

Bill Stern

William Stern and his wife Noreen were friends of my folks. They were witty, urbane, and attractive. I never understood why they chose my parents as close personal friends. As far as I could see, my mom and dad were boring, boring, and boring. But maybe I was too close to the family dynamic to appreciate what they had to offer. At any rate, we spent a lot of weekends and holidays hanging out with the Stern family. Which was fine by me. Mom and dad were more fun and interesting when in their company. Even spontaneous on occasion. One morning, after a late night of imbibing, then cooking breakfast over an open fire at a local park, at Bill's behest, he suggested we all take off that morning and go on a road trip down to Hannibal Missouri, birthplace of my favorite author, Mark Twain, AKA Samuel Clemens. I believe that is the reason that Bill chose that destination. He was always very kind to me. And we did. Something that my folks, Don and Harriot, would have never thought of, much less carried out themselves. It was great fun, I even got stuck on the side of a bluff overlooking the Mississippi river.

Then, there were their kids. They were a little older than me, but they inexplicably took me under their respective wings. The older one, Bill junior, seemed to always have a rich supply of fireworks which he generously shared with me. I learned

how to ignite bottle rockets, Black Cats, and my personal favorite M-80s. They were like a ¼ stick of dynamite and had a water proof fuse, perfect for under water demolition. The younger one (but still older than me), beautiful Linda, took me to my first live music venue, The Roof Gardens in Lake Okoboji, when I was twelve (I have no idea how they got me in) with her crazy boyfriend who drove one hundred and twenty MPH on the way to the “out in the sticks” dance hall. Suffice it to say, I was always glad when my folks said we were spending the weekend with the Sterns.

As I got older, we moved in one direction and they moved in another. Bill ended up owning a huge Ford dealership in Des Moines and my dad was a mid-level paper pusher at a big defense contractor in Cedar Rapids. So, we fanned out in the 1960’s mid-west. Our families still got together on occasion, and even though, as a surly teen, I had come to detest spending time with my folks, I always tried to make it to those get-togethers. The Sterns still made my parents more interesting and Linda had evolved from beautiful to gorgeous and she was still willing to drag me along on outings with her breathtaking girlfriends. But eventually I got my own car, at a bargain price, used from Bill’s dealership. Shortly after that, I lost touch with their family.

So, I was stunned to see a file photo of Bill on the six o'clock news, while watching the tube in my college dorm. He was somewhat of a regional celebrity, due to starring in his own raucous TV car commercials. His abduction was the lead story on the local CBS affiliate.

According to the newscast, he had been abducted from his driveway while shoveling snow on the day before Thanksgiving. The last time his wife had seen him was about noon, when he was backing his car down the partially shoveled driveway with two men, she had never seen before, accompanying him. Initially she was not concerned because he sometimes had customers come to the house for an after-hours sale or pick up of a repaired vehicle. It was that personal touch that had helped make him the largest Ford dealer in the tri-state area. But three hours later when he had not called or come home, she started to contact all of their friends and business associates. His manager reported that Bill had not been in all day and that there was nothing on his schedule indicating that he had any appointments. At that point Noreen called the police and filed a missing person's report. Meanwhile, Bill was getting to know his new companions and getting farther and farther away from his home and family.

When the two scruffy looking post-adolescents in ill-fitting clothes and bad completions started walking up his driveway, Bill felt no cause for alarm. He figured that they were probably going to offer to finish shoveling the driveway for a few bucks and he thought that might be a splendid idea. But when they got close, the taller of the two produced a snub-nosed revolver and said “We are taking you and your car for a ride. Or we can just shoot you here and take your car.” They looked like a couple of punks but the gun gave them credibility. Plus, Bill did not want them anywhere near his wife and home. So, Bill calmly said “Let’s go for a ride then.” They walked up the drive and Bill opened the garage door. The tall, gun wielding one ordered Bill to get in the driver’s seat while he took the seat in the back right. The shorter kidnapper took the “shotgun” position. As Bill backed his brand spanking new 1968 Ford LTD, boasting all of the optional goodies, including the 390 cubic inch engine with a three speed Cruise-O-Matic transmission, out of the driveway, he hoped that his wife Norine had been watching and had detected something suspicious. “Nice wheels” commented the gun wielder.

He then gave Bill explicit directions while the guy in the front remained mute, staring dully straight ahead. Bill could see the talker out of the corner of his eye and realized that he was keeping the gun out of sight. Thank goodness for small favors.

“Where would you gentlemen like to go”, said Bill in a friendly tone? “Shut up and just follow my directions” was the terse reply. Within fifteen minutes they were on I-80 heading west. In another fifteen, Bill was ordered to take I-35 south heading toward Kansas City.

The car was silent for about and a hour until the “alpha” abductor in back, ordered Bill to pull into a truck stop so he could “drain the lizard”. He ordered his lackey to go in and piss first, then come right back, even though the guy swore he didn’t have to pee. While he was gone, the guy in charge ordered Bill to empty his pockets into his non-gun hand. The contents included a wallet with \$236 cash, five credit cards, pictures of his family, and some change. When his partner returned, Mr. Alpha had him take the back-seat position and the gun with orders to shoot Bill in the head if he made the slightest move or said a word. He filled up the gas tank and headed into the store. Bill considered testing the #2 guy’s resolve but decided against it. After “draining the lizard”, the head honcho returned with a bag full of snacks and sodas and a half gallon carton of milk which he poured out on the pavement. He and his partner then returned to their original seating arrangement and he placed the empty carton on the front seat next to Bill. “If you gotta piss, you piss in the carton”. Bill nodded his understanding. Bill was then ordered

to get back on the interstate in the direction they had already been heading. He did so.

The intake of snacks and the warmth of the luxury automobile, apparently made the front seat guy chatty, and he began wondering out loud if they were really going to make it “home” for Thanksgiving. He also addressed the gunman as Curt. Curt was not thrilled by that development, and told him to “shut the fuck up Melvin”. But after the initial hour of silence, Melvin wasn’t easily deterred and rambled on about how much he missed “good old Texas” and how great it was going to be to see his sweet old gram after all of this time. Bill knew human nature pretty well from his decades of selling cars to the public. So, he kept his mouth shut and let them do the talking. And talk they did. Once the spigot was turned on it soon became a gusher.

Turned out that the boys, who barely had enough whiskers to require shaving, had walked away from a juvenile detention facility that morning, then broke into a house where they found the gun and civilian clothes but no car. They had however, found an old Honda motorcycle in the garage and rode that into Des Moines until they were freezing their collective asses off and decided to commandeer a car. The offences that had landed them in juvey were all B & Es and retail theft. But after two years in lock-up with some “real”

bad boys they had decided to graduate to armed robbery and kidnapping. Bill learned that the guys were headed to Corpus Christi to visit their boyhood homes where they had been raised by their mom and grandmother respectively. At that point Bill commented that he had once been there for a sales conference and how beautiful it was. This time there was no rebuke from Curt. That was just the opening Bill needed to do his thing. Persuading people was his super power.

Bill knew that the key to closing a deal was to draw the customer out, getting them to reveal personal details that he could then “relate” to. But he also realized that this was a special circumstance that could end in either life or death for himself. So, he treaded lightly like a hunter stalking its quarry in the woods, knowing that one wrong move could ruin everything. When Curt mentioned that his sister had just had a baby boy and he was looking forward to seeing it for the first time, Bill reminisced about what an important role his brother Bob had played in his son’s life while growing up (Bill didn’t actually have a brother). When Curt seemed to mull this over, Bill went into great detail about his brother Bob buying Bill Jr his first football as Bill knew how big football was in Texas, before the boy could even walk and playing catch with him at a tender age. At this point Curt appeared to be lapping it up like a hog at the trough. Bill then filled in more details about camping trips and even a tale about Bill Jr

calling Bob to bail him out on a minor offence when he was a teenager. Not to be left out of the conversation, Mel chipped in. “Yeah Curt, you used to play football. You could teach the little guy some skills. All his old man does is sit on the coach, drink beer, and yell at your sister.”

Bill knew that the hook was set. Now the trick was to reel in the line gently. Many a fish had gotten loose because of an overeager angler. “Does your family usually have a big get-together for Thanksgiving?” “Yeah” Curt replied. “We’ve got a lot of cousins and Mel and his gram always come too. They’re our next-door neighbors”. “Yeah”, Mel chimed in. “It’s a damn good feed and we’ve got leftovers to eat for days after. My gram makes the best pie. Pumpkin *and* peach.” “That sounds delicious” replied Bill, starting to gain a sense of confidence that he might actually survive the experience and a realization that these two had been brought up in a hard scrabble existence by single women with little outside support other than each other.

Even though there was beginning to be a sense of chumminess in the car, Curt still followed the rotation protocol when they stopped for gas and pee breaks. Bill still had to use the milk carton to urinate in, then dump it outside of his door, on the ground, after. Curt did ask him what he wanted when they stopped for carry-out that night. Bill

ordered a large coffee and a cheeseburger, as he figured he would be driving through the night. Except for a two-hour nap, sitting up, in a rest stop, he was right.

It's a little less than twelve hundred miles from Des Moines to Corpus Christie. Averaging about sixty-five, at Curt's direction, and with the two-hour nap, Bill calculated that they should arrive at around 8 am on Thanksgiving morning. He was close. They got to Curt's mom's house at 9:15 am. Curt ordered Bill to park a half block down the street in order to watch the house for a while to make sure there were no cops looking for them. He took the surveillance time to fill Bill in on how things would go. "I was never planning on bringing you this far Bill. I figured that if you gave me a hard time, I would shoot you and leave you in a ditch. If you cooperated, I was going to take you to a remote spot and tie you up. But you're a pretty slick operator and you somehow got us to talk and now you know all about us and we know some shit about you. I would feel really bad about shooting you now. That complicates things. So, here is what we're going to do. In a few minutes we are going to go in my mom's house. We are going to spend the day having a nice Thanksgiving dinner with our families. We're going to tell them that you are a traveling salesman that picked us up hitching and had nowhere to go for Thanksgiving, so we brought you along. But I am going to have my gun in my pocket at all times, and if you try anything

stupid, I will shoot you in the head whether I feel bad about it or not. We are going to be in the same room all day. And you are going to continue to be the friendly guy you have been so far. Got it?"

"Yes, Curt, I understand. I will be on my best behavior and treat all of your family with the greatest respect."

"Good. You don't have to be nice to my asshole brother-in-law though."

"I'll even be nice to him. Just to maintain my cover."

Curt chuckled at that and said "Sounds like a plan".

Curt pulled the keys from the ignition and pocketed them. Then they got out of the car and walked up to the house. Curt walked in without knocking, keeping Bill right beside him. His mom and Mel's grandma where already busily preparing the feast. When his mom spied Curt, she stopped what she was doing and rushed to him, giving him a long hard hug as tears gushed from her eyes. "I never thought I would see *you* today." Meanwhile the same scene played out between Mel's gram and him.

“Yeah mom, they let us out for good behavior two days ago and we’ve been hitching here ever since. This nice man Bill picked us up and brought us here. I told him he could stay for dinner.”

“Of course he can.” Turning to Bill. “Thank you so much for bringing our boys to us on Thanksgiving.”

“It has been my pleasure mam. He and Melvin are nice young men. And they’ve told me what great cooks you two are. Thank you for sharing your holiday with me.”

And so, the day began. Bill sat at the kitchen table, in clear sight of Curt. Curt’s mom offered him a beer which he readily accepted. When he had to pee, Curt walked him to the restroom and warned him not to try anything. Bill agreed that he wouldn’t and took care of his business. But while he was in there, he did open the window and found that it was a short drop to the ground. The bad news was that the car was in plain site from the home’s kitchen and dining area where the festivities were gearing up. Bill knew that Curt would eventually come to the realization that he “knew too much” and would have to be eliminated. Timing would be the key.

Later, as the other family and friends began arriving, Bill was introduced and the cover story was told again and again. Bill had a few more beers and observed the family. Curt's sister really did adore her loser brother and broke into tears several times over the next few hours. And her husband really was an obnoxious asshole. Their kid was kind of homely but Curt was really dotting on him, even promising to buy him his first football.

Finally, dinner was served and the boys had not exaggerated about their mom and grandma's culinary skills. Bill had to use great restraint not to eat too much. His after-dinner plans did not include a nap. From the dining room table, they moved into the living room to watch the Dallas Cowboys play the Detroit Lions. Halfway through the second quarter Curt nodded off. It was dusk but not completely dark. But Bill figured he needed to make his move before Curt woke back up. As he made his way to the bathroom, he stopped at the kitchen phone and memorized the number. He went into the bathroom and took a quick pee. He then opened the window and lowered himself to the ground. He walked briskly around the far side of the house where he was least likely to be observed by anyone inside. When he got to his car, he reached under the left front wheel-well and retrieved his magnetic hidden key holder. He quickly got in, fired up his

LTD, and headed back to the interstate. After he got back on I-37 he headed north to get on I-35, he stopped at the first truck stop and called Curt's mom's number. When she answered he apologized for leaving without saying goodbye and thanked her for her generous hospitality. Then he asked to speak to Curt. When Curt came on the line, he was angry and threatening. Bill said "Now it is time for you to shut up and listen to me Curt. I could and should have called the cops on you already. You kidnapped me, threatened to kill me and I'm sure that my wife and kids are scared as hell wondering what has happened to me. But I am a big believer in second chances. You and Mel keep your noses clean. Throw that damn gun in the river and get legal jobs. The cops in Iowa aren't going to care about you as long as you never set foot in their state again. Throw the credit cards in the river too. I'm reporting them missing as soon as I hang up. This is your chance mister. Do you want to spend Christmas and future holidays with your family or in some shithole jail? Think about this very carefully Curt. I am going to drive back home to my family now and make up some story for the cops, that doesn't include you and Mel. If I never hear from or about you two again, I will never mention your names or where your mom lives to anyone. Do you hear what I am saying Curt?"

There was a long pause before Curt replied. When he did his tone was conciliatory. "Yes Bill, I understand. Thank you for

not turning us in. I will throw the gun and cards away tomorrow and we will start looking for jobs on Monday. I am sorry that I pulled a gun on you and took you away from your family. You will never see or hear from us again.”

“Good, and good luck.”

Bill hung up and called Noreen. He told her that he would be home tomorrow night and that she should call the cops and tell them that he had been on a bender and was OK. He promised to tell her the whole story when he got home and told her to wire him three hundred bucks to the San Antonio Western Union.

As he got back on the road, he started to think about what he had just done. Curt and Mel were punks and assholes. But their mom and grandma were sweet well-meaning ladies. Maybe the boys would turn their lives around and maybe they wouldn't. But the women that had raised them under trying circumstances would at least be happy for a while. He also realized that his “getting to know each other” strategy had ended up working in both directions.