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#TBT The Friend

Craig and I got to know each other during our junior year in high school when we were both on the school tennis team. I'm not sure how long he and his family lived in Chatham, but I think they moved to town during the summer between our sophomore and junior years. We struck up a friendship during after school team practice while hitting tennis balls against a concrete practice wall waiting for a free court. We talked about school, sports, girls, and life in general. The typical guy stuff.

When we were hanging out, we often sat on the stoop in front of the entrance to the apartment building on Main Street where he lived with his parents and older brother. When I wanted a smoke, we went back by the parking garages behind the apartments. If it were lunchtime, his Mom always invited me in to eat a sandwich with Craig. While I learned little about his life before he moved to Chatham, he never tired of hearing me talk about Chatham and the different people I knew growing up in town.

In April of our junior year, he received his driver's license and got to drive his parent's second car, an old Plymouth station wagon. I wouldn't get my license until the following month. I had been practicing driving with Dad in the '57 Pontiac, which had an automatic transmission. And a two-barrel carburetor, which my friend Mike and I would later swap out for a four-barrel. One day Craig and I were cruising around in the Plymouth when he asked me if I wanted to learn to drive the standard shift transmission. It had a three-speed stick on the column, also referred to as 3 on the tree.



What the heck. He didn't have to twist my arm. After a few turns lurching around the high school parking lot, he told me to take her out on Main Street. I nervously drove from Lafayette Avenue straight through the middle of the downtown business area to Summit Avenue. I was having a ball even as I was grinding the gears now and then. It took a lot of concentration learning how to use the gas, brake, clutch, and shifter while steering the vehicle.

Thankfully, there were no police out to see me behind the wheel as the Plymouth idled, waiting for the light to change by Mother's Pantry. And that was a strong possibility as the

town police station was less than 50 yards away on Fairmount Avenue. Once again, in my young life, I was tempting fate, but found no misfortune that day.

We continued this casual friendship off and on through our senior year. Sometime before the end of that school year, Craig told me that he had been diagnosed with a condition that caused fluid to collect around his brain. He said he would be having surgery to insert an internal tube from the brain to his stomach to drain the excess fluid that would otherwise cause the brain to swell. He made it sound like no sweat. And I didn't press him for details.

He was still in the hospital during our May class graduation ceremony. I sat in the darkened auditorium with my classmates waiting for the ceremony to begin. We were all wearing our blue gowns and caps with gold tassels. At the front of the room, Craig's Mom was setting up a large reel-to-reel tape recorder on the edge of the stage to record the event so he could listen to it; especially, the part where his name was announced as a graduate of the Class of 1963. She sat quietly in the front row during the entire program. I can't remember if she went up to the stage and accepted his diploma, but I don't think so.

He came home in June. We hung out that summer when I wasn't working or involved in other parts of my life. It looked funny on a hot day when he wore his dark blue wool cap pulled down to cover his head. I guess he was self-conscious about his shaved head and surgical scar. I didn't ask. Since he hadn't been cleared by the doctors, I was the designated driver whenever we spent time together. He couldn't go too far from home so we drove around town, which he seemed to really enjoy.

That summer before college went by fast. Craig told me that his plans for college were on hold until his medical condition improved. Alright. Okay. I got that. I wasn't particularly interested in going to college at that time and the thought even crossed my mind that maybe I would stay home and work for a semester or the entire first year. But, I got caught up in what so many of my friends were doing and followed the group.

Toward the end of October, I received a letter at college from Craig. I remember sitting on the steps of a large brick building not far from campus near the town's main street reading about his life at home. It was an unusually sunny autumn day and the concrete sidewalk and steps were warm. He hoped that I was having fun and enjoying college. Besides resting and following doctor's orders, he was reading a lot and following the news about President Kennedy kick-starting his 1964 reelection campaign by going to Texas with Vice President Johnson. He sounded good but reading between the lines I got the impression he didn't like being stuck at home with his friends away at college. I wasn't about to write him back telling him I didn't like college. I had pretty much made up my mind back by that time not to return to college for the second semester and started cutting most of my classes. I'd tell him in person at Christmas time.

When I got home for Christmas semester break, Craig was back in Summit Overlook Hospital. Mom told me that his mother asked for privacy and she didn't want Craig to have visitors or phone calls at that time. I assumed he was having another routine procedure and heard nothing to the contrary. Respecting his Mom's wishes, I waited to see him when he got home, which I hoped would be soon. We had a lot of catching up to do, including the tragic assassination of President Kennedy. And I could tell him I was going to be around instead of heading off to college again.

While I was still waiting for him to come home, Craig died January 4, 1964. After his death, I learned that his surgery the previous May included the removal of a brain tumor. Much more serious than I realized.

I was mad that I wasn't told the extent of his medical condition. Mad that I went away to college while he was stuck at home. Mad that I hadn't replied to his letter. Mad that I hadn't tried to see him in the hospital. Mad that he died.

It took a while, but I let the anger go.

(Photos are representations from Google)