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Kevin O'Hara: Driving home the meaning of Christmas

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By Kevin O'Hara

PITTSFIELD — Our dad rarely passed a hitchhiker, no matter how rough or ragged they might look, or how crowded our car might be. "Boys, make room," he'd say to his three young sons occupying the back seat. Abruptly, you'd find yourself sitting in your older brother's lap, a brother with whom you'd just exchanged a flurry of angry elbows. Or on occasion, a younger sister would be dumped on top of you, her dumb ponytail swishing annoyingly across your nose.

Most hitchhikers seemed local and harmless, but others looked like shady drifters who'd never taken a right turn in their lives. Some smelt badly, belching out stale beer or dragging in dog dirt on their boots. When Mom, seated up front, would complain about Dad's perpetual habit of picking up every roadside tramp, he'd calmly reply, "There but for the grace of God, go I."

His habitual benevolence was also puzzling to his three musketeers, who'd frequently pay the price for it. At times, we'd nearly be crushed to death by these burly brutes who barreled in beside us, heavy bags and all. We figured Dad's obsession had something to do with his occupation — a chauffeur for the Sisters of Providence at St. Luke's Hospital — perhaps he believed it was his purpose in life to give everyone a lift. Our older siblings harked back to his days working the RAF airfields in England during the war, when he was dependent on the luck of the thumb to get home on weekends.

Many home deliveries

With a traveler aboard, Dad would ask him a battery of questions. When riders disembarked, Dad would know a great deal about them, but they'd know nothing about dad. A wary Irish trait, I'd later learn.

On rainy days, hitchhikers couldn't have fared better if they had hailed their own taxi, because Dad would drop them off right in their driveways, whether they lived in Cheshire or Stephentown. Over the years, we'd often say that Dad did more home deliveries than most pizza joints.

One Christmas Eve, late in the afternoon, with two little daughters up front and the three rascals in back, Dad spotted a young hitcher stranded unstrategically between traffic lights on North Street. In an eye-blink, the stranger was crammed

in with us boys, blowing warmth into his hands. Unlike many others, he was a friendly, chatty sort, who introduced himself as Henry.

"So, Henry, where might you be headed this Christmas Night?"

"Burlington, Vermont."

"Burlington! What carries you there at this late hour?"

"My parents. I'm ashamed to say that I haven't seen or spoken to them in four years."

"Four years! My goodness! Why? "Did you run afoul of the law?"

"No, sir. We had a foolish falling out back then, but now I figure it's high time I right the wrong. Mend fences, so to speak. I've heard that Christmas is as good a time for healing as celebrating."

Dad glanced at him through the rear-view mirror: "Well, son, you've right. Now settle back and warm yourself. We'll see how far we can carry you."

When our father failed to make the turn for home on Wilson Street, we three princes of Orient, with gifts on our mind, nearly busted out in tears.

"Cripes, almighty!" we muttered to each other. "Is Dad going to drive this Henry guy up Route 7 for hours and hours? Jeez Louise, Christmas-On-Wheels!"

Oblivious to his sons' backseat anguish, Dad motored past Pontoosuc Lake, headed north for the hinterlands of Vermont. But God must have taken heed of our silent pleas, because Dad finally pulled over in front of the Lanesborough police station.

"Well, son, I'm afraid this is the best we can do. I suggest you stand beneath that streetlight, so drivers can have a better look at you as they pass. Now, God Speed, and I dare say, there'll be no better gift for your parents this Holy Night than seeing yourself at their door."

A lucky bunch

Henry seemed most appreciative, both for the ride and Dad's encouragement. Before he hopped from the car, he reached over to shake Dad's hand, and turned to us kiddies, saying, "You're a lucky bunch, I hope you know that. Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas to you, too," we chimed in return.

Dad drove up to the old Sunset Drive-In to turn around, and by the time we were passing south again, Henry was already getting into a vehicle heading north, so there was no chance of Dad having a change of heart. My brothers and I let out a silent but heartfelt cheer.

Dad delightedly fired up his pipe to a cheery glow, "There, children, see how a little kindness can carry a person a long way. Now, we best hurry home before your dear mother begins to fret."

All of us lucky kids settled contentedly into our seats, each gazing out our windows at holiday lights and snow-covered pines, our thoughts lost in the splendor of the holiday season. I leaned forward and put my hand on Dad's shoulder, with no need to say anything more, as he chauffeured us safely for home.

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual Christmas column for The Eagle. Visit his website, thedonkeyman.com