



Gene Ziegler

Octogenarian Time Capsule

The story I am about to tell you is mostly a writing exercise. I've taken a small number of facts and woven around them a fictionalized context that is part authentic and part imagination. At the end of the story, I will tell you which is which.

Full Moon

Wait here but stay alert. We may have to leave in a hurry!

The young man, dressed in the black jacket and hat of a chauffeur, hurried along the narrow, double parked streets of old Allentown driving a four-year old dark green 1930 De Soto four-door sedan. He was late for his appointment with his employer, Jake Moser, who was not the most patient of men. It was the driver's first full-time job since the crash and Great Depression, and he wanted badly to succeed. Ten Dollars a week was a windfall for a man with few skills at the tender age of twenty-three.

It was 26 degrees, not uncommon for a Pennsylvania October, and the car seemed unhappy with the cold. It was difficult to start, and the heater was not living up to the Dodge Brother's advertisement. It was the 21st of October, and a Sunday. It was only 5:15pm but the sun was already setting to the west. The skies were clear and there would be a full moon. For that, at least, he would be grateful.

He was fortunate to find parking space in front of his employers stately inner-city home. It was probably considered a mansion in some bygone era, but Mr. Moser was not one for pretense and the location near city government suited him for his endeavors. It was clear to his chauffeur that he was an official of some stripe, but it was never clear what his portfolio might be. He never used a title and discouraged any curiosity on the part of the young man.

He had barely stopped the car when Mr. Moser burst out of his front door and bounded down the front steps to the car. The chauffeur was out of his driver's door and around to curbside to open the rear door with only seconds to spare, allowing his employer to enter the rear cabin without any loss of momentum. The young man quickly slipped behind the driver's wheel.

“You’re late,” said Moser, “I have to be in Mauch Chunk by 8pm, so step on it.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Moser,” the driver replied.

Mauch Chunk was an anthracite coal mining town about thirty miles to the north. The road was mostly paved by 1934, but narrow with ill-defined shoulders, potholes, and there was no defining center line. The concept of a bypass was far in the future and the road was peppered with small towns and villages that slowed progress – Copley, Northampton, Laurys Station, Treichlers, Walnutport, Palmerton, Bowmanstown, Parryville, Weissport, and Lehighton. The driver, planning road trips to outlying towns, had to make sure the car had a reliable spare tire, an air pump, and repair kits for fuel pumps and brake cylinders.

The drive proved to be quiet and uneventful and they arrived at their destination with ten minutes to spare. The event was a clandestine meeting of union organizers on a small church on a hillside overlooking the town. “Unionizing” could be a dangerous business in that period, which explained meeting in a darkened church late on a Sunday night and off the beaten path.

The driver was instructed to park on a dirt road, at the top of a hill, pointed downward, just a short distance from the entrance of the church. He was to sit quietly, wait, and be prepared to leave at a moment’s notice.

“This meeting may not go well,” said Moser, “These men may not like what I have to tell them, and we may have to leave in a hurry.”

With that, Moser stepped out of the car and hurried toward the church. There were no streetlights on the hill, but the full moon made it possible for the driver to track Moser’s progress.

An hour passed and the driver, lost in his own thoughts, failed to notice the figure approaching the car until the rear door opened and Moser, clearly out of breath, dropped into the seat and hurriedly closed the door.

“We must leave promptly,” he said, “but do not start the car or turn on your lights. Release the brake and let the car coast down the hill until I tell you otherwise.”

The driver did as he was told and as the car began to roll, he glanced in the mirror and saw in the moonlight men emerging from the church and approaching the car. After they had made some progress down the hill, the driver popped the clutch to start the car and turned on the headlights as they sped away into the night.

Before they reached the bottom of the hill, the passenger began to chuckle. It soon turned in to a full-throated laugh, so infectious that the driver started laughing with him, like two boys who had gotten away with something naughty. It would be the first, but far from the last of such adventures in the years to come.

Separating fact from fiction:

1. Jake Moser was a real person, a small-time politician of that period, probably a shyster lawyer, definitely a shady character. He was a deal maker who traveled around the small towns of eastern Pennsylvania negotiating...whatever.
2. It actually was 26 degrees and a full moon on October 21st, 1934, and sunset was at 5:15pm. I looked it up, but the date I chose, I pulled out of a hat.
3. Anthracite coal was mined in a small town called Mauch Chunk, which was later renamed Jim Thorp. The locals still refer to it with both names.
4. While “pavement” was the norm on city streets, the roads between towns were just being paved at the time of my story. Many of the smaller villages could only be reached on dirt roads.
5. Jake Moser really did have a 23-year-old inexperienced chauffeur in 1934 whom he paid \$10 a week.
6. The chauffeur was my father and he told me of *the slippery getaway* as a true story.

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