

Ole Ruth and the Runaway Piano

By John Atkinson

At nineteen, I was given an upright piano. It was a huge thing weighing nearly a half-ton. I owned a pickup truck, Ole Ruth, which had lots of muscle. She was a '41 Dodge with a big block V8 hemi, four-barrel carburetor and duel exhaust. But I needed help to load the piano, so I asked Smart Frank and Dumb Bob. They only agreed to help because they wanted to ride in the fast red truck.

On the way I stomped the gas pedal a few times to give my friends what they wanted, speed. Ole Ruth provided that and it made our young minds happy. I pulled up to a curb in the neighborhood where the piano was and windows rattled from the truck's high compression engine. Eyes were on three young men getting the job done. No sweat, we were dripping with cool.

I asked the former owner would he help us load the piano. He agreed, and a few of his neighbors helped too. Legs buckled and backs strained but somehow we managed to get the instrument onto the back of Ole Ruth.

That thing was tall and top heavy. I figured that I would lose it in the first turn. Smart Frank was astounded I could think that far ahead. Dumb Bob agreed with Frank, not knowing Frank was jerking my chain. I didn't care. My pals thought I was being a square when I asked for a rope. They teased, but the man gave me a cotton sash cord the size of my baby finger. "Thanks, Mister, for your generosity," Smart Frank wisecracked. The cord was weak. It snapped in half, but after doubling and redoubling the long line, I felt sure four strands would do the trick. So off we went. Even though we moved at a

good clip, my friends made fun of me saying I drove like an old foggy. Let 'em have their fun. If I more than feathered the gas pedal Ole Ruth would lay the load on the road.

I decided to go back to our neighborhood by a different route, one with not so many turns. That was a mistake because the road I picked crossed the main intersection where the Virginia State Fair was in full swing. The light caught us at the fair grounds' main gate. I had to make a wide swing crossing four lanes to get to the highway home. A State Trooper figured I needed assistance and stopped all traffic. He waved for me to go-a-head. I eased forward but the racing engine cut off. Nothing like that had ever happened before. The stalled truck made the trooper agitated. I kept Ole Ruth tuned so she quickly fired back up with a deafening roar. We loved it, but the Trooper didn't like the sound of her pipes. He waved harder for me to "get going." I eased out on the clutch, drove partway into the wide turn and Ole Ruth cut off again blocking everything. Arms swung wildly from the blue and gray uniform as he yelled for me to move my truck or a wrecker would.

No doubt the officer was sorry he'd stopped traffic for three lost souls with cigarette packs rolled up in their shirtsleeves, wheeling a loud red truck that wouldn't run slow. He yelled and I lost my cool, flooding Ole Ruth with too much gas. The State Man headed our way and my pals looked at me when a fresh thought entered Smart Frank's mind. He said, "Hold the gas pedal to the floor." I did and Ole Ruth fired back up, exploding in anger. The big block hemi idled radically and rocked the tiny cab as if to say, "Turn me loose, Johnnyboy. I'm ready to roll!" Not yet. The Trooper held onto my door and stared at three guys who would never learn a lot about philosophy and thinking

ahead on things. The officer spoke his mind. “If you don’t get this deathtrap moving, I’m going to lock your ass up.”

He meant business. I glanced at Smart Frank, he at Dumb Bob and they yelled what came to their minds, “Hit it!”

I don’t know how much horsepower was under the hood of Ole Ruth but it was a lot. The truck moved forward fast and the piano banged against the tailgate. Halfway through the wide turn, the sash cord snapped. “Blessed Mary, Mother of Jesus!” Dumb Bob yelled. The truck’s bed bounced up a foot when the huge piano sailed over the side and crashed into the curb and broke into a hundred pieces. What was left of the keyboard played a sorry tune.

In the rearview mirror I watched parts of the big piano slide in a new direction from Ole Ruth. Smart Frank, cool as could be, called that “a sequence of inertia” and Dumb Bob, not knowing what inertia meant, agreed. But I called it Ole Ruth and the runaway piano, a big mess on the highway. There was no time to explain physics to the law and that we didn’t have a desirable rope. We were just cool guys from a poor neighborhood. But the Trooper saw I had a fast truck and now the piano was his problem, blocking traffic he’d stopped. Served him right for threatening to lock me up. My pals agreed. They yelled a meaningful recommendation from a limited vocabulary of cool: “Hit it!”

I stomped on the gas and by the third shift of the four-speed transmission we were moving at a high rate of speed, which made our young minds happy. The big carburetor moaned as to suck the hood down into the motor. With a sound like that, who needed a piano anyway? No one I knew could play.

Dumb Bob said they had a tow truck on standby and the police would soon clear the streets, and things would be back to normal. By then, we would be long gone.

Smart Frank wisecracked, “Damn, Dumb Bob, you’re getting smart.” I didn’t agree, just kept both hands on the wheel and my eyes on the road. A few minutes later we had deeper concerns. Where could we scrape up enough money for a six-pack and gasoline to ride? Ole Ruth was thirsty from the high speeds, the gas gauge nearing empty.

We laughed about the lost load. That was good medicine. I wanted to contact the law and say I was sorry. But thanks to Dumb Bob I didn’t. Trying to be cool in front of Smart Frank, Dumb Bob spoke with an air of confidence, “Johnnyboy, it was just an accident. That cop inertia-ed that piano mess on himself.”

That comment rang Smart Frank’s bell and he spoke to me. “I don’t know what’s more dangerous, Ole Ruth or Dumb Bob.”

Bob fired back, “But nobody got hurt.”

I had to agree with him. We could laugh and laughter was as good as gasoline at 24 cents a gallon. Problem was, we could only afford one thing at a time, gasoline or beer. “Hold the beer,” Smart Frank said. “Let Ole Ruth roll. Hit it!” Minus one piano, Ole Ruth provided speed and that made our young minds happy.