

Typehouse

Literary Magazine



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LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Andrew Miller retired from a career that included university teaching and research in endangered species and aquatic habitat restoration. Now he has time to pursue his long-held interest in creative writing. Recent work has appeared in: Literally Stories, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, The Fair Observer, Gravel: A Literary Journal, Fiction on the Web, and Microfiction Monday Magazine.

The Long Way to Town

Andrew Miller



The first picture of Bill with his new car

I was in the rider's seat next to Bill Petry in his 1917 Ford Model T that he bought when he was fifteen, nearly sixty years ago. He paid the original owner one hundred dollars for the car, money earned delivering papers.

We were bouncing toward Brooklin, a village on the Maine coast south of Bangor. The wind was in our faces, our jackets zipped tight against the October chill. We had to shout to hear ourselves over the shrill buzz of the motor, the clank and clatter of the chassis as we bumped in and out of potholes. The air was rich with aromas: at the start of our journey, the musty, dark gray upholstery, then as the engine warmed, hot oil on metal. When we swooped near the Atlantic Ocean, we took in the smell of decayed fish, dried mud, and sunbaked rockweed, heavy and a little sweet.

I've known Bill for almost twenty years and we ride the back roads often. Lunch is always in our plans, although we don't always have a specific route or destination. Today it will be the Brooklin General Store for chicken salad sandwiches, potato chips, sodas, a homemade molasses or oatmeal

cookie. This will be Bill's treat, payback for helping him work on this old car. On another day it might be the Blue Hill Wine Shop for a bottle of Merlot, a slice of Saint-André or cave-aged Gruyère, a loaf of bread from the wood-fired oven at Tinder Hearth Bakery. Thirty miles an hour is just right. Fast enough to get to there in time for lunch; slow enough to savor the ride.



Bill in 1960

We are both in our early seventies. Odd relationship, some might say. He's is gay, I'm straight, and we've always been that way. We both love the coast of Maine, red wine, antiques, and old cars. We both love to ride in the T. Although I'm not sure of our route, of one thing I'm certain: it'll be the long way. On any of the myriad twisting side roads that lead up the coast through beech, maple, and oak forests, dressed up in reds, browns, and yellows since the weather turned crisp. We'll grind past boulder-jammed blueberry barrens, now crimson, lurch through stands of spruce, the reds straight and tall, the whites shedding branches and tops, soon to die. We'll lumber by Allen Cove, the site of E. B. White's saltwater farm, muse over *Charlotte's Web*, think of Charlotte the Spider, Wilbur the Pig, Fern Arable, and the Zuckerman's barn. White wrote essays for *The New Yorker* as well as three best-selling children's books. Several of his essays were about Model Ts, and when he was in his twenties, he and a friend drove one to California. Back in the early 1980s, White spotted the Model T near Blue Hill and flagged it to a stop. He asked Bill if he wanted some Model T parts that he had discovered in his barn. Bill took the parts, then later regretted that he never offered the famous essayist a ride.

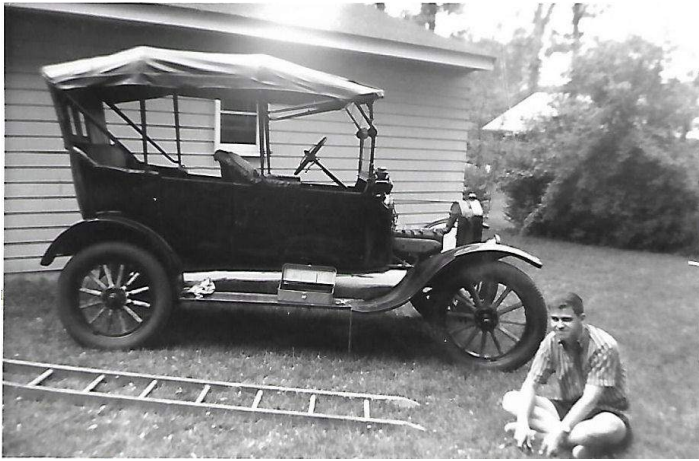
"Why didn't you?" I asked.

He became wistful. "Sometimes I rushed through life a little too fast."

Everyone that we pass, waves. The first time that we were out together, I asked, "How do you know so many people?"

“When I’m in the T,” he said, “everyone waves whether they know me or not.”

A Model T, the antithesis of the modern car, is easily recognizable. Boxlike with spindly appendages and protruding eyes, it’s stately and tall, never slouches, stands erect. And always black. As Henry Ford wrote in *My Life and Work*, “Any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants so long as it is black.” Not shiny and sparkling, but thick and dull, like clam flats at dusk, the underside of rocks at low tide. These vehicles eschew casual attire, wear only top hat and tails, whether they are marching into town for business, romping over back roads to visit friends, escorting lovers through a meadow, or plodding into a pasture for chores.



Bill in 1962

The car is noisy, breezy, bumpy, and slow, laden with eccentricities. Three foot pedals are on the floor: one to stop, one for reverse, one to shift from low to high gear. And, as E. B. White noted, pressing any one retards forward motion. The throttle is on the steering wheel and the spark and choke must be adjusted by hand. All very interesting and quaint, but it's Bill and his relationship with the Model T that intrigues me. He feels about this car as original owners felt about theirs: it's not a curiosity or a valuable gem to soup up and polish for others to admire. It's for chores, going to town, touring with friends. When Bill is out and about he never feels the need to show off, wear goggles, a newsboy hat, white duster. Everyday clothes do fine.

Bill has been interested in antiques for most of his seventy-four years, even before he acquired the Model T. On the table by his bed is a Victorian antique lamp that he purchased when he was twelve years old. His 160-year-old home is filled with handsome old furniture, lamps, and paintings collected over a lifetime. He has modern appliances in the kitchen, but they stand

alongside a functional wood-fire stove he often uses to cook and to heat the first floor. Bill does nothing to upset the original ambience of his home. The floors still slope and old cracks in the plaster remain.



Bill in 1979

Bill does most of the work on the car himself. You don't take a hundred-year-old vehicle just anywhere for repairs. Early in the week he called and asked if I had ever mounted a tire on a rim by hand. Ordinarily this is a one-person job, but his right arm had bothered him all summer and he wanted some help.

"Sure," I said. "Did that on my bike years ago."

"Come over at 9:30 tomorrow morning. We'll work on the tire, then ride to Brooklin for lunch."

When I arrived, Bill led me around to the backyard. The morning had started chilly, but now that the sun was above the spruce trees, the air had started to warm. Bill is a few inches shorter than average, with a dome-like forehead and round face that's quick to smile. Always well-dressed, today he wore a spiffy blue shirt, clean khakis, and a light gray jacket. If you saw him in the market, or walking about town, you would never guess he spends a lot of time with grease under his fingernails, tinkering with a hundred-year-old car.

I set tire and inner tube on a flimsy wooden table and forced the rim partway on. Bill slipped a couple of crowbars between rim and rubber on opposite sides of the wheel. My job was to drive the crowbars around with a two-pound sledge.

I picked up the sledge and started to whack a crowbar. As it bumped along, the tire shoulder slid under the rim. "Keep going," said Bill, "You'll do it." His brown eyes sparkled in the early morning light. He seemed to enjoy

watching me struggle with the sledge.

After the tire was on and inflated, Bill noticed that the stem on the replacement inner tube barely protruded out of the hole in the Model T rim. Our only recourse was to remove both the tire and the inner tube and enlarge the hole in the metal rim. After considerable work with an electric drill, the hole was large enough to accommodate the larger valve stem. I forced the tire over the rim a second time, Bill inflated the inner tube and mounted the wheel on the Model T. We stowed the tools in the shed and jumped in the car, our sights set on the Brooklin General Store.



Bill on the Fourth of July, 1995

We parked in front of Friend Memorial Public Library, opposite the general store. We crossed the street and went inside to pick out sandwiches and drinks. Bill paid for our food, rummaging through his pockets for the exact change. We sat at a table next to the window.

I asked, “Where did you get your love of antiques and the past—from your parents?”

He opened his sandwich, sprinkled on salt and pepper, and rearranged the lettuce. “My father had some interest in antiques, but my mother didn’t. The truth is, my parents didn’t have much to do with it. I was meant to be living in Victorian times. That’s the way it is, and I never thought much about it.” He fixed his eyes on a platter of homemade cookies on the counter. He was probably thinking that I should buy the cookies since he had paid for lunch. He smiled. “Hard to explain, I guess.” He gazed through the window at the T, took a bite of sandwich.

Bill is not an introspective person. He doesn’t dwell much about why

he loves the Model T and all things old. It's as though the answer is so obvious, he doesn't feel the need to discuss it. The more I probed, the more he evaded. Perhaps I should ask those who wave at Bill in the Model T, whether they know him or not. Maybe they would have the answer.



Bill in 2009

I was about to go for the cookies when we noticed a stooped, white-haired man in a tweed sports coat exit the library, ease down the front steps, cane in one hand, a couple of books in the other. When he glimpsed the T, he hobbled straight for it. As he circled the car, he poked the tires with his cane, sank to one knee to check underneath, leaned inside to inspect the dashboard and foot pedals.

“Old memories?” I asked, motioning toward the man.

He nodded, set the sandwich on his plate. “That happens a lot.”

His usual smile gave way to a slight frown. “Once I gave an old fellow like that a ride.” Bill crumpled his napkin into a ball and dropped it on his plate. “Before we got in, he said, ‘I just want to ride, not talk...’”

“And...?” I asked, curious, but not wanting to interrupt.

“We went to Blue Hill and back—it took more than an hour—cruising up and down the old roads. Never said a word.”

The long way. Bill knew just what he wanted.

Bill's rider, as well as the man we saw leave the library, probably harbor rich memories of Model Ts. Perhaps they rode in them as youngsters, or heard about these cars from parents or grandparents. I looked back later to see if the man with a cane was still there. I thought he might wait to talk about the car or ask for a ride, but he had disappeared.

“Do you ever worry that your Model T could be stolen?” I asked. It has no locks, no glass windows except the windshield and could be started without a key. “No,” he said, “I doubt that anyone could drive it.” True, and a

little sad. People talk about these cars, stare at them in museums, but don't bother to learn much about them.

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Several years ago, Bill taught me to drive the Model T. My proficiency with a standard transmission wasn't much help. I couldn't get used to shifting gears with a pedal that should be a brake, changing speed with a lever on the steering wheel. It was as though I was sixteen years old, trying to master an obstinate clutch and floor shift, an anxious parent at my side. When I had trouble downshifting, he'd reach over and work the throttle.

"Not too sure I can master this," I said.

"Well, somebody has to know how to drive this car." He squeezed my shoulder. "After I die, I want my ashes scattered from it."

I often think of that conversation. Bill never mentioned it again, but I understood. He wants his ashes strewn while the old car snorts and bucks and sways along Route 175 southeast of Blue Hill, where the road scoots over clam flats, wanders past rockweed covered rocks, through saltwater meadows dotted with apple trees and gray barns and stone walls, then settles into Allen Cove north of Brooklin—not far from E. B. White's old farm.

And I will drive the T.



Bill in 2017