

Myrna CG Mibus

Brake Stands

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When I was 18, my favorite cousin David visited my family for a few days. We were the same age and generally could come up with some kind of trouble to get into. Like the time we drove his father's car. We were about four years old at the time and we wouldn't have gotten caught if it wasn't for the tree that was in our way. This time, however, we were hard pressed to come up with anything to do. Finally, David and I decided to drive my 1976 Sunbird coupe around town to pass the time. We were bored within minutes. Then David had an idea that was sure to cure our boredom.

"Hey, let's do some brake stands, Myrna. They're fun." I had no idea what a brake stand was, but I worshiped my cousin and couldn't imagine saying no to anything he suggested. I looked at him in awe as he explained the procedure. "Put your left foot on the Sunbird's brake," he instructed.

"Done. Now what?" I asked.

"Now put your right on the accelerator, all the way to the floor." The engine raced as I firmly pressed on the accelerator pedal. "Okay, Myrna, when I tell you, take your foot off the brake and we'll see how long a skid mark this Sunbird can leave."

"Okay, David." My hands gripped the wheel. I looked straight ahead. I pumped the accelerator to rev the engine. I looked, I was sure, like a NASCAR driver. I looked at David and nodded, "I'm ready."

"Now!" David yelled. My foot leaped off the brake.

“Whoa!” I screamed, as the power of six cylinders pushed me back in my seat and the smell of burned rubber wafted through our windows. “This is fun!” I slowed the Sunbird to a stop and David jumped out to look at the skid marks we left on the once-quiet streets of Richfield.

“Yeah! All right. You did great!” David’s eyes were bright with excitement as he climbed back into my car. “Let’s do it again.”

So we did -- several times. I suspected squealing the tires might not be the best thing for my car but I didn’t care. I was having fun. Besides, I figured, this newfound skill might come in handy some day. Well, maybe not. But at least I could do something that my other friends couldn’t. “I am so cool!” I told myself as I drove home to tell someone about my new driving technique.

We pulled in the driveway and saw my dad working in the garage. He wasn’t my first choice of a person to talk to. But David dashed into the house to find my older brother and as I sat behind the wheel, engine still running, a strange thought flashed through my mind. Tell Dad about doing brake stands? No, I thought, what a silly idea, Dad wouldn’t want to hear about this, he hardly even likes me. But then I remembered how often Dad talked to my brother about cars, and I felt a little sad that I didn’t talk to him very often. Maybe, just maybe, I can tell him about doing brake stands. We could do a little father daughter bonding.

I took my keys out of the ignition, got out of my Sunbird, shut the driver’s door and walked to the garage, and Dad. For a moment, I thought about diving into the house unnoticed and forgetting the whole idea. What am I thinking? I can’t talk to him. Then, Oh, come on, Myrna, be a good daughter and talk to the guy. After all, Dad was the only person around and I was bubbling over with excitement about “burning rubber.”

I walked into the garage. It was dark and cool, smelling faintly of oil and WD40. Dad stood over an old garbage disposal motor he had clamped into the workbench vise. He was pulling coils of copper wire out of the motor with a needle nose pliers, methodically putting the copper into a bucket to take to the recycling center. He spent long hours recycling metal from all sorts of things he found laying around. To say he was thrifty was an understatement.

“Guess what, Dad?” He looked up. His eyes squinted as he tried to see me against the light from the open garage door.

“Oh, it’s you. What, Myrna?”

I wanted to say, “Of course it’s me. What other girl comes in and says ‘Guess what, Dad?’” But I remembered I was trying to be a nice daughter so I said, “David taught me how to do brake stands in the Sunbird. I made skid marks all over.”

Dad’s eyebrows raised, his hand holding the pliers stopped in mid air above his workbench. “Brake stands. Hmm. You know that’s not real good for the car, don’t you?”

“Uh, no. I just thought it was something you do, for fun.” Then I remembered, since when did Dad know how to have fun? He was the most un-fun guy I had ever known. All work and no play. Making hay while the sun shines. Up at dawn and working until nightfall. He didn’t watch TV. He couldn’t sit still for a moment without falling asleep. Why on earth did I tell him?

But, instead of telling me how brake stands and squealing tires caused undue wear on the tires and engine, he looked me in the eye and asked, “How long were the skid marks?”

Was he trying to catch me at something? Was I going to get in trouble for ruining the tires? Would he charge me a fine based on the length of the skid marks? Could I pretend I didn’t hear his question and run into the house?

Dad was peering at me over his glasses, waiting, so I had no choice but to answer. “Oh, five to ten feet long, I suppose,” I said as I concentrated my gaze on the clock on the wall. I was afraid I would see Dad’s blue eyes flashing, his temper exploding like the time when Donnie and David ran over a rake with the farm truck. Or when we were on vacation in Colorado and the car overheated and Dad got out and kicked the tire, jumped up and down and yelled at the top of his lungs while everyone driving by stared.

“Hmm. That’s pretty good.” He actually looked somewhat pleased. I was bewildered, Dad wasn’t mad. He wasn’t going to yell. He seemed almost proud of me. I looked up at him and saw just a glimmer of a smile and a faraway look in his eyes, as if he were thinking of something from long

before he had three children and a mortgage and a job fixing other people's broken stuff. "Yep, that's pretty good." He nodded slowly. "You know, once, in my '56 Pontiac Starchief convertible, I laid skid marks over 20 feet long."

What? My Dad, driving around making skid marks? Having fun? No, it couldn't be true. Not my boring, hard working, thrifty father who was taking a half hour to recycle copper wire that was worth all of 40 cents.

"Really?" I said tentatively. "When did you do that?"

He sighed a long sigh and started pulling copper wire again. "Oh, years ago, before your Mom and I were married. A long time ago.

"Sounds like..." Did I dare say it? "Sounds like fun, Dad."

He looked up once again and smiled a tired smile. "It was." He went back to work. As I walked to the house he said, "Just don't have too much fun with that little car of yours, you'll wear out the tires."

"Yeah, Dad, okay." I opened the screen door. In the moment before I let it slam behind me, I looked at my father and imagined him as a young man screeching around town in his Pontiac, smiling from ear to ear. Having fun. I blinked and saw him again, just as I had left him, busy at work, head bent over his workbench, pulling copper wire.