

## Escaping the California Highway Patrol

By

Jute Panama

High school is designed to teach you to do dumb things. Let's be honest, doing stupid shit defines most people's high school experience. I majored in it. Nothing says stupid in a louder, clearer voice than running from the California Highway Patrol. These boys bring their "A" game and don't take kindly to a seventeen-year-old kid who is clearly smarter and better at everything than they are. Any teenager can go on at length about the failings of the previous generations and how they won't be making those mistakes, thank you very much. Like I said, it's a dumb time in a young man's life.

For the stupid, life lessons should hurt. Otherwise, dumb people don't learn. Or in my case, they learn the wrong lesson because unadulterated dumb luck reared its malformed head, and the unjust escape the justice they so sorely need.

I often wonder what my life would have become if I had faced a reckoning that night. Might I have been scared onto the straight and narrow by chrome handcuffs? Was there a life of prudent choices and mediocrity waiting in the shadows of Highway Forty-Nine that night, illuminated by flashing red and blue lights? If given such a worthy excuse, could my mother have beaten me into a less rebellious form than the scarred and broken man that now recounts this pivotal moment in his own downfall?

Who knows? Fuck it. Here's what you need to know.

I can't speak for women. They remain a confusing and captivating riddle wrapped in a mystery hidden in a thick fog. I just do what my wife tells me; it's so much easier than thinking for myself. But when it comes to men, I can tell with some authority that every generation of men finds a new and completely original way to be total fucking idiots. Usually, it's an annoying way. My friends and I specialize in annoying idiocy.

I grew up just west of Lake Tahoe and east of Sacramento in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. There are only two things to do in any rural area. The first involves doing unmentionable things to farm animals, and the other varies by geographic location and terrain. We'll skip the first; that story isn't appropriate for this setting. In my case, terrain and economics meant that the only other thing to do when not getting frisky with Mr. Ed was driving. The area surrounding Placerville is a labyrinth of winding highways and county roads just begging to be driven at ludicrous speeds. Roads that were surprisingly well-maintained, and they even had banked corners in some areas. Nice. The economics of the area meant that my friends and I weren't driving around in Italian sports cars. We had beaten up domestic cars with the odd

Volkswagen thrown in for good measure. They were slow, didn't handle for shit, and had crappy stereos. Don't get me started on the tires.

What we did for fun was racing. To race, we needed to convert our shitty vehicles into something else, something better, something illegal. First step is to lower the car; this drops the center of gravity and has the added benefit of taking the shitty suspension out of the equation. The second step is to steal performance tires from the used tire pile behind the Goodyear shop, usually between two and three am. Step three involves stealing carburetors and any other performance-enhancing items we could find from the Pick-N-Pull off Auburn Rd. After modifying the cars, all that was left was to round up enough beer and dope to modify the drivers to the point that this all seemed like a good idea. It wasn't.

The main obstacle to driving fast on a winding road is other drivers. Mostly the ones coming from the other direction. To take a corner fast, you need to start wide, hit the apex of the corner as tight as you can, and then finish wide again. The problem is that you spend half the time in the other lane when doing this, and since humans can't see around corners, you end up dead after hitting the other car that you had been hoping wasn't there.

Did I say humans couldn't see around corners? Fortunately, teenage boys aren't human. My friends and I barely qualified as being self-aware, forget about being human. But being stupid and smarter than the adults around us, we learned how to see around corners. Headlights were the Rosetta stone of driving. Coming into a corner fast, at night, we learned that you could tell if there was another car coming at you by their headlights illuminating the trees and bushes on the far side of the corner. It wasn't perfect, but it worked most of the time. It worked well enough to drop the risk factor from suicidal to just idiotic. Idiotic, we could handle. The thing that really made this trick of seeing around corners work well was if your headlights were off. In the dark, another car coming would light up the road for a quarter mile in front of it, making it very easy to spot before diving into a corner at unsafe speeds.

We all had our favorite roads to run. For me, it was Highway 49. The ten miles of road between Placerville and my house was a beautiful run of freshly laid asphalt that was smooth as a baby's bottom with iridescent white and yellow lines marking the center and outer boundaries of the road. I knew every bump and corner like the back of my hand. Like any good monster from mythology, forty-nine was most dangerous around the full moon. With a bright moon high in the night sky, the lines of the road popped like video game graphics, allowing me to see much further than the meager fifty feet that my headlights gave me.

To have a great run and maximize speed, the timing had to be just right. I needed a full moon so I could see the road clearly with my headlights off. It needed to be late enough that traffic would be light, usually after midnight was best. And most importantly, I needed to be right on the razor's edge of stoned enough to make it seem like a good idea, but not drunk enough to end up in a ditch. With alcohol, there is a fine line between loose and smooth, and skidding into oblivion.

It was a good night for a run. Just after one am with a full moon hanging high in a clear spring sky. I pulled over just after passing the city limit sign informing me there were just shy of eight thousand people living 1886 ft above the sea, two hundred miles away. After a few minutes, I was satisfied that my night vision was in full effect and that there probably wasn't another hit left in the pipe. I took another hit anyway just to be sure and put the car into gear. I rolled the windows down and listened to the night while I dialed the dashboard lights down to nothing. Even though the stereo fell victim, the soft light coming from the tiny display was an unwelcome distraction. The music would only interfere with listening to the tires. A tire will tell you when it's close to losing traction if you know how to listen to its song.

One last check of the mirrors, and I dropped the clutch hard while mashing the gas pedal all the way down. Gravel and dust shot out from the nearly bald Eagle GT low-profile tires as the beat-up, lowered Ford bounced violently onto the smooth blacktop. The tires squealed and smoked as they spun onto the road, throwing the back of the car sideways before physics pulled everything in line, and I shot off down the track.

The Ford Motor Company can boast some pretty impressive credentials in the automotive world: Shelby GT500, F150, GT Forty, Thunderbird. You have to go towards the bottom of the list before you get to the 1976 Mustang II. A variant of the Pinto platform, it combined the styling of a dirty brick with the performance of an old dirty brick. Pintos were known for blowing up when rear-ended. Ford fixed this fatal flaw by changing the name of the car, thus reducing Pinto deaths to nearly zero while causing a spike in agonizing Mustang deaths. The four-cylinder engine produced as much power as a battery-powered child's toy combined with the mileage of a garbage truck. The suspension had been designed by a man with a very Italian-sounding name, but lacking any sort of engineering degree or even general knowledge of how cars used tires to stay on the road.

It didn't matter; the car could hardly be considered a Ford anymore anyway. The rear leaf springs had been reversed. Instead of holding the axle and wheels a comfortable distance away from the car, providing a smooth ride with lots of travel for rough roads, they were now pushing the axle up into the body of the car, immobilizing it. The only cushion was the two-inch-thick rubber pads that prevented the axle from damaging the car in the event of a catastrophic event. Like a teenager reversing the leaf springs. That sort of event. The front coil springs had been heated red hot until they lost their spring, and the front end dropped. Later, the top two coils had simply been cut off to drop the front end even further. During high school, I had a running bet that if anyone could slide a pack of cigarettes from the front of my car to the back, they would win twenty bucks. No one ever collected; most of them paid me two bucks to back my car up so they could unwedge their smokes from the frame.

There wasn't much to be done about the engine. We tweaked the timing to get more power out of the high end, but only a little. The tiny four-barrel carb had been modified with baling wire. Yes, real, came off a bale of hay, baling wire. The secondary two barrels that normally only opened

when the pedal was pushed all the way down had been wired to open simultaneously with the primaries. It caused a bit of lag in the acceleration and shot the mileage all to shit, but gave a nice little bump in power through the mid to high rpm range as it dumped fuel into the engine.

I chirped the tires, hitting second and then again hitting third. Clutches are easy to fix and fun to break. Pushing the car near the red line, I kept it in fourth as the speed climbed past 80, keeping the engine running hard in its meager powerband. The first corner came into view a hundred yards out. The 25-mile-per-hour warning seemed less like a bad joke and more like an affront to my driving skills. The general rule of thumb when cornering is that you should be taking every corner twice as fast as the warning. The white and yellow lines lit up my path into the corner with a glowing radiance that could only exist in the 80's. Fifty feet from the curve, I push right until the right front tire is barely on the road while I viciously shift into third, letting the clutch do most of the hard work, slowing the car below 70. Hard to the left across the white line and into the apex of the corner. The left front tire skirting the edge of the blacktop as the tires sing a warning. Still holding the same line, I hit the gas and accelerate away from the apex, regaining speed lost coming into the curve. Across the dotted white line again and out to the edge of the road, pushing the speed back up above 80 as I finish a smooth line through the corner.

With all the windows down, more than just the wind rushes in. The engine sounds normally dampened by the firewall and insulation of the cabin come alive and speak in staccato voices vibrating with power. The tires tell you the story of the road, the small bumps of center and edge reflectors act like sonar pings reporting your exact position on the road. More than the wind and sound of the car, the open windows let the road in. The car melts away as I fly without wings through the night, my entire existence reduced to the next apex, the next line, bouncing up above 100 on the long straight.

Normally, I had a rule. If I saw headlights coming, I would drop to sub-light speed, turn my headlights on, and resume driving in my own lane.

Normally.

Maybe there had been another hit left in the empty pipe. Maybe I had lost count of how many beers I had consumed that night. Numbers above twenty are hard when you are drunk; it's not my fault if I lost count. It doesn't matter, for whatever reason, I decided to have a little fun with a random stranger that night, freak them out by flying past them in stealth mode. The section of road was a long straight that came to a slight crest before dropping gradually down into another set of tight corners. It seemed a fairly safe section for my clever little prank. I even sped up to make it more dramatic.

We met right at the crest of the rise. I flew past him, going nearly 90, lights off, trailing sparks as my lowered car cleared the rise and slammed into the blacktop, grinding off part of the frame. It was glorious. It was perfect. I could imagine the other driver's eyes going wide in shock and confusion as I gloriously disappeared into the night.

Let's take a moment to revisit the previous topic of teenage idiocy. It just became relevant again.

I was right about surprising the other guy. I was very wrong about how I surprised him.

When I was a kid, I saw one of those nature shows about life on the African Savannah. There was a segment where four lions were sitting in the shade in the heat of the day, and out of nowhere, a small, delicious pig ran past all four, only a foot away. There is a moment of utter confusion between the lions as they try to understand what just happened. It was a brief moment. Seconds later, the four lions were up and moving. Thirty seconds later, they were eating breakfast.

That's how I surprised the CHP officer. The tables had turned, now I was the delicious pig.

My moment of smug satisfaction ended the second my brain processed what the large gold star on the door of the black and white car meant.

It meant I was fucked.

For a seventeen-year-old kid that was slightly drunk and definitely stoned, my brain did a bit of math that would have made a NASA computer drop a nod of respect.

This was my road. I knew every twist and turn. I could drive it blindfolded.

On a side note, I am grateful that no one ever actually bet me that I couldn't drive it blindfolded. I would have died a ridiculously painful and appropriate death.

Even blindfolded, I knew that the section of road we were on was narrow. Cut into the side of the valley, the right side was a sheer wall of rock, and the other side was a steep drop with no shoulder. I knew there wasn't anywhere to turn around for a quarter of a mile. By the time he turned around, I would have traveled a quarter mile in the other direction, putting a full half mile between us.

It was three miles to my house. His car had better tires, a more powerful engine, better suspension, and most importantly, a driver who had been trained in high-speed pursuit. I didn't stand a chance.

Except.

It was three miles to my house, and I had a half-mile lead. He would need to be traveling almost twice as fast as I was to catch me before I reached home and safety. He had me outclassed in every way imaginable. All I had was a head start and the certain knowledge that he couldn't bend the laws of physics. There were limits to how fast his more powerful but heavier car could go through the maze of tight corners that defined the last few miles before my house.

I did what any teenage boy would do. I did the prudent, responsible thing. I put the hammer down.

The fuzz was only a second past me when I completed running the numbers and decided I could take the fucker in a straight fight. I instantly realized that there were rules to the game I had begun. The first rule was light. I could only escape if he didn't know where I was. Any light coming from the car would be spotted even at a distance, and I would be toast. That meant the brake lights. No brakes? Fine, I got this. Don't forget, I was a teenager and completely indestructible. Also, I was stoned.

The second rule was that my lead wasn't as good as I thought. The same high moon that was allowing me to see the road clearly would also allow the smoky on my ass to spot me if he got close enough. The tight corners would keep me out of his line of sight at a distance, but I had to maintain that distance. Fine, no brakes, and I have to go as fast as possible. No problem, I got this.

The third and final rule was that I couldn't crash. Normally, this rule is always sort of active; no one goes driving just to crash into something. But the first two rules suddenly made the third a real possibility. High speed, no brakes. What could go wrong?

Remember when I mentioned my overall disrespect for clutches? It's about to come up again.

Pushing hard in fifth through the downhill straight, I entered the first set of corners cooking a tad over a hundred. I'm pretty sure the blurry sign I shot past had the number twenty-five on it. I dropped into fourth gear and watched the engine rev way past the red line as the clutch smoked, slowing the car down. The shift into third around eighty was even more violent as the rear tires skidded and broke traction from the force of it. The tach dropped below the red line as the speedo dripped below sixty. Out of time, now or never. I pulled the wheel hard to the left and dug the right front tire into the road so hard that sparks came off the steel rim. The rear end tried to cut loose, but I held it in place through the corner as I exited at a pronounced angle with smoke coming off both of my right tires.

Using the emergency brake was suicide. It would instantly lock the back wheels into a slide, and the handle that controlled it was ratcheted with a shitty plastic release button, making it hard to disengage once the lever was pulled.

The next three corners passed in a blur as I used the drive train to both accelerate and decelerate the car. The clutch was no longer necessary as I feathered the throttle to unbind the synchros long enough to slam the manual transmission up and down through its range. Every turn brought the sound of tortured metal being pushed past its limits. The smell of burning clutch and oil was coming through the firewall. None of it mattered. I needed two more minutes. Two minutes of not blowing a head gasket. Two more minutes of the clutch not turning into molten slag. Two more minutes of my tires holding out. Two more minutes of the drugs and alcohol not putting me into a ditch and then jail, or the morgue.

I looked over my shoulder as I started climbing the last hill. The clown had the party hats going in his clown car, making him easy to spot coming down the other side of the valley. He had made

up some ground but was still far behind me. I cleared the last corner in a full slide as the backend pitched around, putting me into a wicked drift on the last straight. Home was in sight; I was going to make it.

Or was I?

I realize there was a fatal flaw in my escape plan. My road. Once turning off forty-nine, the road was perfectly perpendicular to forty-nine, flat, and ran straight for a quarter of a mile. My house was the only house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Once I turned down that road, there would be nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape to. Surely the pig would see my car as he shot past the road and double back, trapping me.

The groundwork for my salvation had been laid many years prior when a land developer went bankrupt. My house sat on ten acres in a 40-plot development that went bankrupt when they couldn't sell any of the lots. Only one model house had ever been built, which my family bought years later after the lawyers had finished feeding on what was left of the developer. The other thing he did before going bankrupt was to cut primitive roads throughout the 400-acre development so that they could show people the various lots for sale. Over the years, those roads deteriorated into rutted, washed-out trails that animals wouldn't even use.

With my turn coming up fast, I made a split-second decision, and instead of turning left onto my street, I veered into the field next to the highway and plowed through the chest-high weeds running parallel to Forty-Nine. My target was small. I knew that on the other side of that field was a washed-out road that ran next to the highway but dropped down below the main road as it descended into a small valley. I also knew that ten feet to the left of that road was no road, only a steep drop that would take me to the bottom and certain death. Undaunted, I plowed through the high weeds, nearly blind, aiming for a point on the other side I hoped wouldn't kill me.

I exited the field with all four tires off the ground as the car sailed out of the weeds and down into the ravine. At first, I thought that I had miscalculated and was about to die. Then I realized that I had hit the mark exactly and was going to die anyway. Without any suspension to cushion the impact, the old Ford hit hard on the rough, uneven terrain of the trail. The front wheels dove into a deep rut as the frame impacted with a bone-jarring thud. Having nothing left to lose, I did the only thing I could. I pulled the emergency brake. It certainly seemed like an emergency. It didn't help. The back of the car started bouncing and swinging wildly as the rear tires locked up and tried to swing the car all the way around. The only thing that kept everything moving straight was that the trail was so rough that the rear tires kept getting knocked back behind the car as they hit the deep ruts and holes.

The car finally came to a grinding halt as the frame dug a deep rut in the rough trail and ended up nose-first into the side of the embankment. A roiling pyroclastic cloud of dust swept over the car as the dying engine brought silence.

Much like an inmate waiting to hear the sentence at the end of a murder trial, I sat wondering what fate had in store for me. Would the officer notice the freshly plowed hole going through the large open field just to his left as he sped past? Would he see the billowing dust cloud rising from the dirt road just below the highway? Had he heard the chaos and screeching metal caused by a car using its frame to stop on an unpaved trail?

Seconds ticked by like hours as I waited. An eternity later, I heard the roar of his engine and tires complaining as he rocketed past me, lighting up the night in flashing red and blue lights. I expected to hear hard braking when he realized what I had done and where I was. But it never came. I had hidden right under his nose.

Stepping out of the car, I stood in the settling dust and random ticking sounds coming from an overheated engine cooling down. I didn't notice my legs were shaking until they gave out and put me down on the hard dirt. Leaning against the car, I fished a cigarette out of the pocket of my shirt and lit it with a shaking hand. I wasn't out of the woods yet.

The problem now was that there were no roads that connected to Forty-Nine, only driveways and dead-end roads. It wouldn't take him long to figure out that I had turned off somewhere and was still close by.

Fifteen minutes later, I saw the light. He was moving slowly, allowing his searchlight to swing methodically back and forth as he searched for me. Fortunately, the dust cloud had dissipated and no longer marked the final resting place of my car. It was a cold night, so I was sitting on the hood letting the cooling engine keep me warm. I could see him as he turned down my driveway and searched my house.

I waited another 30 minutes until the cold finally drove me out of hiding. I gave up on the car after several failed attempts to back out of the rut that the frame was wedged in, and just left it there. A few days later, a friend with a winch on his four-wheel drive helped me pull out of the ravine. Another week of wrenching fixed the hole in the oil pan and the cracked transmission mount. The bent frame required a torch and the application of unreasonable force to straighten. Although the car from then on always pulled slightly to the left, no matter how many times the alignment was corrected.

I became something of a legend at El Dorado High School after the story got around. For some, I was the hero who pulled off the impossible. For others, a cautionary tale reinforcing their own superior non-idiot status. I'd like to say they were wrong, but they weren't. None of them. In a single night of stupidity compounded with bad decisions, I had confirmed everything that I knew to be true. I was indestructible.

It didn't take the world long to show me otherwise.