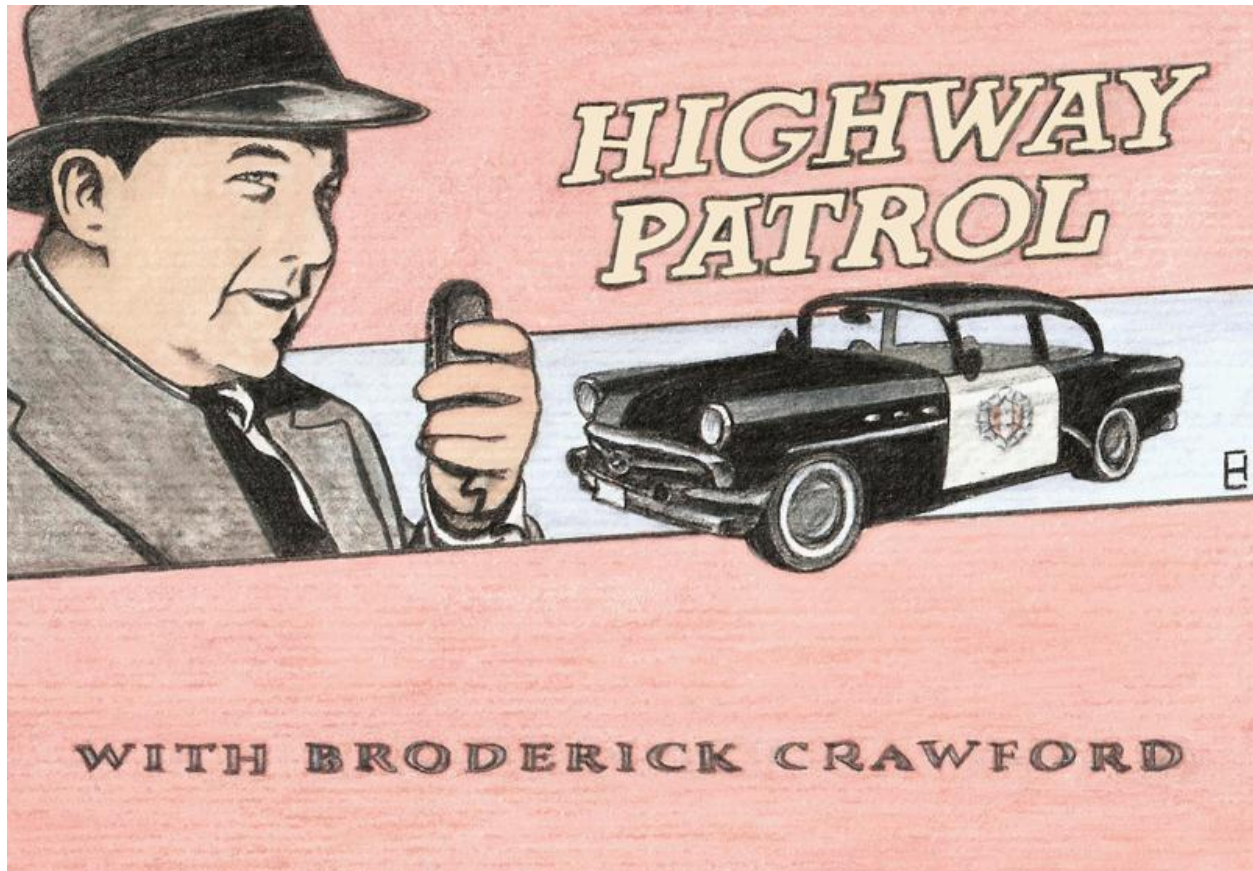




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THE STORYGRAPH



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My Friend, the Impressionist

Nick and I rode in the backseat of the car,

while our friend Steve had to ride up front beside Nick's father, Bruce. Among us all, Bruce was by far the loudest and most obnoxious.

Never mind that we were twelve-year-old boys, bothered by everything exclusive of our love for skateboarding; and that Bruce was in his mid-forties, and was supposed to be burdened with responsibilities like marriage, work, and health. Bruce was a nuisance. In fact, I am convinced that he had elected himself a member of our gang with the exclusive intention of annoying us. Bruce's son, Nick, seemed less embarrassed to have his friends over and more relieved that, finally, someone else would suffer his father's inappropriate and famously unfunny fart jokes, his prank phone calls, and his tendency to administer the occasional wedgie.

Indeed, Bruce was somehow able to ruin every agreeable event that presented itself. The only reason why we were presently in his company was the result of sheer misfortune. Nick, Steve and I sat in the kitchen reviewing the movie show times listed in the local paper when Bruce stumbled upon us. As soon as he discovered what we were up to, it was decided, without our votes being taken into account, that he would join us. He immediately abandoned any other commitments that might have prevented him from impinging on our fun—dentist appointments were re-scheduled, business meetings were cancelled, dinner with his wife was forgotten. The film to be seen was of no importance. He was driving us to the movies; that was his goal and his glory.

By far the worst part about knowing Bruce was having to ride along with him in his car. The reason for this was mainly due to the peculiarity of his vehicle. Bruce had renovated a vintage Buick into the perfect replica of a highway patrol car in homage to his childhood hero: Broderick Crawford, or rather, Chief Dan Mathews, the character Crawford played in the 1950s television show *Highway Patrol*. The car was garnished with all the details proper to a 1950s highway patrol car; it was fully equipped with a siren, the original insignia painted on the driver's door, and a speaker microphone, which Bruce used liberally.

On our drive to the cinema, while waiting at a red traffic light, Bruce grasped the microphone and, with absolute conviction, declared: "Citizens alert: I have detained a band of serious nerds, ten-four," and he proceeded to name all of us who were in the car, one by one, as we slouched in the backseat, while poor Steve, who rode up front with Bruce, remained visible to all of society. I remember being that fellow on occasion. The embarrassment was unbearable. Things worsened when Bruce played the television show's theme song over the loud speaker. Reactions outside the car were mixed: some people loved the spectacle and would even applaud, others appeared to be frightened and almost everyone became annoyed once Bruce turned on the police siren.

At this point we would usually express our displeasure. "Cut it out, Bruce" and "stop being so lame" amounted to the breadth of our argument against his antics. Bruce ignored us, of course. Nothing prevented him from enjoying his invented highway patrol pursuit. Still, we continued to complain. Our judgments failed to produce the results we desired. To the contrary, they worsened our circumstances. Bruce parked the car, kicked us out, and forced us to walk in procession as he drove behind us, announcing into the microphone that the teenage boys on the street played with Barbie dolls and that they still wet the bed. And yet, during this shameful spectacle, as I listened to Bruce publicly destroy what little dignity we might have had, I couldn't help but also remember the sincerity with which Bruce would sometimes say, "Great to see you, son," when I'd arrive at his home, or the excitement in his tone when he'd ask us, "You boys hungry for pizza tonight?" And as he followed behind us in his Buick and continued to slander us while we marched ahead in disgrace, I knew that he was watching us from afar, as if from a world that we teenage boys could not yet imagine, smiling with eyes that betrayed the love of a father.

The Buick served as the model for Bruce's obsession with Chief Mathews and the *Highway Patrol* show. However, Bruce owned many other collectibles dedicated to his hero. For example, the household was often forced to sit through a series of video clips from his favorite episodes of the show, or survey his collection of rare photographs, signed memorabilia and toy police

cars. Likewise, Bruce never left the house without his wide-brimmed fedora hat, just as Chief Mathews had worn.

Even before he grabbed his car keys, the hat was on. Perhaps part of his affection for this cap relied on its ability to cover up the bald spot on the back of his head, but when you saw him drive his Buick while wearing that hat, you saw a young boy's fantasy realized—a demented fantasy, to be sure, but a fantasy nonetheless. You witnessed at once success and absurdity. On the one hand, Bruce had created for himself the world he had always dreamed about when, as a child, he watched his hero fight crime on television; on the other hand, sometimes I think Bruce actually believed that he was Chief Mathews.

Sometimes I wonder if we were wrong to judge him. I have never attacked an ambition with as much passion, with as much pride, as Bruce did his ambition to imitate the great Chief Mathews. It was his fearlessness and disregard of opinion that rendered him so annoying, yes, but it is also what made him so joyful. Bruce did not allow the chance of embarrassment to thwart his happiness or his dream. Now, when I drive my own car, I often think of the Buick, the static behind Bruce's voice as he would shout into the microphone, the resonance of the police siren, the scent of leather and gasoline, and I reckon that maybe it was not that Bruce was any less sensible than the rest of the world, but that he was simply unable to control his overwhelming, magnificent, incandescent love.

