

## Trust

### *Does This Mean No Judas Priest?*

Late August in Rochester, New York is quiet and 1984 was no exception. My parents were headed to Boston to pick up my college-aged sister from a summer job and they needed my mother's diesel-powered Pontiac Bonneville Safari Wagon to haul her things, leaving me, a newly-licensed driver, alone with my father's 1983 silver Mazda RX-7.

A poor man's Maserati, the Mazdarati, as my father dubbed it, was a low-slung, two-seater with an all-black interior, pop-up headlights, crank-it-yourself moon-roof and best of all, an impossibly loud stereo and cassette deck. With its rotary engine, the car's performance fell far short of German imports but represented good bang for your mid-life crisis buck. Difficult to get into and agony to get out of for a man of my dad's six-foot plus size, it was beloved nonetheless the way a life preserver is clung to by a drowning man and symbolized one last chance for my 46-year old father to show the world he was still young.

Whether or not I'd be able to drive the Mazdarati in my dad's absence was the subject of great debate. I begged him over and over, insisting I'd be careful while steering him away from the pesky fact I had never driven a stick shift. They say the sins of the father are visited upon the son but so too are the generosityies. From hearing stories of his childhood, I knew my father wanted to trust me with the Mazdarati the same way, nearly thirty years before, his father trusted him with his car. So after a bit of hemming and hawing, in a beautiful gesture of love that said I believe in you, he handed me the keys. This was his first mistake.

Sixty seconds after the Safari Wagon left the driveway, I called my best friend, Party. In full disclosure, his last name *was* Pardi, but the nickname owed more to the fact he loved being wild. On a typical night, Party would slurp a plate of hot sauce, snort a pile of black pepper and eat the biggest dead bug he could find before stripping off his clothes and running naked through the neighborhood. To put it mildly, he had a problem with authority. I didn't, so our relationship was akin to a parole officer and felon. Beneath the veneer of rebellion and general insanity, I knew Party was a good guy – think maniac with a heart – but I was also well aware of his knack for pulling me off the straight and narrow. So when I told him my mom and dad were

out of town for a week and I had the Mazdarati, I could only blame myself for what happened next.

“Come pick me up,” Party said.

Party didn't believe in bathing daily, doing homework or wearing pants, but he loved fast cars. So doing as asked, I sped madly over to Party's house with Prince's *Let's Go Crazy* reverberating from the Mazdarati's speakers at full tilt. Life grants a handful of moments where you feel the full, spine-tingling exhilaration of unfettered freedom and this was one of them. I was a preening peacock fanning my feathers to the world - untrammelled by anything the world had shown me to that point. And if I could have remained that way for years to come, it would have been wonderful.

“I know a short-cut back to your house,” Party said as he climbed into the passenger seat.

“A short cut?” I asked.

Since our friendship began in sixth grade, our parents had driven us back and forth to each other's houses several hundred times at a minimum and never once had any of them *mentioned* let alone taken a shortcut.

“Trust me,” Party said. “The sooner we get back to your house, the sooner we can call up some girls.”

My Party radar, a usually reliable device, signaled me loudly to ignore him but inexplicably I ignored the radar. Perhaps it was my father's inspiring faith in me or perhaps it was the mere mention of girls and my vision of having them over to my house with no parental supervision. Whatever the reason, I decided to trust Party. This, of course, was *my* first mistake.

The next thing I knew we were on the road traveling in a strange direction with the windows down, roof open and music up – way up - full of the mindless confidence that comes naturally to high school males. With big, fat grins our faces; we were naval aviators – our ceiling and visibility unlimited.

Arriving at the top of an unpaved road Party directed me toward, I came to a stop and surveyed what was ahead.

“This is it,” Party said.

“There's no blacktop,” I observed.

“Blacktop is overrated,” Party insisted.

“Really? I always find it helpful,” I said.

“Let's just go. Girls are waiting for us, remember?”

Beneath a thick canopy of trees, I could see the initial outline of a narrow dirt road leading steeply downward – a vaguely beautiful but deserted place I'd never been.

“Is this a one-way or two-way road?” I asked.

“Not sure,” Party said as he rifled through a vinyl case containing my prized collection of mix tapes. “What difference does it make?”

“Just seems like a good thing to know,” I said.

“Let's go! I've got a radical tune I'm putting in,” Party said as he opened up one of the cassette boxes.

I took a deep breath, shifted into first gear and put my foot down on the accelerator. The road's initial steep, straight incline was manageable but my momentary confidence evaporated as I felt the Mazdarati picking up speed quickly – too quickly. Suddenly, before I could slow it down, the road curved sharply - first to the right, then to the left. Unhappily aware I was going too fast, I hit the brakes hard and the car began to slide on the dirt, its back end fishtailing to and fro, while I frantically tried to steer it back to center.

Things moved in slow motion. In my periphery, I saw Party's mouth hanging open and a bright white cassette tape in his right hand. But with the car's back end beyond my control, my mind rapidly shifted its attention from the trivial to the terrifying and thoughts of what the car would do next. The answer was a 360 degree spin before leaving the road, diving downward and smashing into a deep, dirt embankment.

When we finally came to a stop with a violent, frightening thud, more than half the car was buried in dirt. The force of impact sent mounds of soil through the moon roof, covering Party and me completely. Brown dust particles, made visible by the fractured sunlight penetrating the surrounding forest, billowed into the car through the air conditioning vents and danced around us as we sat stunned. Everything was silent save for our breathing.

Concerned for my friend, I turned my head toward Party who now looked like a life-sized, chocolate Easter bunny. The only bit of white to be seen was the corner of the cassette tape he was holding at the time we crashed and still clung to tightly.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“I think so. You?”

I nodded.

“Does this mean no Judas Priest?” Party asked, holding up the white cassette.

Without responding, I pushed my door open, climbed out and assessed the damage. The immensity of the trouble I was in threatened to overwhelm me but I wasn't ready to enter the

acceptance phase yet. If there was damage to the car, I couldn't see it since everything was covered.

"I think it's okay, Party. I think it's okay," I repeated aloud, hoping that somehow I would dig beneath the dirt and find no injury to the Mazdarati's metal.

In a frenzy, I started excavating with my hands, burrowing ever closer to the front of the car like a crazed squirrel determined to uncover a buried nut. Within seconds, I discovered undeniable proof that things were definitely not okay. The front left end was crushed inward and no amount of wishing it away was going to work.

"It's *not* okay, Party. It's *not* okay! Sh@#\$t!" I shouted.

By now, Party had extricated himself from the car and was standing next to me.

"You know if we can somehow limp this baby back to your house, there's still enough time to call some girls," he said.

"Do you want to die?" I asked. "Just keep it up."

The next minute, a passing delivery truck saw us and stopped.

"You guys need any help?"

"No, not at all," I said, still stuck in denial. "We're good."

After the truck's departure, we managed to unearth the front end of the Mazdarati and push it back up onto the road. Miraculously, it started and I slowly steered the mangled mass the remaining two miles to my house. It was nearly dinner time now and I faced a dilemma. Should I call my father or not?

"You have to call him," Party said.

"You think?"

"No question. It's the right thing to do. You have to do it."

"Since when did you care about doing the right thing?" I asked.

"I'm just looking out for you as a friend," Party replied.

"But I don't want to ruin their vacation," I said, looking for any reason I could find not to call. "Are you sure I have to call?"

"Positive. Absolutely positive," Party assured me.

Hungry, dazed and numb from the day's events, I found the hotel number my parents had left and decided to get it over with like an animal tearing off a leg caught in a trap.

"Yes, may I please speak to Mr. O'Dwyer in room 408?"

"I'll put you through," the desk clerk said.

After six unanswered rings, the desk clerk returned.

"I'm afraid there's no answer. May I take a message?"

"Sure, will you tell him his son called and that he needs to call home?"

"Very well. We'll give him the message."

I hung up with a deepening sense of dread. Now, I would be sitting by the telephone waiting on the worst call of my life.

"You never should have called him," Party said.

"What?" I blared. "You said I *had* to call him. You said you were *positive*."

"I know. But I thought about it some more and your vacation point was a good one. This is going to wreck it for him."

"Thanks, Party. Thanks a lot."

Unbeknownst to me, things in Boston weren't going any better. Just as he trusted me with the Mazdarati, my father decided to trust my sister with the Bonneville Safari Wagon when she asked to take it out for one last night of fun with her summer internship friends. This was his second mistake.

By the time the Bonneville made it back to the hotel, it looked like it was on the losing end of a brawl with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. And, unfortunately, by the time he got my message to call home, he had seen the damage suffered by the Safari Wagon and was already at the tippy top of his pissed off ladder. Of course, I didn't know any of this when the phone rang at 11:00 p.m.

"Hello?" I answered, praying it was a wrong number.

"Hey it's Dad. I got your message to call. Everything all right back there?"

"How are things in Boston?" I re-directed, hoping he'd won the lottery or something.

"Well, your sister banged up the car so it could be better."

“Funny you mention that, Dad. See I had a little problem with the Mazdarati.”

What followed next is something I've worked hard to block out of my mind over the years. My father was a professional yeller when he wanted to be and this was one of those times he decided to go pro. To his credit, he did inquire as to whether I'd been hurt, albeit very, very briefly, before his barrage. Although it was too late to change course, it dawned on me as I sat there listening to him scream me back to the Stone Age that I had assured him of my personal well-being much too quickly and with far too much certainty. This was *my* second mistake. I should have feigned a neck injury or a groin pull perhaps.

By the time my parents returned home two days later, my father had cooled down a little bit but justifiably reminded me daily of the inconveniences I had caused him with my irresponsibility as he dealt with insurers, repairs and driving my mother to work while we were a one-car family. Unsurprisingly, my driving privileges were revoked and my dreams of taking any girl out on a date in the Mazdarati died. Party, who made sure not to be around when my father got back from Boston, asked me to let him know when I thought it was safe for him to come over again. I told him to check back in 20 years.

Life seemed over to me at the time. Aside from my loss of freedom, I had lost the confidence and trust of my father. But today, when I drive down the same road, long since paved and part of my regular routine, it reminds me of new opportunities rather than lost ones because eventually, months and months after the Mazdarati had been repaired and the hassle of driving me everywhere began to take its toll, my dad trusted me with his car again. And this is something I'll remember when my own son turns 17 and comes asking for the keys to my car.