasn't like the movies. He didn't open his eyes and lick her hand to say he was ok, but you could see that he was breathing now.

She put her hand on his chest and said she could feel him breathing, and his heartbeat. We just sat there awhile, telling her the details of what happened, and offering hope that he would be ok, now that he was breathing.

Pop figured that since he couldn't feel any broken bones, and he was still alive, it was more likely that the truck and dog had run into each other, rather than the truck running over the dog. That seemed to explain why there was only one yelp, and an unconscious dog.

When we went to bed he was still the same way, but Mom-mom woke me up in the middle of the night – holding the box. She wanted to show me that his eyes were open.

When I got up the next morning, Mom-mom and Pop had him on a pad of towels on the kitchen table. Mom-mom giving him spoonfuls of warm milk, and he was lapping up most of them. It took a few days before he was moving around like normal, but it did seem like he was going to be ok after all.

We never knew if that heart pill helped or not, but Mom-mom fussed at Pop for giving it to him. She said giving a human heart pill to a dog that little could have killed him.

Geez! A man just can't win. No matter what he does.

Ps. Even though I no longer complained, I still didn't like it when he stunk up the car.

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