

# CHAPTER 1.

## DERBY DAZE

This is all so strange.

I feel as if a dozen unpleasant bodily sensations have switched on at the same moment, all of them so far beyond my control it is as if I observe them from a polite distance at the same time they run riot within me.

Perhaps you will recognize the symptoms.

My stomach is upset. I am sweating profusely from glands strategically placed throughout my body. My vision has been slightly blurry for the last half hour, and every once in a while I notice my hands actually suffering tremors. All of this relates directly to concerns I have about my companion of the morning, who is not even in sight at the moment.

Still, if I cannot see him, I know for certain he is somewhere in this noisy, over-crowded function hall, running around with other nine- and ten-year-olds, probably committing unintentional acts of minor arson. He has brown hair and was last seen wearing a blue cub scout shirt topped by a neatly rolled, banana-yellow bandana whose rolled ears come together over his breastbone in a metal ring embossed with the blue and gold image of a wolf.

This nine-year-old cub scout is of average height for his age and thin; I prefer to think of him as wiry rather than frail. Once, long ago, he possessed wispy golden curls for hair, but now they are gone and in their place lies a thick field of brown matting, with a cowlick rising in the back and reaching out like a perpetual waterspout. If I think about it, he looks much like I did when I was his age, even down to the way he divides his hair with a half-hearted part on the right side of his head.

Like many things in his young world, the part in his hair runs barely longer than the thought that created it.

I am talking about my little boy, of course, my very own nine-year-old son Michael, who I call Mickey and who, at this precise moment, though I cannot see him, is running around somewhere in this room, most likely laughing and shouting with his friends. An easy assumption, since most of the room's occupants are contributing without restraint to the deafening volume of noise and chaos that surrounds me.

There is no reason to be concerned about this, however. Given the circumstances, the shouts and screams and laughter are entirely appropriate.

Manufacturing noise is what young boys do when you bring them together in large numbers in confined spaces. And they are definitely here in large numbers. I estimate more than two hundred cub scouts present, half of whom are in constant physical motion, their screams, cheers and cries rebounding off the linoleum floors and green painted walls of St. Theresa's church basement hall without noticeable rhythm or pause.

If you happen to be a parent, you will have been in countless rooms like this before. As the father of three children, I have been in a thousand at least, or so it seems. They are easy to remember, these anonymous rooms dedicated to civic ritual, because they are all so similarly forgettable. You only need remember one to remember them all.

These are the rooms where parents organize book fairs and bake sales, where little leagues hold their spring sign-ups, where Christmas Pageants are presented and sixth-grade dances are chaperoned. And, oh yes, where cub scouts gather on an early

February morning, dragging their fathers out from winter hibernation and post-NFL depression for the Pinewood Derby.

If you look in the approximate center of this swirling mass of blue-shirted boys you will see a clearing in the middle of which is an imposing structure that looks something like the downhill segment of a roller coaster. The structure, the actual Pinewood Derby 'racetrack,' begins about four feet off the ground at its starting gate and runs downhill for twenty feet before reaching the linoleum floor. On top are three parallel wooden tracks, each with an elevated guiderail down the center on which the model racecars are placed; and down which, once the starter

restraints are removed, they race furiously for all of 4 or 5 seconds, totally under the impetus of physics and the requirements of gravity, until they cross over a finish line marked in yellow tape on checkered linoleum squares two feet beyond the end of the wooden run.

I marvel at how something that happens this quickly, in five whizzed-by seconds, can be so captivating and exciting for nine- and ten-year-old boys. But then I realize we are dealing with new age children whose attention spans blink on and off in nano-seconds, and my sense of wonder is blurred by the sharpening image of a reality that never ceases to surprise and discomfort me.

I have long realized that I am little more than a stranger in this strange land of my children. No longer the child at the center of his own universe, I have become an adult—worse even, a parent—and have been transformed from a leading player in my life's story to an inconsequential character in that of my children's. Leaving myself no room to hide from life's unpleasant realities, I accept the fact that I have risen to heights of inglorious accomplishment which parallel, even surpass, those of my own parents. I am now, without doubt, tolerated by my children as culturally obtuse and terminally

dimwitted. Or, as they might phrase it, "...too dim to light a refrigerator."

How many times have I been startled by the fact that I do not understand the world my children inhabit? Their particular zone of the planet is not a familiar or welcoming place for me with its quick cut video images, its harsh music, its casual familiarity with foul language and sex, its unattractive hair styles and, most especially, its body jewelry puncturing the human form at any number of

inappropriate places. I make it a point never to count the number of piercing metal objects my eldest daughter Susie has mounted, like teenage battle trophies, on the rims of both ears. The one time I jokingly suggested she might imperil herself by exposing her head during a lightning storm, she did not appreciate the humor.

Then again, where the women in my family are concerned, the men of the family rarely meet their high standards for humor.

You will notice that none of these aforementioned women from my aforementioned family suffered the need or the interest this morning to accompany their brother Mickey and myself down to this church basement; cub scout activities occupying one of the lower positions on their menu of interesting spectating sports. But the truth of the matter is we do not need women with us this morning, my little boy and I. What we need is luck. And I am not referring to the winning kind, as you will soon come to see.

Have you ever been to a Pinewood Derby?

This is my first Pinewood Derby, and already it has become one of life's little learning experiences.

It is a marvelous thing to watch the individual races, or heats as they are called. Once the three racecars have been placed in position, usually with extreme care by their respective cub scout

owners, the thunderous buzz of noise and energy subsides, as if a switch had been thrown under an immense weight of expectation and anxiety. Then the individual gates, nothing more than pins that retract into the guiderails, are simultaneously withdrawn, and instantly the noise level shoots up again, as if the audio segment of a hurricane or some other ferocious natural

cataclysm had been abruptly turned back on; with no apology offered for the interruption.

Under the rising storm of screams and cheers, the three cars duel each other for all of three to five seconds. Each race, if you pay close attention, has its own unique qualities. Most are actually decided in the split second after the restraining pins fall away, when a single car usually ends the suspense by jumping to the lead and holding onto it for the entire distance. Occasionally, the contest is a seesaw battle for supremacy between two cars; but occasionally, all three vie for first place.

If you are not feeling overwhelmed by the desire to personally witness a Pinewood Derby, do not be concerned. It is not an experience whose pleasures are easily described or vicariously enjoyed. To be fully appreciated, it must be experienced firsthand. Otherwise, there is very little for one to hold onto. Without the roar of the crowd, the surprisingly stylish, almost professional look of the home-made racers, the titillating presence of a table filled with Pinewood Derby trophies, each with its gilded racecar pitched upwards in a drunken strutting pose and, especially, without the non-stop buzz of two hundred would-be Grand Prize Winners, you are left with nothing more than a child's racing game to consider—two hours of individual heats, three cars at a time, five seconds to a run.

But make no hasty judgements. Do not be deceived by my inability to convey the thrill of this unique annual sport competition.

More often than you would expect, the outcome of a race is too close to call and the two official cub scout spotters lying on their stomachs flanking the

finish line, their faces pressed close to the linoleum floor, call out excitedly that a second heat is needed. For the most part, however, in four out of five races, there is usually a clear cut winner crossing the finish line first. And conversely, two clear cut losers following soon thereafter.

And now, if you would, take a close look at this object in my hand. Allow me to raise it up for your inspection.

This—for those of you who cannot see, or for those who cannot identify

what they see—this is one of those rare Pinewood Derby powerhouse racecars. In fact, so far this morning, this humble creation has powered itself to victory in five different heats, two of which were decided in second heat runoffs.

But now, take a good look at this demon of the Derby and you will start to understand why my nervous system is working under such a severe strain.

Go ahead, look closely at this leading contender for one of those ten dollar trophies with the gilded plastic racecars snobbishly tooting upward into the air. If you did not already know what it was supposed to be, and that it had taken its place amongst model racecars by the hundreds, what would you see? What would you make of what you see?

At first glance you would find yourself looking, with wonderment, at a small, elongated block of wood that someone foolishly painted fuchsia. I say ‘foolishly’ for the simple reason that this shade of fuchsia is so bright and garish it seems patently inappropriate for an

object this small and so poorly defined. There is also the possibility that some observers, though they would be committing a

grievous mistake, would look at this painted wooden form resting in my hand and imagine its color to be pink.

There it is: 'pink.' I said it. Please, God, let that be the last time the word passes through mine or anyone else's lips.

But continue to rest your eyes upon this object, and observe closely what happens.

Gradually, the object, or its general shape, begins to grow familiar—am I right? You begin to detect car-like qualities in the way its various aspects come together and occupy space. Yes, its shape definitely bears rough resemblance to that of a car. Or a child's idea of a car; like a cartoon automobile magically brought to three-dimensional reality.

But still, the resemblance is not clear enough to give you confidence in your opinion. You suspect it was meant to be a car, but you are not ready to commit yourself. So, you begin to break down and separate the individual segments of this brightly painted block of wood. In the middle, there is a protuberance that sticks up like the topmost section of a child's finger. If you allow your imagination enough license to animate this upright plug of painted wood, you begin to see it was meant to look like the head of a racecar driver, and not a lifeless nub of wood. And the boxlike segments to the front and rear were probably intended to be the engine and trunk of that selfsame child's car. And there, straddling the bottom of the block, without any imagination required, are four black plastic tires. They are, in fact, the only elements of this modest effort that resemble their real life counterparts.

We are gazing upon the final product of a weekend's futile efforts. A weekend where too few hours were stolen from too many activities

to allow anything more than this gaudy imposter of a model racecar to emerge from the virginal block of wood my little boy had been given by his cub scout troop.

I hasten to add, to avoid any misunderstanding, that if the tires seem true to life, it has little to do with the modeling skills possessed by me or my little boy, and everything to do with the fact that the tires and their individual axles, come fully manufactured and ready for use along with the kit, as if someone knew that a minimal amount of realism was needed to keep these cub scouts and their fathers on solid ground.

However, if one of the objects of the exercise was to keep our feet on solid ground, this humble achievement I hold in my hands proves how far short, indeed, my little boy and I had fallen from the objective.

Take, for instance, our attempt at applying racecar graphics to our miniature racecar. Look on both sides of our model's bright, (dare I say?) 'pinkish' exterior. There, where another father and son team might have simply applied realistic racecar decals, you will notice instead crude, hand-painted white symbols, one on each side of the car. At first glance, these symbols appear undecipherable, like primitive caveman drawings. Their legibility is not helped by the fact their whiteness is barely maintained against the bleed-through of the fuchsia. Which creates, of course, the false impression that the blurry white symbol is about to give itself up to more of that 'pinkness' whose presence I seem compelled to acknowledge time and again, even against my deepest will.

Now, if you squeeze your eyes into a fuzzy squint, and hold up the block of wood so you are looking squarely at one of these white painted symbols, you can actually start to see, or imagine, the number two surrounded by a poorly drawn circle. The number itself,

of course, represents the body count of those responsible for creating this act of aesthetic mayhem.

“Let’s make it number two,” I had suggested a short week ago, both of us in my apartment kitchen, hovering like inattentive gods over this freshly painted model racecar, “just like there are two of us,” I explained. “What do you think?”

“That’s cool,” my little boy decided with hardly a thought.

But now, looking at it in the cold cruel morning light of St. Theresa’s basement hall, there is nothing ‘cool’ to be seen. If I had the time to do it over, I could be easily convinced to omit the number two altogether and leave the surrounding circle as testament to the number of modelmakers on our team who actually knew what the hell they were doing.

Ultimately, if you hold the entire object further away, at whichever angle you choose, eyes squinting or not, consciousness set at high or low, you start to realize you are looking at the juvenile attempt of a child and his father to create a model racing car. The final product of two amateur craftsmen with too little experience and, probably more significant, far too few carpenter’s tools.

Surprisingly, my little boy does not notice my discomfort. Nor does he seem to realize how ungainly a model racecar he and I have brought to this day’s derby.

This is the real miracle of the morning. Not our winning five consecutive elimination heats, not our remaining undefeated while legions of meticulously designed racecars have fallen by the wayside, but our making it through all this complex, unfolding activity, where human lives and hopes intertwine so closely, without being spotted or called out for the poorly dressed clowns and imposters that we are.

But there is little solace in having gone this far undetected. It is a miracle that resembles a penny balloon floating high up into the heavens. You watch it climb, awed by the grandeur of its flight, all the while knowing it will inevitably burst once it reaches an altitude where the pressure is too great.

At this moment, I cannot do anything but watch the balloon as it continues to climb, paying idle attention to the fact that my hands are moist and periodically seem to shake.

My little boy, on the other hand, seems quite happy. 'Ecstatic' would be a better word. He is not yet old enough, I suppose, to suffer from the disease of social self-consciousness that greatly afflicts both his sisters, who if given the choice would rather be shut up for life than be seen wearing or doing anything that could be labeled 'uncool.' But my little boy has not yet caught that particular strain of social virus. His sights are set on more manly standards of accomplishment at the moment. Rather than measure himself against the other scouts in terms of the aesthetics of our humble creation, my little boy is content to be the proud owner of an absolute killer winning racecar. 'Content' is too mild a term. In truth, he is totally inflated with pride and beguiled by the heady aftertaste of fresh killed conquest.

And so, my little boy (not to overwork the balloon metaphor) floats grandly above the losers and the also-rans who populate this bleak, noisy and very crowded church basement. The fumes from his victories hold him high above the realities that worry and upset his father. Unlike my little boy, I am not elated. I do not savor our victories. Instead, I silently pray to whichever God holds dominion over this basement hall that my little boy will continue to remain innocent and elated and unaware of the lowly place he and I occupy in this subterranean world of exquisitely designed and torturously crafted model racecars. At least, (please, God!) until we can remove ourselves from the premises.

Now I see him!

There, on the other side of the room, running back and forth with Billy Montcrief, Ivan Pittorney and Louie Marino. They are playing some form of tag that requires only minimum attention to any apparent set of rules.

I suddenly feel myself smiling; feel the tension release as my facial muscles shift autonomously into positions I would have thought were lost to memory. As if my face, intent on smiling, has declared independence from the control of my battered and beleaguered emotions. That is not true, of course. That is not the way things work. If I smile in reaction to seeing my little boy immersed in child's play, it does not mean I have been released from the bondage of my worries; only that I have been furloughed for a few brief moments.

And what a joy it is to see my little boy filled with energy and the ever-present hint of life's potential fullness; to observe even from across a crowded room how he enjoys his brief moment as a competitor-chomping, Pinewood Derby

hotshot. It is also quite a rare sight to see him so openly animated by positive feelings. Mickey usually expresses his emotions more discreetly, and mostly by himself. He is not aware right now that he is sharing his elation with others. Still, it is no less a window into his present state of mind to see him running around in circles, trying to tag an elusive Louie Marino, as it would be to hear him relate his deepest feelings to a therapist.

Five times he has carried our clunky, tropical-colored creation up to the starting block, and five times he has survived elimination runs where all the other scouts competing against him have not. And each time he has scampered happily up to the finish line, retrieved 'Old Number Two' and carried it with immense pride back to his seated, substantially more subdued, father whom, if the truth were

known, sits on the sidelines waiting for our luck to catch up with us; waits for my little boy and two hundred other cub scouts to discover what a shamefully ugly piece of work we have brought with us to this year's Pinewood Derby.

That we have not yet been discovered—*that* is the real miracle of the morning!