

THE FORD LTD
&
MARIO ANDRETTI
BY Timothy J. Muise
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Most of my life growing up my father was a clam digger, and from what I knew one of the toughest and successful "clammers" of the day. He kept a 14' Amesbury skiff at Conomo Point in Essex and ventured out to the "Spit" sandbar near the mouth of the Essex River each day to dig the sweetest soft shell clams on the planet. He was always lean, tan, and truly my hero and champion. I did not know in those days of innocent youth that my Dad willingly risked his life each winter battling the howling Northeast winds coming out of Ipswich Bay on his way to the Spit so that his son could wear Nike sneakers and ride dirt bikes. Other clammers retreated to the safety of the rivers in such harsh conditions, but not Bob Muise; he was iron and the wild river no match for him.

In the late 1970's my Mom and Dad saved enough money so that they could open up their own fish market where they could sell clams, lobsters, and also fish. My father had a shucking house behind Goucher's Essex River Clams and employed 3 or 4 girls at a time to shuck those beautiful clams from the spit. My old man made restaurant contacts and sold his golden gallons of river ore to places like Captain's Courageous and Skipper's Galley. Oftentimes I would travel with him to deliver the clams as well as to dispose of the shells at the Essex dump. He always took time to feed me whatever meal I wanted from the restaurants as well as to let me rummage through the piles of wonders at the dump, which was a child's paradise.

Bob Muise was one of the most unselfish men I ever encountered. He allowed my brother Bobby to manage the Fish Market, East Gloucester Shellfish, pretty much letting him set his own pay rate, and had my grandmother, "Big Nana", work the shop on weekends. The old man never checked the cash in the register and did not even keep the paper receipt roll in the machine; you took what pay you thought was fair, that was my father. Prior to the plague of "Red Tide" East Gloucester Shellfish made good money. Dad had a new custom Ford F-150 and Ma had a nice four door Ford LTD. The business had a nice F-250 refrigerator truck and I was riding

a Honda XR-75 dirtbike. Things were pretty good for the working class Muise family.

Vacations were what my family spent the lion's share of their savings on. We camped, skied, and swam in the pools and lakes all over the New Hampshire and Maine region. Florida and Bermuda were real treats, but we bonded as a family at the Red Jacket in Conway, Jack-O-Lantern in Woodstock, and Point Sebago on Lake Sebago. This one year Mom and Dad made plans to rent a nice condo in Waterville Valley. The plan was to have a nice relaxing summer getaway in the woods of New Hampshire. My misguided youth, spoiled brat mentality, and marijuana fueled poor judgment would dash the hopes for a refreshing break from the workingman's grind for Bob and Lorraine.

The old man rents a seperate small condo unit for me and my friends John and Glen. He even lets me bring my entire stereo system and a milk crate of albums. We have so much gear for this ten day getaway that we bring two vehicles, Dad's truck and Mom's car; the brand new Ford LTD. On one of the weekdays Dad takes his truck and heads off to the golf course in Waterville. John, Glen, and I head down to the horse field near the condo and smoke a little weed. We get it in our heads that we want to get some beer, but the beer and wine store is a couple miles away. My Mother would drop us off there, if we asked, but how would we get back with the beer? Since John has his driver's license we decide to approach my mother about using the car.

"Absolutely not! Daddy would kill me." "He will never know Ma. We won't be long. We just want to go talk to some girls we met at the arcade yesterday and we can't have my mother dropping us off." Even at that age I had developed the confidence man skills of a drug user and after many back-n-forths with Ma she agreed to let John drive her precious LTD into Waterville. She instructs us to stay away from the golf course and not to be more than an hour. We jump in the dark blue luxury vehicle and head out of the condo complex. As soon as we are out of sight of the condo I tell John, "Pull over. I'm driving."

Never having driven before I was impressed by the acceleration and

responsiveness of the car. I felt as if I was Mario Andretti and surely this driving thing was a piece of cake. I sped into Waterville and we were coming upon the golf course which we were warned to stay away from. I knew there were only two holes near the street and the odds were one in nine that the old man might be playing one of them. As we cruised by with wild reckless abandon I saw Bob Muise, legs crossed, leaning on his driver, as another player was teeing off. I guess one in nine are not the best of odds but we were in fact fortunate he did not look our way. Luck was with us, or so I thought.

At the country store we parked the car in the back of the lot and I stood off to the side of the front door. I asked 10 or 12 guys to buy me a case of Michelob beer before I found one who was willing as long as we bought him a six pack as well. A good and fair deal I thought and handed over the cash. In a few minutes our buyer emerged with a case of Mic in the can and we tossed it in the trunk of the LTD as we planned to consume it that night down at the horse field. Mission accomplished we headed back to the condo, taking the road which did not go past the golf course. I did not want to press my luck any further. On the way back I accelerated wildly and dared unsafe speeds; Mario Andretti at Monaco! I then spied a fresh dirt road where a new cul-de-sac was fashioned out. I flew up that road jerking the wheel back-n-forth. When I got to the end, at the round cul-de-sac segment, I decided to attempt a "donut" as I had done so many times with my little XR-75. I hit the gas, then the break, spun the steering wheel right, and then stomped the gas again. The last thing I remember is seeing the trees coming and realizing we were headed off the embankment.

The rock we hit was the size of a Volkswagon. The hood was bent in a tent shape and steam was rising from the engine compartment. The doors would not open and we all had to climb out windows. The precious LTD was a wreck and I knew that the old man was going to tear my head from my shoulders. My first thought was to take off, for real, and I voiced this. John and Glen talked me out of that. John said that if he said he was driving then the old man really could not do too much to me as it would be his fault. In the panic

it sounded like a solid plan. We walked the half mile or so back to the condo uttering a few "what the f's" and "holy shit's". Not the relaxing vacation anyone had planned. When we rounded the corner of the condo complex I could see my mother in the kitchen window at the sink washing dishes. When she looked and saw us without the car you could see her face change; disaster was the look. She came flying out the front door of the unit screaming, "Where's the car!" I know in her head she hoped we ran out of gas but in her heart, and from the looks on our faces, she knew it was worse than that. John told her, "We crashed the car Mrs. Muise.", and she uttered, "No, God."

She called the golf course and told them it was an emergency. They sent a gas cart out to find Bob Muise. Imagine playing golf and having course staff come out and tell you that there was an emergency back at your condo that required your immediate presence? What must he have been thinking? I never thought about such things before. Dad pulled up in his truck, Ma told him we crashed the car, and he looked a bit relieved; at least no one was dead. He made John and I get in his truck with him and we drove the short distance to where the car was wrecked. On the way up the dirt road to the cul-de-sac there were fish-tail tire marks from where my Mario Andretti persona had taken over. I could see my head coming off in my fathers eyes. When we reached the wreck he looked at the car and then directly at me. We thought we were smart but Bob Muise knew what happened, I never had to tell him.

The ride back to Gloucester was silent. Dad had to rent a flatbed and driver to get his FORD LTD back home; it was totaled. As we rode in silence I thought about what I had done. I could see the pain in Ma and Dad's eyes and I knew it was time to at least think about doing things differently. I wish I could report the event transformed my life, then at least the damage would be worth it, but I cannot. I got in a lot more trouble in my youth and caused more pain in the eyes of my parents but I did learn some real lessons. I learned about love and unselfishness as my father was over it all in a couple of days and treated me as if it did not even happen. My

mother started feeling sorry for me the day the crash happened. Imagine that, my mother felt bad for me because I had to go through this? These are special people and true examples of loving parents. Dad stood in the freezing cold "pickin' up nickles and dimes", as he used to like to call it, to buy this fancy car and I destroyed it in seconds due to selfishness and foolishness, but I was still the favored son. Very undeserving but so blessed.

Many years later when Dad gave me a set of keys to his new boat, a boat he could ill afford, I wondered if he thought about the car I wrecked (or his truck I damaged later)? I never asked him as I did not have to. It did not matter to him. I was more important to him than a hundred cars or boats and he stood on that cold and unforgiving Spit because he loved me, my siblings, and my dear mother; unconditionally and with all our faults. Out of that type of love comes strength and I thank him for that gift. He lives forever in my heart.

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