

# Dead Man's Curve

© 2011 David Milholland

**U.S.** consumers are scarcely surprised at being sold two thoroughly contrasting visions in the same basic package. The omnipresent ditty “See the USA in your Chevrolet” charms post-war mom, dad and kids with an idyllic vision of cruising across this big land from “sea to shining sea.” Work-in-progress interstate highways herald our newest, proudest creation.

As scarcely assailed victors of the big one — WWII — we are a nation and people obsessed with speed. Our jets and rockets fly faster and higher than ever. Land-speed records fall repeatedly on nearby Utah’s Bonneville Flats. Massive vehicular horsepower is available at pedestrian prices through auto dealerships in even the smallest burghs. Yes, in the fifties, mayhem is understood to lurk around every corner on American highways and byways, including the jolting September 30, 1955 auto death of film icon James Dean. U.S. teens, inheritors of a world more and more shaped in our own image, can hardly plead immunity to the temptation, at least until we’ve tried it on for size.

Even in Junior High, word springs upstairs from Lakeview High School below of daring young drivers — boys we know — who’ve learned to go up on two wheels to spin around the G Street jog as it heads south, before flopping onto the other two to complete the passage. It’s right on my daily newspaper route, a residential street. Others brag of drag races on the edge of town. Cars lumber through the streets boasting “spoilers,” custom paint jobs, all hot to trot. Wannabe speedsters talk knowingly of chopping and channeling their dream machine, even if its purchase still lurks in the realm of fantasy.

Rock music keeps up the beat, with *Dream Angel*, *Dead Man’s Curve*, and *Transfusion*, Nervous Norvus’ 1956 hit, banned on stations nationwide, ensuring its enduring popularity. After a brakes and crash cacophony, he sings, “Never never never gonna speed again, shoot the juice to me Bruce.”



The one 'n' only  
Nervous Norvus

**S**o right in that groove, after one early sixties spring evening’s band practice for a district competition, several freshman instrumentalists join me for a ride home with 2<sup>nd</sup> coronet and sophomore Bill Eastland, no longer Billy, in his older brother’s 1958 Plymouth Fury. He’s borrowed it as a special favor. To no one’s surprise, after dropping off our lone female companion, nervous at our talk of speed, the rest of us continue north out of town on Highway 395. Just beyond Hunter’s, Bill presses the pedal down and we watch the speedometer ramp right up to and over 100 mph. The Fury’s 350 V8 engine clearly has more to give, but we’re content barreling along the two-lane blacktop at that ferocious pace.

Somewhere past Warner Junction we turn west on a well-packed, unpaved farm road, straight as far as our lights can penetrate. Here, with no chance of any law enforcement, the car again resumes its 100 mph pace. We jabber encouragement as Bill takes us on the ride of our lives. Suddenly, a few miles along, as we stare into the pitch black beyond, the road bends slightly to the south. Mere moments later we don’t, flying straight off the road and through a barb wire fence that never knew what hit it.

We bounce and skid across the field, miraculously flat and unencumbered, until our brakes and good fortune draw us to a halt. The five of us are virtually speechless, keenly aware that any tiny shift in our field of fortune could have spelled all our demise. As we sit there, eyes bore into our range of vision. We’re soon nearly surrounded by a herd of cattle. Not one of us or them has suffered a nick. Bill slowly turns around, maneuvering between them. After seemingly a quarter mile exploration of our tracks, he pulls through strewn-about fencing and heads back to U.S. 395. A collective “Whew!” resounds from us.

Our return to town in the scratched but otherwise intact speedster is the height of propriety.

At school the next day we’re chastened enough that not a single one of us brags of our daring do or absurdity. Back in band just before lunch hour our classmate Tom Kitzen slinks in, all steamed up about some “blamed fools that tore out more fence than they had brains, spreading cattle up and down the road for miles from our place!”

Yes, good band members know what a mute is and when to employ it.

“Whew!”

**Three from David Milholland**

# Why I'm planting peas!

© 2003 David Milholland

At the height of WWII a series of powerful films were hatched by Hollywood — *Why We Fight*. They made a compelling case for taking on Hitler and his Axis, to those U.S. individuals who'd bought into the isolationism common in Island America of that day. Today, our national leadership has clumsily tried to link events of 9/11 and the threat of Al Qaeda to its unilateral decision to invade Iraq. It brought the debate to the UN Security Council before totally disregarding its members' counsel, defying world opinion as it has done repeatedly since grabbing office.

Meantime, I've several times joined crowds moving through the streets of San Francisco and Portland to raise our signs and voices against the onslaught of war. Across the planet, millions of humans have peacefully assembled to say no. They've been totally disregarded by a government intent on constructing a global empire, righteously claiming no regard for such "focus groups."

What do we do next? For myself, I'm far from tossing it in, nor removing myself from the public forum: communication with my elected leaders, friends, family and neighbors, marches, and more that comes along. I'm lighting a candle nightly to beat back the darkness. I'm also planting peas.

One anti-war current claims we should permit "no business as usual." I'm sympathetic. Pure acquiescence to these self-selected powers running full tilt over our hard fought rights, the virtually defenseless Iraqi people, and our sense of hope, is foolish. Those opposed to this preemptive action must continue to stand up to let the world know that millions are unafraid to say "Not in my name!"

Foolish however, to cancel our plans and lives till justice again prevails. It's going to be a while folks. The group in power has a bold agenda. They plan to capture and settle into Iraq, to pressure and likely invade Iran, and to build a modern Rome with the purest Caesarean trappings, despite all resistance. Having destroyed our economy and whittled our rights down to the nib, they will continue to do so. All opposed to this apocalyptic vision are made plain and simple enemies.

Yet I'm planting peas because I know that life goes on. Forces worldwide that have spoken out against the American imperial fantasy will not casually be silenced. These bad actors are going to pass.

Later this spring I'll eat from my garden, harvesting greens, peas, strawberries and more. I'll join friends and family to search out wild morels and hike in the Columbia Gorge to see the divine beauty of wildflowers spanning the rainbow spectrum. There'll be a high school graduation, a fabulous Mexican feast on the Oregon Coast, bike rides through the mist, and celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of James Beard, the Father of American Cooking, born in Portland, May 5, 1903.



I'm planting peas because they represent the miracle of life, and its challenges, that tiny shriveled green orbs carry the very plasm of existence. With the succor of sun, soil, water and the least bit of husbandry, their progeny bring bounty and unparalleled taste into being. Sweetness, light, sometimes even blight — they provide anyone embracing the process a deeper sense of our place on the planet.

I find it hard to believe our President has ever planted peas, and hung in there to nourish them into a flourishing symbol of all that is right with the earth. Perhaps he should, though I fear he's preoccupied with might making right. You can, perhaps you already do. Be tender. Be patient. They deliver the goods to the steward. The sustainer.

Celebrate spring and foster life out of the smallest seeds of hope.



Scenes at peace march, Mission Street, San Francisco

February 2003 © David Milholland

last day of winter, March 20, 2003, with soil under my fingernails

# Howling at the Moon!

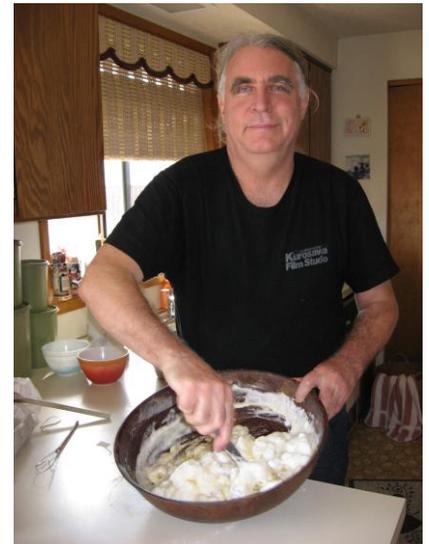
© 2006 David Milholland

**T**hat wintry evening, my brother Doug announces his intention of taking our 91-year-old mother Alice, recuperating from an operation that replaced ball and socket in her hip — she fell the day after her February 18 birthday — out in a wheelchair to greet our favorite lunar object. It is his March 3 birthday after all, and thus hers once again!

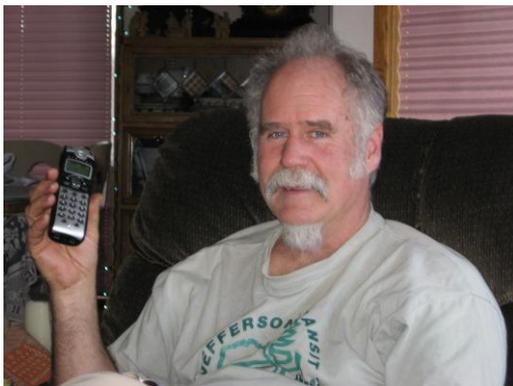
I had drawn our attention to sister moon only two nights previous as we drove across Snoqualmie Pass, the apex of the Cascades. There the slimmest crescent reigns over a star rich sky and hundreds of yellow lights illuminate night skiing runs. Doug's son Danny pulls their biodiesel bug off I-90 into a wintry world, snow banks loom above us. We momentarily acknowledge the amazing power of the tiny slice dominating the high southern sky. Then hotfooted Danny flies us off eastward toward the Columbia River to help Alice weather this current storm.

So here we are, a strong presence in the extensive entry lobby of Wenatchee's Colonial Vista recuperation wing — three Milholland siblings and a passel of Davies / Milholland cousins. Sister Lois is away on a project with the Washougal Schools. The cousins have watched Grandma while Phil, Doug and David go out for an afternoon of intensive visits to senior residential facilities.

The initial three locales we drop into receive us graciously. Easy to understand when there's so much money at stake with each person served — some version of thousands of dollars per month. These corporate complexes feature bells and whistles galore. Yet the day bottoms out at the last two sites, both adult family homes with a small cast of residents. Word to the wise — don't visit when dinner is nearing the table. We are surprised to find it being served around 4:30 pm at Cherry Acres — or Cherry something, the names blur. "This place is full," we are told. We're getting the definitive brush off — no room in the inn.



David Milholland fixing a birthday cake for his mother Alice's 92<sup>nd</sup>



Douglas Milholland visiting his sister Lois's Orondo, Washington home to celebrate his mother Alice's 92<sup>nd</sup> [and last] birthday — February 18, 2007

**T**hat is cheery compared to our reception at Heavenly Haven, where Alice had moved less than a month previous and where the fall had occurred. We knock a couple of times before seizing the day and entering. Her room there is very small, and my contractor brother Doug sees its every flaw — tiny, hard-to-access closet, a lousy floor plan, etc. Even the soffits at the entryway, he notes, need repair. Having spent the day seeing the array of senior offerings — most far from places one dreams of finding oneself in a latter-day — leaves him mumbling under his breath as he walks out into the main room where three old ladies, and just 2 weeks ago our own mother, sit as they do daily.

I take a brief pause to use the bathroom, and come out to find my brothers engaged in what appears to be a fairly heated conversation with the woman in charge. They are discussing the facilities, our mother, and where

things stand. The three senior residents act as something of a Greek chorus, squeaking out, “I saw her fall” and “Alice doesn’t eat without help.” Her husband lurks in the background as his wife stands her ground.

“Your mother,” she states authoritatively, “is an accident waiting to happen” — and more along that line. Hers are defensive responses with the unstated implication that if someone is to blame, it could not be the eager owners of Heavenly Haven. As my brothers have no doubt pointed out, we’ve been out “shopping facilities,” and that of course immediately threatens their cash flow, not to speak of their “intentional community.”

Seeing her majesty backed up against one wall, facing Phil and Doug, both large-enough men, I check myself to avoid forming a three-man firing squad, but not so far back I might miss a word. After hearing a faulty medical analysis of our Mother’s condition — “she’s a 7 to 8 on the 10 point Alzheimer’s scale, and I’ve been in this business long enough to know” — I push to hasten our departure, before we sully all lines of recovery for this relationship. No one is going to remember this conversation fondly.

So it isn’t surprising that a couple of hours later, back at the Colonial Vista recuperation wing, Doug feels the need to share all his heartfelt sentiments with the waxing moon. It has been a stimulating but ultimately challenging day, in which we’ve seen hard-working people and seniors across a broad behavior spectrum reveal a lot about what our mother faces next.

In her wheelchair, having picked through her dinner and eager to resume her recovery in bed, Alice is hardly an advocate for his enthusiasm. Nonetheless, she is also delighted to have all our attention, for she has always thrived in the locus of family. I demur, sensing that this isn’t exactly what the doctor ordered.

When the pair returns from their round of baying, Doug insists that I’ve missed the first boat but would be a fool not to catch the second. So a corps of us go right out the front doors again — to hail the clear night sky and its arc of lunacy with our own.

After howling 3 or 4 times, we notice that a group standing 40 feet away is glaring at our boisterous effort. Never ones to be dismayed by such a lack of appreciation, we yip one last time before rolling our “just along for the ride” mother toward the entry.

Suddenly, the electric door slides open and a gurney bearing a body-sized khaki bag emerges from the building, being pushed by a single attendant. My immediate thought is — How can whomever’s inside breathe? — before realizing that it certainly contains a corpse. I further reflect that our own father had been hauled out through the same door only 20 months previous, for all I know in the same bag.

So are these the relatives of the dearly departed, listening in to the chanting of our inner coyote?

We’ll never know, but the thought lurks, as chilling as the late winter air we are rushing inside to escape. Our family’s lively energies often amuse us no end. Others are left musing as much about our sensitivity as our sanity.

Oh I have surely been the fool to avoid such a charming opportunity that first time.

Yet will I yip again? Have no doubt.



Alice receives her 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday cake from her son Douglas with grandson Jon Davies in attendance  
Photos © 2007 David & Douglas Milholland / John Davies

