Demonic Devils Passage

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There are some experiences that are never forgotten no matter how many experiences come after or how old you become. It is the kind of experience where you found it hard to breathe and the hair rose on your arms from an inner chill even as you felt the ungodly heat of the day burn the tip of your nose. You inhaled the smell of fear in the dusty air and saw red crescents left by your fingernails biting into the palms of your clenched hands. In remembering today, you can hear the echo of your heart thudding in your chest and the ticking of your life’s clock as it spun out its time. This is about one of those experiences.

Every time we bought a new car we had to make the grand loop of relative visiting. It seemed we had to demonstrate our non-existent affluence. It took most of a day to drive from our central Washington home to our Idaho destination. From Idaho to Wyoming, it was two days with sightseeing; we ate restaurant food and camped out by the side of the road on the first night. From Wyoming to southern California, it was almost three days; we camped out one night and stayed in a motel the other. From southern California to northern Oregon, was one long day.

Those long days spent riding in the car are among my favorite childhood memories. We must have driven our parents nearly mad on every trip by shouting out the alphabet letters from A to Z and squealing in glee when we beat someone else at finding a cherished letter like “J” or “Q” or “Z.” We found the alphabet letters by using the license plates of the other cars on the road. This was our favorite made-up road game. Our raucous, repetitious singing of “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall,” “This Old Man,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “I’m a Little Teapot,” and “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” must have set Mom and Daddy’s ears to ringing and teeth on edge; we didn’t have a large repertoire but we put lots of energy into our singing. After the first day, our 1951 summer-show-off-itinerary wasn’t any exception.

We had left home at 5:00 a.m., on what was to become a blistering hot day in mid-July, 1951, in a brand new, just off the sales lot, royal blue 1950
Packard Custom Eight, six person touring sedan. It was almost noon when we stopped in a small Idaho town to fill up on gas. New maps were one of Daddy’s passions. He had gotten a new Idaho road map and after unfolding it and taking a look, he pointed his stubby forefinger at a squiggly black line on the map indicating that it was curvy blacktop. He asked the young service station attendant, “How is this road?”

The filling station attendant assured Daddy that it was good two-lane blacktop and, as the map indicated, it would cut several miles off our usual route. Daddy liked shortcuts.

We found a small, shady, local park and after making and eating sandwiches from our large home-made, ice cooled lunch box we played while Mom and Daddy rested for about a half-an-hour. Then we set off to find the new road. The beginning of the road was promising. The green clad branches of the trees on either side of the road arched over and almost met creating a mercifully cool and refreshing passage. This didn’t last long. The cooling trees remained but the blacktop dwindled to one lane and then ran out within a mile and we were stuck on a narrow “S” shaped one lane dirt track. The brilliant sunlight slanting between dark tree trunks was like flashes from a strobe light and made visibility difficult. We hadn’t proceeded very far up the smooth, dusty, pale brown dirt road when we discovered that it was far too narrow to turn around and too full of hairpin curves to attempt to travel in reverse to get out of there. Still, if we had known just how much worse it would become, I am sure that Daddy would have figured out how to back down the couple of miles that we had traveled up that dirt track, but he kept hoping for that promised good two-lane blacktop road.

As we rounded a curve to the right, the trees abruptly disappeared from both sides of the road leaving us in the spotlight of the full white hot glare of the sun. Our noisy songs died in our throats; dried up as surely as the hot, unrelenting sun had dried the trees. It seemed like forever that we sat stopped at that spot waiting for our squinting, watering eyes to dry and our vision to clear. Not only did our eyes have to adjust to what we were seeing, our minds and hearts had to accept the dead, alien, almost prehistoric golden brown and black world that confronted us. The road was nothing but dry, dusty, light brown earth with small dusty brown stones for its bed. To our right, was the steep, towering embankment from which the roadbed had
been cut. It was naked of growing vegetation and pebbled with various sized rocks that appeared a uniform light brown with their covering of dust. Dust covered skeletal black roots, from long dead vegetation, protruded from the embankment and hung out over and into the road as though they wanted to grab the car and hold it back. To the left of the narrow road, there was a nearly vertical drop-off to the blue ribbon of the Snake River far below. All gaiety and sound was murdered by our new view of the world and our place in it from the Seven Devils Mountain Road we were on.

From that point on, it was an eerily silent drive, up that too narrow, too steep, too curvy road. There wasn’t any singing, word games, complaining about the heat, or bickering amongst small children cooped up for too long in a hot car. I think we were all too scared to sweat. The loudest sound hurt our ears, like the screech of fingernails scraping down a blackboard, when the passenger side of the car scraped against the rocky embankment as Daddy maneuvered for an inch or two more road. The second loudest sounds were of the rocks and gravel that our tires dislodged as they tumbled over the edge of the road and crashed down and down and down the drop-off on our left. I think that it was only by an act of God that our tires didn’t follow them down. The quietest thing was the sibilant sound of indrawn breath that started with my Mother in the front seat and flowed to the backseat and into us children. I never heard my Daddy draw a breath, but I heard the tiny grinding sound of his teeth and knew the ache of his jaw as he willed that huge car up the road and around curves designed for a wheel base at least three feet shorter than the Packard’s ten-and-a-half feet.

My normal seat in the car was behind my Daddy. As we drove up and up that road, all I could see when I looked out of my car window was the tiny blue/white ribbon of the sparkling river far far below. I could not see any road shoulder. Most of that dirt track was only about two feet wider than the sixty inch tracking width of the wheels of our car. Those two feet dwindled to nothing as we drove around the curves of Idaho’s Seven Devils Mountain Road. In places, large gray-brown boulders had tumbled down and nestled against the base of the embankment taking up valuable road width. The road followed every crease and outcrop in the western edge of “He-Devil.” At over 9,300 feet, He-Devil was the highest of the Seven Devils. Eagles soaring high above the Snake River area known as Hell’s Canyon couldn’t have had a much
better view than we did.

The “pass” consisted of one hair pin after another. The car barely had time to curl to the right and straighten out for a foot or two, before it had to curl to the left, straighten out and do it all over again and again and again. It seemed that we were going to spend our life endlessly curling to the right and then the left and hearing the car scraping on the right and rocks tumbling down on the left. Our hot, sunlit, shrunken world consisted of the sounds of falling rocks, the earth and rocks scraping the car, and our indrawn breath. On an outer curve, we saw the pale brown steep embankment on our right up close and personal. The royal blue hood of the car, that extended almost two feet in front of the tires, blocked most of our vision of the road in front and bending away beneath us; we saw emptiness on the immediate left and in the far distance on the other side of the Snake River there was a duplicate of our surreal brown world. On an inner curve, we saw the embankment on the right, and over the hood of the car, a bit of the road that led upward to the next outer curve, and the clear blue sky high above us. We couldn’t see how much higher we had to climb or form any idea of how we would get back down once we reached the top of the pass. We never knew when we would follow the rocks tumbling down on the left, but I don’t think that anyone doubted the final outcome of that shortcut road.

For a lot of the way up that road, we were all scrunched over on top of each other, leaning as far to our right as we could so our puny weight might help keep that over two ton car clinging to the earth. There were three or four times when Daddy had all of us squeeze out and walk while he drove the car. We were instructed to stay back a considerable distance behind the car (Daddy was afraid that if the car went over the drop-off it would take a goodly portion of the road and us along with it). From our vantage point behind the car, we could see the left rear tire had little but air beneath it as Daddy negotiated the turn. Despite the quiet purr of that magnificent car, we heard the tiny extra bit of gas that Daddy gave it just before the left rear tire hung spinning in near mid-air on the outer edge of the curve, churning the few small rocks beneath it into the abyss before it once again found purchase on the rocky verge and on around the curve to solid ground; all we could see was sky beneath the forty-three inches of car behind the rear tires that hung out over the void until the car was almost completely around the curve.
We had one tiny necessary respite from the white knuckled fear and tension of the drive. There was a wide spot in the inner bend of a curve where a small, cold, clear waterfall trickled out of the rocks high above to form a small pool in a manmade stone basin; a tin cup on a slim rusty chain sat on the rim for wayfarers to use. I don’t remember that water ever tasted so good before or after that day or that any place ever felt like such a haven. For once, my brothers and I didn’t get into high jinks of tag or roughhousing. We were as quiet and mannerly as we would have been in church. I don’t think anyone, except Hal, who was only five, resisted trying to peer around the next bend to see what new trials were coming to test us.

We met only one vehicle on that road. It was an uncovered Jeep going down and Daddy, ever the gentleman, backed around a curve to a place where it could barely squeeze past us on the outside. There were three teenage boys in the Jeep; they looked at us funny and then burst into loud braying laughter as they pointed at us. Those Idahoans sure had a funny sense of humor. After we had renegotiated the curve, we found that in the inner bend of the next pair of curves there was a much better place for the two vehicles to have passed and the boys in the Jeep knew it.

About a half-a-mile from the top of the Seven Devil’s Mountain Pass, the road straightened out and we ran onto two-lane blacktop again. At the top, there was a little general store set amidst a cool oasis of tall shade and evergreen trees and soul reviving green grass. The 360° vista was magnificent. The store owner couldn’t have been nicer; Daddy had told him that we had come up by way of the dirt road and that started a conversation. The store owner said, “We only receive mail delivery up here every two weeks and we’re lucky if we receive any mail at all in the winter months; we’re just too dang high. I have to go down in early fall to stock up on supplies for the winter or we couldn’t make it through. But you’ll have good blacktop the rest of the way going down from here.” Then he looked out the screen door and saw our car. Shocked and surprised he said, "You mean to tell me that you drove that car up that road? That road ain’t fit to be used by anything except mountain goats, horses and Jeeps. Mister, I shore don't know why you ain't in the Snake River."

Well, we didn’t know why we weren't either. I have often wondered just how the filling station attendant who told us that the shortcut was a good blacktop two-lane road would have felt if he had heard that all of
us were dead in the Snake River because of his "practical joke." Or—to be charitable—maybe he didn’t know any better and was ashamed to admit that he, a native, didn’t know that road. That drive was fifteen miles and five hours of pure white-eyed terror.

My Daddy wasn’t exactly a praying man, but he prayed that day. He prayed that the gravel of the road stay beneath the wheels of the magnificent Packard as it purred and climbed and bent itself in and out of curves of a road it should have never been on. And he thanked the Good Lord that that Packard outperformed all expectations.

I don’t think that Daddy ever took a shortcut again.