

An Excerpt From

*SPECIAL DELUXE: A Memoir of Life & Cars*

by Neil Young

**PREFACE**

Originally, my idea for this book was Cars and Dogs. That seemed like a nice enough idea for my second book, basically an outgrowth of the first one. I reasoned that I have had a love affair with cars my whole life, so that would be a really good thing for me to share in this second effort. I also have had some really great dogs, and I thought that both cars and dogs would be perfect vehicles to tell some more stories.

Drawing on my pedigree as the son of a great Canadian writer, Scott Young, and my family history of author friends, I could surely pull something together that would be of interest to somebody and potentially keep me busy for a while, which I really would appreciate. It was my original hope that I could write an interesting book and continue the fun I had with my first one. The only problem I had was the feeling that the book was going to get serious and obsessive about some of the things that I really care about. That had been something I had to face with my first book. In writing about cars I would have to come clean about a lot of my feelings concerning fossil fuels, global warming, and American politics that might end up driving away readers. Unlike the cars themselves, a fun and innocent topic, the subject of politics and legislation might change the book significantly from the way it started, making it not that much fun for some people to read. I had my fair share of doubt.

To complicate things further, upon closer inspection and a great deal of soul-searching over a period of more than one hour, I realized late one night that I was perhaps the worst master of a dog that the world has ever seen. I have done almost everything wrong that one can do with a dog, and that would surely be a royal turnoff for any dog lover reading my new book if I called it *Cars and Dogs*. With that in mind, I changed the title to *Cars I Have Known* just to make sure that I did not attract any dog lovers who might really hate the book and me after the first few dogs. That said, I hope I have made the right decision in still including my dogs, and indeed some other dogs. I am trying to underplay their presence in the story by not mentioning them officially, yet including them whenever it seems appropriate.

**CHAPTER ONE**

Skippy was a Labrador mix. We had Skippy when I was a young boy, about four or five, I reckon. He was basically a yellow Lab, with some sort of other dog thrown in for seasoning and personality, as well as endurance, I am sure. I say that because my dad used to take Skippy for runs on the weekends or any other time it seemed right. The dog runs were a wonderful family

experience. It was about 1950, gasoline cost twenty-seven cents a gallon, and we had a 1948 Monarch business coupe with a huge trunk. Skippy would jump right in the trunk happily, as far as I can remember, his tail wagging and ready to go, because he knew we were going for a run in the country. After my dad closed the trunk door with Skippy safely inside, we would all jump in the car.

Omeme, our little town with a population of 750, was on Highway 7 between Lindsay and Peterborough, in the province of Ontario in the vast country of Canada, and the open and wild countryside was only about three miles away. We would ride out there together, past the dump, along the swamp, and across the low bridge—which enabled the water to slowly run under it, joining one part of the swamp, or “bog” as it was called locally, to the other part. On one side was a large expanse of water with stumps sticking out of it where trees once stood, before the mill and dam were built, forever changing the natural flow of the river. On the other side was the marsh, which was mostly cattails and swamp grass.

At the far end of the bog, at the dam, farmers would bring in their crops to the mill to have them ground by the grinding wheel, which was turned by water running under the mill, hitting a big paddle wheel. Where the water entered the mill from the bog, it swirled and kind of boiled and was really deep. That’s where the fish were living. Once, while my mom and dad were visiting friends who lived near the mill for dinner, instead of sitting around bored while they talked and drank, I went down to the mill at sunset and caught some frogs, put them on my line, and nabbed three or four really big bass, which I proudly brought back to the party.

Back in the car, though, when we got across the low bridge, it was obvious that we were on a road that was built on an old abandoned railroad line. It was straight, narrow, and all overgrown with trees. The surface was smooth for miles. We would cruise along on our old gravel road through a beautiful leafy tunnel of multicolors, the sun streaming down through them. When Daddy stopped the car I would get out with him while he opened the trunk and let Skippy out, then we would get back in the car and away we would go, with Skippy running behind. After a few miles we would reach the Hog’s Back, a road that took off into the hills. Cedar-rail fences anchored every fifty feet or so with rock piles ran along on both sides of the Hog’s Back, a more primitive and much rougher road. It went up and down hills, had big rocks on it, and had grass growing right out of the middle of it. We had to go real slow. Often Skippy would see a groundhog and take off after it, howling and barking. Daddy would stop and let him chase the groundhog for a while until Skippy eventually came back to the Monarch with his tongue hanging out, covered with burrs and all manner of sticky things.

Skippy never caught a groundhog to my knowledge, although he had a great time trying, then we would slowly crawl along the Hog’s Back in the Monarch until we got to a little pond in a farmer’s field where Skippy would drink and drink. Then Daddy would open the huge trunk door and Skippy would happily jump inside and curl up on the blanket Mommy had put there for him. We would make our way home and open the trunk, finding Skippy curled up on the rug, but instantly ready to jump out and go in the house, happily wagging his tail.

A Monarch is actually a Canadian-made Mercury, the same as the American one but with a different name. Ours was kind of light in color and was called a businessman's coupe, so named I think because it had that huge trunk for putting products in to make an instant sale. This was really a workingman's car. No frills. I seem to remember ours had a small backseat, although some of them didn't. It was simple and comfortable with cloth upholstery. My earliest recollection of the 1948 Monarch was at a place called Jackson's Point, where we lived on the lake for a while before the family moved to Omemee. I vividly recall it in our driveway in Omemee, but it was soon replaced with a four-door sedan.

## CHAPTER TWO

It was a stormy and rainy night on Labor Day weekend and the traffic was intense. We were on a family car ride to the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children. I had contracted polio and our house had quarantine signs on it, warning people to stay away. We drove to Toronto in our new four-door sedan, a black 1951 Monarch that looked a lot bigger than the old one. On long trips I usually slept on the floor, listening to the wheels turn and feeling the little bumps on the highway, but that night I was feeling stiff in my back, wondering why my mother was crying so much, and why we were driving in the middle of the night. We eventually arrived at a very big, drab-colored, and imposing building: the Toronto Sick Children's Hospital.

I was treated for polio there, starting with a lumbar puncture, which was scary and intimidating, not to mention painful. It was performed with a large needle that looked surprisingly like a fishing lure, with colored, featherlike things on the end and the big needle protruding. As I write this, I am amazed that my memory of this needle is so vivid. How could it look like that? Was it a dream?

Then Mommy and Daddy had to go home, and I was in bed in the hospital for a long time until they returned, and I finally shuffled across a small room with a shiny linoleum-tile floor, from my dad to my mom, to prove that I could walk. I was very happy to get back into the Monarch and go home. I rolled down the window and played airplane with my hand as I smelled the Ontario countryside. By sticking my hand out the window and tilting it up or down, I could "fly" my arm like an airplane wing.

Once at home again, I moved pretty slowly for a while and couldn't keep up with the other kids around town, but I was getting better, and in the fall of 1951, as soon as I was well enough, I began grade one at Omemee Public School. Miss Lamb was my teacher. She used to pick me up off the floor by my chin to get my undivided attention when I misbehaved.

The school was a three-story brick building and I remember King George's picture hanging above the blackboard. We sang "God Save the King" every morning. Still recovering from the polio, I couldn't run very well when playing with the other kids at recess, although I had no problem getting into trouble with my pal Henry Mason by making faces and weird sounds to disrupt the class. Henry and I were always cutting it up. Ultimately, we both were hanging by our chins at the hand of Miss Lamb.

That was the year I started driving, probably late 1951. There was an old Model A or Model T Ford parked on the road near school and when we walked home for lunch every day we would pass it. It was black and boxy, unlike any of the newer cars, and we were curious about it. Perhaps *I* was most curious. One day I got in it and turned the key. The car started to move! I was driving! It was my first drive. As long as I held the key on, the car would move! The owner came out and busted me right there. He told me he was going to tell my mom and dad. I was scared as hell. I walked and walked, terrified to go home for lunch. I missed lunch and went back to school, which got my mom and dad upset. I got in big trouble and confessed to my driving episode myself, without the man who owned the car ever having to tell them anything.

The seasons came and went with great regularity and the snows in Omeme were always big and deep. The pure white snow was bright in the sun, almost blinding. When spring arrived, the trees exploded in green and flowers popped out of everyone's gardens, planted in front of and around their houses. Summer came right on time with the tourists from the States and the countless wonderful afternoons at the swimming hole on the Pigeon River under the big cement highway bridge. Then fall would sweep in on schedule, changing the colors of the maple trees to red, brown, and gold, all along our Highway 7, right through the heart of town.

With the changing seasons, I could feel something in my bones, an occasional chill and tremor through my body. My soul felt it. I think it was life itself as I grew. Those multicolored leaves soon became brittle and started to fall, dying on the ground. They then were gathered with rakes into piles and burned by the roadside, filling our little town with the sweet smoke of burning leaves, marking the end of another season. Year in and year out, right on time, that was how I grew up, and I was happy with the changes as they paraded through our little town of 750 souls.

After Christmas 1951, my parents decided to take the family to New Smyrna Beach in Florida. On that first trip down to Florida, I slept on the floor in the back of the Monarch, with the sound of the wheels on the road putting me in dreamland. My brother, Bob, would sit on the seat. The back windows opened and that was really cool. I played airplane. I spent hours doing that on our long trips south every winter, as the journey became an annual tradition for our family. We would pack up and go to New Smyrna Beach right after Christmas, and Daddy would write there in our little cottage on the beach. I loved those family trips. We were all together and really happy.

Stopping at motels for the night, my mom would put hot towels on my eyes because I had sties, sort of little infections like boils on my eyelids that really hurt. I don't know why Bob and I both got those. Maybe it was the chocolate bars and candy we ate on the trips. Anyway, we were back in the car in the morning and away we would go!

When we got to Georgia we would always see the signs reading LAST CHANCE FOR PECANS! Those signs would go on for miles and miles. We always knew we were getting closer to Florida when we saw them. Once in Florida, we would travel on A1A, the route that ran from beach town to beach town. We were never in a hurry and it was the time of our lives. Gas was around twenty-seven cents a gallon. Our family's Monarch would shed about 1,296 pounds of

CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere every time we made that great trip to Florida, and on the way back we would do it again.

Our little rented cottage in New Smyrna Beach on Atlantic Avenue was right on the sand dunes and we had a path through the sand directly to the ocean. We stayed in the same cottage every year. Skippy went to Florida, too, and we would run with him on the beach. Cars could drive on the beach, so we could run Skippy right there! It was so fantastic doing that. Dog lovers: In case you are wondering, Skippy did not ride in the trunk on those long trips to Florida. He rode with Bob and I in the back.

Of course, we had to go to school, and there was one named Faulkner Street School that both Bob and I went to. We started after Christmas holidays and left after Easter holidays, returning up north to finish the year at Omeme Public School. Growing up, I went to a lot of schools—twelve before I dropped out—but it never dawned on me that I was different from most kids in that respect.

While we were in New Smyrna Beach, every Thursday we would pile in the Monarch and go to Buck's Barn and the drive-in. Buck's Barn was a Quonset hut with wood chips and peanut shells on the floor and a lot of picnic benches with checkerboard tablecloths all set up inside. They served fried chicken and French fries. We had that every week! Families and kids were everywhere. After dinner we would get in the Monarch and go to the drive-in theater to watch a new movie. Car speakers hung on posts at every parking spot. Daddy would set up the speaker in the window of the car and turn it up for the cartoons, which started just as it was getting dark. We were there with hundreds of other cars and it is one of the best memories of my life. Our family was together and all was perfect in the world.

Another thing we did very often was go out for dinner at a special place that had a buffet. I remember standing in line there one night, looking at some incredibly red apples. The apples were right in the center of everything and they were huge and bright shiny red, very appetizing. I reached in as far as I could and got one of 'em and put it on my plate. When we got back to the table everybody was laughing at me! They were totally cracking up that I had taken an apple from the big display. It was made of wax. I had to give it back.

Monday night was bingo night at our house. People from the neighborhood would come, and my mom would serve some good food. The grown-ups drank beer and got real loud, having a good time. One night, I had just learned the alphabet and went down from my bedroom and recited it for the first time in front of everybody. At the end, everyone cheered for me. What a great feeling! I really liked that approval. Pretty soon Easter came along with the big Easter egg hunt, then when we returned from Florida in the Monarch, it was the last time, probably early 1953. We didn't stay very long in Omeme.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

For reasons unknown to me at the time, having to do with my parents' marital problems, we left Omamee, where we had lived for years, and moved to Winnipeg, back where my mommy and daddy had come from originally. At that time, gas prices had risen to about twenty-nine cents per gallon. On the trip out there to Winnipeg, we put around 1,382 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere with the Monarch, but we weren't alone. In 1954, 58 million other registered motor vehicles drove a total of 557 billion miles.

When we arrived in Winnipeg, Mom and Dad were trying to get their marriage back together again. We lived on a little street called Hillcrest Avenue, at number 145, marking the first time I can remember having a street number on our house. I went to Nordale School there for the last couple of months of grade three, the new kid. I was always the new kid. I was used to that. I didn't mind.

There was a store on the corner near our house where I saw a little sailboat in the window. I would go down and look at it every day. It reminded me of the freedom I felt while playing on the river or the lake back in Ontario. It grew on me until I knew I had to have it. In an early sign of the obsessions I would have later in life, I dreamt about it every night. When Christmas came, I didn't get the sailboat, but I did get a Werlich bicycle from my grandpa Bill Ragland! It came in a big cardboard box and Daddy put it together with a screwdriver and some pliers, then I went out for my first ride. It was cold outside and the lawns still had some snow on them but the sidewalks and streets were bare. Soon, after riding on the street and falling a few times, I got the hang of it. With the wind flying through my hair, I was free! I cruised around the neighborhood, learning all the streets. I rode to school! I rode home. I rode everywhere I could. I really loved moving through the world with my hair blowing in the wind.

Every Thursday night there was a square dance at the community center, and I, at eight or nine years old, would go down there and try to do it. I was a fish out of water, not knowing any people and more importantly not knowing how to "do-si-do with the old left hand" as some guy called out instructions over a squeaky speaker while records were playing, but I did see some girls there and that was interesting. Fascinating, actually. Sometimes, when I got to dance with them, it was a thrill. I was really nervous and self-conscious, but I was having a good time. By the beginning of spring I was starting to know kids, making friends, and getting into the groove.

We used to ride to many places, my new friends and I. It seems we all got our bikes at the same time, and the freedom was infectious. There was a river, the Assiniboine, that flowed through town, and a natural trail (no cement or pavement) followed the banks going up and down through the trees and little canyons. It was called the Monkey Trail.

Created by the First Nations peoples centuries before when *they* first settled in Winnipeg, the trail was just like a roller coaster and we used to ride out there with lunch bags packed by our moms, eat lunch, ride some more, and then ride home. That would take a full day, and I remember getting home a few times after the streetlights came on and getting a real earful from my dad and mom. Of course, we could not call and check in from a pay phone, because that would not have been a good use of a dime. I probably did not have a dime anyway.

Pulling wagonloads of things around with my bike brought a new dimension to my bicycle riding experience. One day, I was out riding along pulling my wagon, and it hit a rock or something and I went flying! I landed on my head and was knocked out on the curb. I remember waking up on the road with some people I didn't know looking down at me. I had a concussion, and it took a while to come back to my senses. The front wheel of my bike was all bent. It sure was a hell of a year there in Winnipeg, and it came to an end as suddenly as it started. We moved back to Ontario.

Back in Toronto, my dad had gotten a job working for the *Globe and Mail*, writing a daily human interest column on the front page of the second section that was maybe a little like this book. We got a new car, a 1954 Monarch Lucerne, a metallic-silver four-door sedan, and if it wasn't brand-new, it was only a year old. The most fascinating aspect of this car is that, later on, absolutely no one remembered it except for me, and I remembered it very vividly. My brother, Bob, who has helped me remember a lot of things for this book, was pretty sure we never had the car. Perhaps I just imagined it. Perhaps not! It was real to me, and when I recently found a picture of it from my childhood that proved it existed, I was ecstatic. I had almost been ready to admit that it was just a figment of my imagination until I found this little photo.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Because of my upbringing in rural Canada, where the houses we lived in were in rural areas and were not numbered, it meant something special to me when we began living in houses with numbers on them; it meant I was in the big city. When we settled in Toronto, it was on another city street of houses with numbers called Rose Park Drive. I was in grade four and was going to Whitney Public School.

That year, we took a big family trip to New York City. It was my first time going there, and when we got on the New Jersey Turnpike, I saw the new 1955 Pontiacs with the two bars of chrome on their hoods. New cars always showed up first in the States, and for me it was exciting just to see them. I was always looking for the latest models and could name them all. In New York City, we went up to the top of the Empire State Building and I stood on my toes to see down over the ledge. There I was, with my chin on the cement, peering over the edge, down to the street below, where tiny yellow taxicabs jockeyed for position on ribbons of asphalt. It was almost a quarter mile down to the street from the top of the building. New York City was the biggest place I had ever seen in my life.

Back in Toronto, I got to know some kids, and as a way to meet more, I started a club that was called the St. Lawrence Committee. I had a bunch of cards and we all wrote the name "St. Lawrence Committee" and our own names on them. I got those cards from my dad's study, where he wrote his daily column. These white, heavy-stock cards were three inches by four inches with blue lines on them, and they were very official looking. We were an exclusive club, and I was the president. When we would meet at recess, it felt good to belong to something.

Near the school was a store called Dot's, where the kids all went to buy licorice candy and hang out. There was usually a car parked there that I particularly remember. It had big fins on it and a lot of chrome. I think it was a DeSoto Firedome or a Dodge Adventurer or something like that. Advertisements on TV called it the "Forward Look." I was very impressed with that car and went back every day to see it. I would get some candy at Dot's for a few cents and look at the car, imagining myself driving it and being so cool. It had a lot of push buttons and that was the new thing. Push buttons even changed gears, and I was quite impressed. I could not imagine how pushing a button could change a gear. The car was like a rocket ship. I was already obsessed with cars. The designs were fascinating to me. The power was interesting, but it was the styling that really caught my eye.

During my life, I have collected many cars and have had lots of experiences with every one of them. They were a major part of my life. I did not collect perfect cars, expensive cars, or exotic cars. No; I collected cars for their uniqueness, with little concern for their condition. Because of that, most of my cars were dirt cheap. The great majority of my proud collection was clunkers. I just loved the way they looked and got a lot of joy from just observing them from every angle, as I considered their histories and the possible places they had traveled. They talked to me. And I talked to them.

I want to tell you two little car stories. My memory doesn't always make sense, so I am not sure of the locations and times. Because new cars were always introduced late in the year preceding the year of the car, it must have been late 1956 at the earliest, since these stories are about cars from 1957. I remember this happening near Rose Park Drive in the area near the Whitney school, but I was not there in 1956. I was living somewhere else. So here is the first of my two stories, lost in time.

*Walking home from school one day I took a different way and went down a new street with big maple trees and impressive brick houses, each one with a long driveway. I saw a car parked in front of one of the big houses. It was a convertible with really sharp fins and beautiful curves. I had never seen one like that before, and I walked over to view it right up close and read the writing on it to see what it was. It was an Eldorado. I was very impressed, having never seen one. I knew that it was one of the best Cadillacs ever made. Upon close inspection I could read the word Biarritz written in a stylish script in gold metal applied to the front fender. This was a car I had only heard of and had never seen! The epitome of Cadillac quality! I was knocked out with the beauty of the sculpted body, chrome, and glass, the lush leather seats with chrome medallions in the backrests, and the overall presence of this magnificent car. I looked at the license plate. "Michigan." Of course it had to be an American who actually owned one of these. I vowed that someday I would be down in the States, living the life I dreamt of, heard about, and read about. That was where all the cool music came from, all the great cars. How did those people do that? I wanted to know.*

And now I want to tell you the second story, lost in time as well.



*I was at a friend's house, playing with his Lionel trains down in his basement. He had started building a really big layout down there, with his dad working on it with him. It had a plywood foundation with a lot of hills, bridges, and curves. It was under construction and going to be really amazing. I don't remember ever seeing it finished, but it left a mark on me. I can still see it clearly in my mind. I hope he and his dad finished that layout. As I was walking along on my way home from playing trains there, I noticed a stylish new car parked on the street. Walking up to it I saw that the electric rear window went up and down by pushing a button inside. I was very impressed with that feature, having never seen, or even imagined, anything like it. Also, there were little chrome ornaments on each fender with lights in them. This car was unreal. Looking at it further, I discovered it was a 1957 Mercury, a Canadian car with Ontario plates. I read the words Turnpike Cruiser on the side. I had never seen so many new and different features on any car. A spare tire, cloaked in shiny chrome, was located on the extended back bumper that hung way out over the back. It was huge. My mind was blown. It made an indelible impression on me that I can still feel. Why? It is part of me. New designs I have never seen before seem to stay with me forever.*

While I was living on Rose Park Drive, I put my own design energy into making a submarine out of two-by-fours and nails. Near our house there was a park called Moore Park with a wading pool in the center of it. Even when it was filled with water it was not deep enough for swimming. That is where I tested my submarine. I designed the submarine based on aerodynamic principles I had learned with my airplane hand sticking out the side of Daddy's car. Using a wooden two-by-four as the main body, I cut a downward-sloping, wedge-shaped front end onto it with a handsaw. The sub was about sixteen inches long. Pulling the submarine along on a string connected to the front end caused it to submerge and travel underwater. For stabilization I added a conning tower made of another two-by-four cut into a different pointed vertical shape, and cutting through the water, it straightened out the slight wobble I had noticed. My wooden submarine would pop up to the surface whenever I stopped pulling it forward. It had to be moving to stay submerged. I drove big nails into it to represent guns, and it looked increasingly formidable. In fact, it was so formidable that it was banned from the pool by the authorities. They viewed it as a dangerous weapon.

The Wing brothers, a couple of Chinese boys I kind of knew from school, lived across from Moore Park and had a band. That year, in 1955, I went to Mayfair, a yearly event that was held every spring in Rosedale Park, which was a lot bigger than Moore Park, and watched the Wing brothers play on a little stage. I watched the whole thing go down, thinking it was really cool. People clapped after the band played, and the guys were very happy. That was something special to me. I saw they were doing what they liked and that other people were clapping for them.

At Mayfair, after watching the Wing brothers and their band, I won a very ornate and colorful leather collar with marbles and studs on it by throwing tennis balls at a rubber rabbit. I decided to give it to the girl I particularly liked, Mary Ellen Blanche. I felt more than a little nervous, walking up to her house to ring the doorbell and give her the gift. She was very pretty with blondish-reddish hair and a light complexion, a lot like my wife Pegi looks now, come to think

of it. Her mother came to the door, and when I asked if Mary Ellen was home, she said no, so I had to leave the gift with her. Years later I was told that maybe she might not have thought that a dog collar was a good gift. I still had a lot to learn about boys and girls, to say the very least. It's the thought that counts, though.

It was around this time that I saw my mom and dad have a big fight, and Mommy was screaming at Daddy and he hit her. I don't know what they were fighting about and I guess I wasn't supposed to be there. Later Daddy said that my mother was hysterical and that's why he had hit her. Up to that point I had only heard the word *hysterical* associated with laughter. I really didn't like what I had seen, and I spent a lot of time during the following days in the basement with my little secondhand Lionel steam engine. Down there below the house on the cement floor, where I was in my own world with my electric train, the furnace, and the musty-smelling water pipes. I forgot about everything else.

It was a little damp in the basement, and sometimes I got a shock when I touched certain things. Bare feet did not work. One hanging lightbulb illuminated my little train set. I would sit on the floor and experiment with the transformer, holding the train and watching the wheels spinning and throwing sparks. That was the beginning of my long relationship with electricity.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

In the summer of 1955, when I was nine years old, our family moved again; close to Pickering, Ontario, about thirty miles from Toronto, and into a new clapboard bungalow my mom and dad had purchased on Brock Road. My dad later wrote that this move was to be a new start for my family, referring to the problems that had been brewing in our house back in Toronto. My mom single-handedly painted the entire outside of the house a beautiful white. She painted everything inside the house as well. She really loved the place, and planted some trees in the front field that eventually became a lawn that Bob and I mowed with a gasoline-powered mower. My mother poured her love into that house, making it look great and doing everything she could to make it feel like a good home. I realize now, she was trying everything she could to make our little family work.

Once we settled in, I entered grade five at Brock Road Public School, a one-hundred-year-old stone schoolhouse with two classrooms—grades one through four in one room and five through eight in the other.

Some cars were known as “bombs” back then, when they were customized and “souped-up.” There was a guy who had a cool bomb on Brock Road in 1955. He used to stop at Middleton's confectionery store across from our old stone schoolhouse and buy cigarettes, which he would roll up in his T-shirt sleeve, like the movie star James Dean. His bomb had blue lights under it and it made a low rumbling sound. He always left it running, and when he got in it to pull out onto the road, he crowded up by the steering wheel with his elbow out the window so you could see the cigarette pack rolled up on his sleeve. His posture was very different from a normal driver like Daddy.

At Middleton's confectionery store, bubble gum cards were big, with Elvis having his own line of cards. I remember this guy and his car well because I would go in to buy a five-cent pack of gum and cards and he was in there a lot. He and guys like him were known as "hard rocks" or just "rocks." His hair was greased back and came down on his forehead a little, and it came together in the back with a DA (duck's ass) or ducktail. His bomb was so cool. It had no door handles. I wondered how he got in and out and locked it and everything without any door handles. I would watch him outside Middleton's and still couldn't figure it out. It was a 1950 Monarch, maybe a 1949, because it was a little different from my dad's 1951. As he drove away looking so cool, his two exhausts made that low rumble, unless he was in a hurry and stepped on it, then it got really loud like a machine gun. Daddy's old Monarch did not do that at all. The rock's bomb really had a lot of attitude.

We had a gang of boys, maybe four or five of us, who walked home from school together every day. The gang did not include my two best friends, Chuck Bent and Reggie Taylor. Chuck lived up a side road behind the school, right near an old railroad bridge, in a big house full of kids, and Reggie lived the opposite way from me on Brock Road, about a mile past the school. The gang of boys walking in the direction of my house must have looked like a scene from *Huck Finn* or *Tom Sawyer*, scrubby-looking youngsters, ready to go fishing or investigating. A gang unified by scruffy hair and curious faces, always intent on some goal.

Walking along the road the same way from school every day, we were pretty predictable. There was a guy who lived in a house on our road, and he started waving to us from his front steps as we walked by. After passing him a few times, we waved back. One day, he asked us to come in. Curious as ever, we accepted and went inside the house. He sat us down in his living room in a big circle like we were at a meeting and told us he was going to teach us something he called "whacking off." He unzipped his pants and pulled out his pecker. Then he began. He encouraged us all to do the same thing. So we did. We never got the results he did. He said you had to use your imagination, or something to that effect.

The whole thing took a bit too long and I couldn't wait to get the hell out of there. We all agreed he was weird and we never went back, at least I know I didn't. I never told my mom and dad about it, either, and we made a pact that it would just be our own little secret. Every day when we walked by after that, we just kept going straight ahead and walked on, never looking over at that house again.

While we were living on Brock Road, we got a brand-new record player. It was a Seabreeze, and I think it was my mom who got it. It had a rectangular shape with a lid that opened on the top and three control knobs on the outside. There was a cloth on the front that had some shiny metallic threads in it and a speaker behind it. The finish was a blond wood, and I remember how excited my mother became because she had found a cabinet that matched it perfectly, a wonderful place to store all of her old records by Lena Horne and Satchmo. She loved those records. She arranged all the furniture so the record player was the center of attention.

My own 78 rpm record collection began there at Brock Road and consisted of Jerry Lee Lewis, Larry Williams, Little Richard, Elvis, and a few others. Rock and roll was just in its infancy when I played those records in the house alone, pretending *I* was singing those songs while I stood in front of a mirror, the Seabreeze blasting at full volume. I sang the songs right along with the singer and played my own imaginary guitar, making all my Elvis moves and soaking up the wild applause I was hearing in my head. I imagined I was winning some talent contest. I only did that when no one else was around; those moments alone in the house when Mom and Dad had gone out and Bob was at a high school dance or something. That Seabreeze had a magical transporting sound, and I would look forward to being left all alone in the house with my dreams.

*Well, come along my baby, whole lotta shakin' goin' on.*

*Yeah, come along my baby, we really got the bull by the horns.*

*We ain't fakin'.*

*Whole lotta shakin' goin' on.*

—JERRY LEE LEWIS, “WHOLE LOTTA SHAKIN’ GOING ON”

We were all very happy to be out of the city, with a lot of land behind our house like we used to have in Omemee, but Daddy had a job working at Orenda Engines near Toronto. He had to drive to work every day and was gone a lot. Orenda made the engine for a famous Canadian plane of the time, the Avro Arrow, a delta-winged interceptor aircraft that was touted to be superior to its American counterpart, the F-35. Daddy was a public relations assistant to the vice president, or something like that. That is the only time I can remember him doing something other than writing for a living and I imagine it was not that great for him. I guess sometimes his stories just didn't sell.

Daddy sold his 1954 Monarch and got a 1956 Volkswagen shortly after we moved out to Pickering. It was fun to ride with him in it because it was small and we were close together. My mom had to have something to drive since my dad was gone so much in the city. For the first time, we were a two-car family! The little Volkswagen parked in our gravel driveway with my mother's 1950 Ford coupe.

One birthday, I guess it was my eleventh, I got a plastic Arthur Godfrey ukulele. It had a picture of Arthur Godfrey right on it, with some musical notes. With its nylon strings to tune to the little whistle that came with it and an instruction booklet full of chords, I was ready to go. One day, getting nowhere, I was trying to play it in the backyard when Daddy came out and said something about showing me some old songs. I was dumbfounded when he started to play and sing “Bury Me out on the Prairie.” I had never heard him sing or play and didn't even know he knew how to play. I knew Uncle Bob played uke and piano and sang; we had all sat around listening to him and my girl cousins, but not Daddy, and there he was, singing and playing great. He looked so different; so light and happy. I will never forget it. I learned a few chords from him and started to learn to play myself. That was my beginning in music, that and the Seabreeze. I never saw my dad play again, though. I don't know why. There was some reason I didn't understand.

In 1956, Daddy got simultaneous jobs with the *Globe and Mail* newspaper and also on TV! That was very exciting. He was hosting *Hockey Night in Canada's* intermission program, *The Hot Stove League*, every Saturday night. Those two jobs returned him to the kind of work he loved, writing and sports. Of course, for our family that meant another move. It also meant more money than we had ever had before.

## CHAPTER SIX

When we moved back to Toronto, our new house was at 49 Old Orchard Grove in North York. I checked into school at John Wanless Public School, a beautiful old brick-and-cement four-story building between Fairlawn and Brookdale Avenues, with a huge playground surrounded by a fence. I finished the last few weeks of grade seven there and then went for a full year, completing grade eight. I was then ready for high school at Lawrence Park Collegiate. Probably all that early moving around is why I am so happy traveling now. A lot of the kids I knew in school were reluctant to move. I always liked to go to new places, so that didn't scare me at all.

During this time, my dad did something quite unusual and different. He purchased a very cool and deluxe car, a 1956 Monarch two-door hardtop convertible. It was an attractive and sporty design with no post between the windows, so when they were down there was an openness. I was an avid follower of all the car designs, fascinated by every new twist and turn. When my father purchased this car it was the first time we had ever had a car that was more than just a standard sedan or coupe. This really got my attention. Perhaps he was rewarding himself for all of the success he was enjoying. It was a very big and stylish car, a statement, new in every way! I was thinking to myself, *Wow! Daddy has a cool car. This is really something.*

Life in the city rolled on. I had only a few friends at my new school. I never really had a lot of close friends anywhere we lived, though, usually just one or two. One I met was Brian (Bunny) Stuart, who lived one block over from Old Orchard Grove. He was into sports and I was into music and cars, but somehow we related really well and he became my best friend there at old John Wanless Public School. We spent a lot of time together, and I got to know his family well and spent many hours at his house. His brother had a 1958 Chevrolet Biscayne. I knew that the Impala was the nicest Chevrolet model that year, but that Biscayne of his brother's was really sharp. Every time I visited Bunny's house, I checked it out thoroughly when it was parked in the driveway, imagining the differences between it and the Impala. The Impala had a very sexy treatment over the rear window and more taillights than the Biscayne.

I missed my dad. He was in and out of our house and was writing in an apartment in the city a lot. I would always look for the big Monarch in the driveway when I came back from school in the afternoon, but it wasn't there much.

At noon hour, I would regularly stop by another friend's house where I could listen to some records. I don't remember his name, but music was always playing at his house and I really liked that. Every afternoon after school we would gather there to watch *American Bandstand* on TV. I couldn't wait to get to that part of the day! Dick Clark gave us the music news as Conway Twitty

and Johnny Burnette served up hits along with Roy Orbison, the Everly Brothers, Jack Scott, the Kalin Twins, Marty Robbins, and several others. Music was taking up most of my spare time as my interests were all starting to revolve around it.

*Once you told me long ago,  
To the prom with me you'd go.  
Now you've changed your mind it seems.  
Someone else will have my dreams.*

—MARTY ROBBINS, “A WHITE SPORT COAT (AND A PINK CARNATION)”

That fall, I started grade nine at Lawrence Park Collegiate. During this time there was a group called the Sultans that played at some of our local dances, and I would go to watch them every week with my friend Comrie Smith. Comrie was a schoolmate one year ahead of me who had dreams of a life in music, dreams like mine. We were the best of friends and used to buy records at a local store, Robinson's Radio and Appliances, on Yonge Street, located conveniently between our houses, about three blocks from mine and two blocks from his. When we started jamming in his attic with my uke and his guitar and bongos, it was the beginning of me playing music with others.

About Christmastime, Comrie failed math and was put back into my class for that subject. We walked to school together a lot after that, becoming good friends, listening to a little transistor radio and talking about music, music, music. We built a solid friendship, and he was one of my two best friends during that time of dreams and big plans of a life in music.

Every day on our walk to school, at some point we would leave Yonge Street and pass through residential streets, crisscrossing our way toward Lawrence Park Collegiate and listening to Gene Vincent or Bo Diddley on the transistor as loud as it could go. Sometimes we would try to play these songs at home on our instruments. We were pretty primitive. I don't think we even knew how to find those chords yet, but we were exploring.

*Well, she's the gal in the red blue jeans  
She's the queen of all the teens  
She's the one that I know  
She's the one that loves me so.*

—GENE VINCENT, “BE-BOP-A-LULA”

Comrie had a car called Priscilla. She was an old Plymouth, a fun old car. He and his girlfriend, Lynda, a really happy, friendly, and pretty girl, used to spend a lot of time with me. Often the three of us would get in Priscilla and go for a ride to a nearby park overlooking Yonge Street, the main drag, where we would hang out and talk about music and life. Just sitting there on a bench or on the grass, talking together, looking through the trees at the cars going down the hill into Don Valley, dreaming about music and bands; we became three good friends. I always thought Comrie and Lynda would be together forever.

*Well, pretty soon I met a friend,  
He played guitar.  
We used to sit  
On the steps at school  
And dream of being stars.  
We started a band,  
We played all night.*

—“DON’T BE DENIED”

Comrie and I dreamed about how someday we would make it in music. I don’t remember any specific plans, but we were big dreamers. Every time there was a dance with a live band, we would go and watch them play. Church dances were popular and we would travel around Toronto, following the bands. The Sultans were one of our favorites, but we would go anywhere we could to see any band. Sometimes we went to areas where the dances were a little dangerous, with gangs fighting and older kids around, drinking. We stayed away from that, but still we always went to see the bands. Sometimes we were too young to get in and had to listen from outside. Occasionally, we could watch through a window in the side of the building, standing on something to get enough elevation to see. Each time we would take note of the equipment, the outfits they wore, the singers, the guitar players, drummers, and organists, anything to do with the music being made. We knew who was hot and why, and we had our own favorites.