

The Unspeakable Buggy Ride

By John Atkinson

The dumbest stunt Frank and I ever pulled was with a huge 19th-century pram. He found it at a dump. It had spoke wheels the size of a small bicycle and was spacious enough for us both to ride inside. I wanted to make a miniature stagecoach but Frank said first we had to ride it down Staple's Mill hill. Being twelve years old, I didn't think that was a cool idea.

"Man, you can't let anybody see us with a baby carriage."

"I know that," Frank said, his pride injured. "You take me for a nut case, Johnnyboy?"

"No, I wouldn't do that." I marveled over the carriage's suspension, large springs and strong axles. "How did you get this thing home without anyone seeing you?"

"Took a shortcut through the woods and hid it behind the woodshed like anybody would do with half a brain." The brown leather cover had deep scratches. I tried to imagine the trouble he had gone to. Frank spoke from one side of his mouth, "Ain't I cool?"

"Yeah. The coolest."

I looked to see if anyone was watching us. We were on spring break and had earned a reputation for doing crazy stunts like hopping a freight train. If anyone ever saw us with a baby carriage, we would never live it down. I wanted to take the skin off and make a buggy right away. But Frank said we had to do the acid test.

That night with the full moon bright, we set out at dusk with the carriage to a hill a mile away. We hid in the brush avoiding automobile headlights. After a few cars had passed, we faced the steepest grade anywhere. As I stared down the slope I told Frank things looked like we were doing another insane stunt.

“It’s nothing but a molehill. Get in and I’ll push us off.”

“Hey, Frank, it’s more than a molehill. A guy broke his arms when his bicycle tire blew out going down this molehill, remember?”

Frank said that the kid didn’t know how to handle a bike and a lump in my throat felt like a golf ball.

“It didn’t kill him did it?” Frank said.

“No, but he’s still decked out in bed hurting bad.”

Frank said, “Hurting was the mother of invention. With enough pain one tends to get smarter.”

We turned the handle to face downhill. Frank could jump in without anything in his way. “Let’s do it,” Frank said. I got in and Frank pushed us off as fast as he could run. At first I thought it was a setup—that I would be in the pram alone. Faster and faster he ran. Then he hopped in behind me while I held the foldaway sunbonnet down with both hands. Sitting on my heels, I peered over the edge at the great downhill slope. The pram rode smooth like a car, but right away it veered off to one side of the road. We learned fast how to get it back on course. If the cart drifted to the left, we would lean to the right to straighten it up. That got confusing after we were traveling at a good clip. We didn’t have much control over the guidance system. The faster the cart went, the closer the intervals of corrections became. From panic, I leaned to one side and Frank the other.

After we traveled about a tenth of a mile, I wanted to know if we had passed the bridge at the bottom of the hill. But my pal was concerned about gaining more speed.

Frank yelled. "Keep your head down. You're causing a drag,"

I worried about slamming into the concrete bridge abutments. Also, with the last correction, the stroller cocked over onto two wheels and close to the edge of the pavement. Before I could think straight we passed the bridge in a flash. "Got-damn, we're doing a hundred," I yelled.

"Hold her down, Johnnyboy. We're going to crash."

I thought to myself, *We're going to get killed. I don't know why I hang with Frank. Oh, Moses, help me out of this one . . . a stupid baby carriage. Everybody will laugh when they find out we got done in by a baby stroller. I can hear them now.*

We were going faster than the posted speed limit and the baby carriage cocked onto two wheels out of control. I closed my eyes and thought about some of the crazy stunts Frank and I had done. We rode a bicycle over a ramp knowing there was no way you could avoid falling in a ten-foot drainage ditch. Frank said with his math a man could make the span without injury. He held a pad of paper and had drawn curves crossing curves and letters here and there. Everyone in school knew Frank could think in high math like trigonometry. The big guys in the upper grades called him a freak because of that. I would never do that. Hell, I didn't know what trig meant.

I spoke to a classmate who gathered his courage to jump the ditch. "Hey, man, my genius pal, Frank, said he doesn't expect anyone to make the span but me."

"You're crazy, Johnnyboy."

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "I know it."

The ditch stunt took its toll. Boys all over went home with broken arms, ribs, deep cuts and bruises.

Frank bragged that I had more nerve than a bad tooth. To get the guys stirred up he said that I had made the jump, which was an outright lie. He swore his math was correct, that I could do it. Frank said I stood a better chance of getting across if we had a motorcycle. He said I needed more speed. “Who do we know that’s got one?” Frank asked.

“Hey Frank, I’m too young to do something like that.”

“That’s not so. Look at you. You’re as big as me.” Frank held his hand at the top of his flattop haircut and saluted toward me.

A kid spoke up in the group of guys. “Nobody is going to let Johnnyboy have a motor bike. He can break a blacksmith’s anvil.”

I swelled with pride while Frank rechecked his marks on the pad of paper. He spoke with confidence. “Johnnyboy can jump the ditch with his eyes closed.”

I told the boys I had never done anything with my eyes closed except pray I would live through Frank’s stunts. They laughed but knew I had spoken the truth.

Frank changed his conniving jive. “How long you think it would take for the world to learn Johnnyboy jumped the drain ditch on a motorcycle? Hold it!” Frank threw up his hand. “Let me answer that. About two hours, that’s how long. Glen Allen would be on the map.”

Frank went into a rant. “I’ve seen Johnnyboy do things nobody else had the guts to do. Remember the time he swam Hoen’s Pond in January? That took nerve. Who else

would try that?” Frank watched for a show of hands. “Anybody here want a shot at that? No hands, huh.” Frank turned to me. “Now think who has a motorcycle.”

That’s how Frank talked me into doing insane stunts. Here we were, doing something crazy again. I could feel the baby carriage cocked onto two wheels to the point of no return. But somehow it straightened up again. My eyes were closed and I heard weeds brush the leather coating of the pram. Legs folded beneath me, weeds beat against my shins. Frank grabbed hold of my belt at my backside and I buried my head between my knees, covering what little brains I had with my forearms. The sunbonnet I had been holding down popped up like a parachute.

I prayed. *Moses, help me out of this one.* But I had already learned that there ain’t nary a thing you can do with fast times but pray for a good number . . . an easy crash landing. Frank had schooled me with the law of averages.

The sound of brush got louder with each passing second. Were we gaining speed or losing it? I couldn’t tell. It was better we had tall weeds than trees or a barbed wire fence.

Something wrapped around the forward axle, which caused the handle bar to drop to the ground. It drug along until it hung onto something stable. The pram stopped and I flipped head over heels through the air. I thought I was going to die, but didn’t have time to dwell on that. My landing took a few layers of skin off my hands, but I escaped death without breaking bones, only a big knot on the forehead. I looked around in a daze. Frank was in a heap a few feet behind me. If Frank could get up I knew he wasn’t hurt. Otherwise, he would die on the spot without saying goodbye. Well, maybe a chuckle or

two in his death-throes about what we could have done to make the pram go faster. Still alive, we brushed ourselves off and laughed.

Frank cut through all the complicated things and made life simple. The greatest thing I learned from him was trust. He said without trusting your instincts you've got nothing. I trusted in the Great Spirit and Frank said I was right.

Some years later Frank crossed the USA in a car that didn't have an engine. Who could think of such a stunt and pull it off? He would ask strangers to tow him a mile. He had chains, ropes and a makeshift tow bar. To accomplish something like that he must have used some really good numbers.