

The Concrete Desert Review



Fall 2021

Behind the Wheel

Pamela Gwyn Kripke

Andrew and his father sat in the Chevy Suburban, waiting for the men to come out with Grandmother Maureen. They figured she'd be wheeled from the building, but the cart was in use, so the men carried her instead. Grandmother Maureen was six-foot-two, even at 90. Not one to shrink. They needed an extra guy.

"She's coming," said Andrew, jumping out to open the trunk. His father followed. "Jesus, Dad, golf clubs? And the banjo?"

Hank reached in and shoved his belongings to the side. The men slid the casket into the sports utility vehicle and pushed it until it hit the back of the passenger seat.

"I knew she'd fit," said Hank, Grandmother Maureen's first-born.

It is expensive to hire a hearse to drive a body 560 miles, across state lines. Hank was a proficient saver, and since he sidelined as the Clark County Medical Examiner, he was legally permitted to transport a dead person in his car. His wife, thinking that such a road trip was ill-advised, not to mention gruesome, refused to accompany him. So, he enlisted Andrew as co-pilot for the eight-hour drive from Arkadelphia, Arkansas to San Antonio.

"It's a nice coffin," said Andrew, swiveling in the front seat. "Flashy."

"Your mother picked it."

Hank Gallagher had a history of speeding, the kind of speeding that would have earned citations and fines and license confiscations if not for his governmental appointment and the leniency of law enforcement officers, many of whom Hank treated in his internal medicine practice. As Chief of Emergency Medicine at the regional hospital, he

was accustomed to calling the shots, particularly those under pressure. He had witnessed thousands of accidents—vehicular and not—so his complicated relationship with speed confounded his family, friends and of course, highway patrol. Three years before Grandmother Maureen died, Hank had swerved a previous Chevy Suburban to avoid a suitcase in his lane and wound up strewn on the pavement with half his scalp ten feet from his head. His dog, Pilot, was ejected and found later on the side of the road, upright and unscathed. Mighty auspicious, that name.

Hank accelerated out of the funeral home parking lot and ripped through the yellow light at the corner. Andrew tightened his belt.

Grandmother Maureen was an heiress to a Texan steel fortune and the matriarch of the family. She married a World War II bomber and had the disposition to be one herself. For most of her life, she oversaw Fredericksburg Metals Inc., and she raised three sons, two of whom became physicians and the third, a rancher.

"Next time, take a lesson from that dog of yours," she said to Hank after the accident.

Andrew felt the casket press up into the back of his seat. With slight shifts in velocity, the pressure on his thoracic vertebrae increased and receded, curving his spine forward and back like a reed at the beach. After an hour, Andrew became concerned that if his father hit something in the road, again, Grandmother Maureen would plow through his midsection at 92 miles per hour, her inertia ransacking his spleen, lungs, abdomen. Everything. Quietly, he unlatched his belt, gambling that he stood a better shot at survival being catapulted like Pilot through the windshield than strapped in

and mowed down. It was a risky and also morbid dilemma to have en route to your grandmother's funeral, but it was not the first fraught choice his family had presented. Ripped your meniscus and lost the scholarship? Join the army or pay your own way. Your wife colluded with your partner and stole your business? Get a new business.

Andrew braced his feet on the floorboard. After two hours, the carburetor light lit up, and Hank pulled off the road to find a gas station. Andrew's hips ached.

"Let's hope there's a mechanic," said Hank.

"Let's hope he only needs to look under the hood," said Andrew.

"You boys quit carrying on," Grandmother Maureen thought.

They got out of the car, and Hank locked the doors with the remote. The windows were tinted, fortunately. Arkadelphia sun. It was noon, and they were due at the funeral home in San Antonio by 7. The ceremony was scheduled for the next afternoon. At Hank's rate of speed, they'd make it by 5, if not earlier.

A man walked out of the garage and nodded hello.

"What's her trouble?" he asked.

"Carburetor," said Hank, popping up the hood. Andrew wiped his forehead.

"Turn her on, will ya?" the mechanic asked.

Hank hopped in behind the wheel, with vigor, as if a dead parent did not lay behind him in a flashy coffin. Andrew distracted the mechanic with chit chat.

"Sweet shop you've got here," he said. "Family business?"

"Yep, Grand-daddy's," said the mechanic, knocking

around. "All right," he waved to Hank, pulling down the hood. "She's got a bum carburetor. Needs a new one."

"Can I make it to San Antonio?" asked Hank.

"The San Antonio three blocks from here, maybe," said the mechanic, laughing.

"How long to put it in?"

"Not long, if I had one."

"You don't have one?"

"Hang on."

The mechanic went into the garage. He didn't hurry.

"We should get Grandmother Maureen out of the sun, Dad."

The man came back with an employee, whom he sent in a pick-up to retrieve the new carburetor. Meantime, Hank drove the Chevy Suburban around the side of the garage, into the shade and out of view. He took his banjo out of the trunk and started to pick the strings. Rhinestone Cowboy. Then, he sang. Hank was a bad singer.

"You doing okay?" Andrew asked.

"We'll get there in time," Hank said in between phrases. "I'm not worried."

"Not that. Your mother, dying."

"Pneumonia at that age is tough. They can't fight it, the older patients."

Hank switched to John Denver. Rocky Mountain High. He strained to reach the notes.

Andrew shook his head and paced in the driveway on the side of the garage.

"Well, she was right about Stacy," he said.

"Which part?"

"She told me at the wedding to keep my bank accounts to myself and not have any babies. Then she said to 'go dance and have fun.'"

"Sounds about right."

"What?"

"We weren't surprised," said Hank. "Your mother and I never trusted her. And your brother predicted the whole thing."

"Are you serious?"

"Why wouldn't I be serious? You can't tell a kid everything."

"A little something, though. You can tell a kid something."

From Hank's vantage point on the curb, he noticed a wet spot on the ground underneath the car. Soon, he saw dripping. A weekend tinkerer, he didn't think that auto parts utilizing liquid were positioned in the midsection of a vehicle. He put down the banjo and crouched next to the door.

"She's leaking," said Hank, bolting up.

"That's probably normal in a carburetor."

"Not the car!"

Andrew ran around the side of the Chevy and dropped to his stomach.

"Touch it to make sure," said Hank.

"Are you out of your mind? I'm not touching it."

"Move over, then. Christ."

Hank stretched his arm under the Chevy Suburban and tapped his hand into the wet patch. He sat on the pavement and rubbed his fingers together, analyzing the texture. Then, he sniffed them at their tips.

"Formaldehyde. Look," he said, shooting his hand forward. "Sloppy work. Must have been the new guy."

Andrew jumped back, grabbing his stomach.

They determined that when the carburetor arrived, Hank would drive the car around and Andrew would hover over the spot, blocking it. The last thing they wanted was for the mechanic to think something else was awry and begin investigating. Mechanics like to find extra trouble. Meanwhile, they flanked the vehicle in case someone came by.

"You know, you told me to settle down already," Andrew said. "'Enough dating,' that's what you told me. Sitting on your patio, clear as day."

"I did, you're right."

"You gave me a deadline."

"Exactly. You had time to pick the right girl. Not the first girl."

Andrew, now 38, was two years old when Hank married his mother and adopted him. His biological father took off before he was born and moved to Georgia with another woman. Andrew's mom, thinking he'd only cause havoc, told him to stay away, and he did. At the proper time, she told Andrew about the circumstances of his birth. When he was 23, he got a call from the man, Chris, and he met him one time without telling his parents, thinking they'd feel bad. His mother and Hank had two kids after him, neither of whom was as intelligent or athletic or as good-natured as Andrew.

He rested his hand on Grandmother Maureen's window.

"You pushed me, Dad. Hard. Not like Ali and Rich. You still do."

Hank took some steps, scratched the back of his neck.

"I wasn't thrilled that your mother had you, I'll be

straight," he said. "I was on call all the time, making no money, and now a kid running around. No handouts from that one, either." He tilted his head toward the car. "Know what she said?"

Andrew combed his fingers through his dark hair, crossed his arms.

"Give him your damn name, and crucify him if he ever cheats on a woman."

Andrew took it in.

"Sounds about right," he said.

"It was right," said Hank, gripping his son's shoulder. "Bless her soul."

Andrew paced by the side of the vehicle. He skimmed his fingers along the black metal.

"I met him once, you know," he said. "Chris, I met him. Fifteen years ago."

"Down in Atlanta, I know. The bastard called the house, and it was a good thing I answered."

Hank leaned his back up against the car and closed his eyes. "Don't worry, she has no idea."

"He said he wouldn't tell you."

Hank laughed.

"Nothing since then, I figure."

"Nothing."

...

After nearly three hours, the repair had been made without further incident.

Hank blasted the air conditioner and flew out of the parking lot at high speed, warranted this time. They arrived in San Antonio past 7 p.m., but the funeral home

director agreed to accept Grandmother Maureen despite the hour, particularly given Hank's medical description of her tumescence, or lack thereof. By the next afternoon, she had been hydrated—and with additional milliliters, just in case. A tough one, Grandmother Maureen showed no sign of having been derailed or dried out.

"Fantastic," Hank said. "She looks fantastic."

In the chapel, Hank sat with his wife to the left, and Andrew, Ali and Rich to the right. Andrew turned each way, seeing the Gallagher chin ripple down the row, the blond hair glow violet and blue in the stained glass. The minister walked to the podium while the choir sang, and Hank straightened up on the bench, humming the tune of the hymn. Off key and a beat behind, he opened the Bible in his hand, his mother's, and fell upon a page held with a ribbon, marked up in the margins. A line was underlined: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." Next to the words, written in her elegant script, were his name and Andrew's. Seeing them, Hank slid the book onto his son's knee and rested it there. The music soared to the rafters, and the service began.

Pamela Gwyn Kripke's fiction, essays and feature stories have appeared or are forthcoming in Folio, The Woven Tale Press, The Barcelona Review, Doubleback Review, Underwired, The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, The Chicago Sun-Times, The Dallas Morning News, The Huffington Post, Slate, Salon and other publications. She holds an AB in English from Brown University and a Master's from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.



This Issue of

The Concrete Desert Review

features the works of:

Steve Abbott

Karen Alkalay-Gut

Japman Kaur Aneja

Rana Bitar

Robert Boucheron

Michelle Brooks

Despy Boutris

Andy Conner

Stephanie Downey

Kindall Fredricks

Mukund Gnanadesikan

Laura Hoffman Kelly

Sophie Holland

Parisa Karami

Kip Knott

Karen Koretsky

Pamela Gwyn Kripke

Cecilia Rodriguez Millanes

AnneMarie Miles

Will Neuenfeldt

Charlotte L. Oakeby

Sergio A. Ortiz

Thomas Osatchoff

Jared Pearce

Ernst Perdrict

Emily Rankin

Terry Sanville

Kalya Simas

John Tustin

Steven Tutino

Dianabee Vellie

Daniel Westrich