

The Year Of Kahoutek

by John Olson

I remember the gas crisis of 1973. I shared a ride with a woman and another man to get to my parent's home in Seattle for Christmas. The woman had posted an advertisement at San José University, hoping to find passengers to help with the cost of gas and some of the driving.

We had a lot of fun on that trip. We invented stories using the letters on license plates. The stories became more and more pornographic. There must have been a lot of sexual energy in that car, though it had never occurred to me to see this woman again. It was just free-floating sexual energy. Nothing tangible surfaced, other than these silly, meandering tales of Rabelaisian excess.

The woman did not go directly to Seattle. It wasn't her destination. She dropped me and the other guy off at a tavern in Winslow where we waited for the ferry to carry us across Puget Sound to Seattle. We drank beer and watched Kung Fu with David Carradine on the TV behind the bar.

I spent most of my time at home in the basement working on a paper about Joyce's *Ulysses*, a book about which I was enormously excited. The basement was cluttered with furniture and things that had belonged to my grandparents in North Dakota who had recently passed away. I used the old oak desk upon which my grandmother had once kept a diary, recording temperatures, visits, wheat crops, dairy prices, and births and deaths.

My father had a terrific argument with his wife, my stepmother, a flaming harridan with a voice like hydrochloric acid, and insisted on driving me back home to California. Home at the time was a tiny studio near San José State which had a tiny galley kitchen and a communal bathroom at the end of the hallway.

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When we got to Portland, my father made a sudden and unannounced decision to make a right turn and head to 101 via Highway 26 to Seaside. I wasn't happy with this crazy, self-indulgent act of whimsy, since it would add hours, if not an entire day, to our trip to San José, and I hadn't finished my paper on *Ulysses*, which was due the following week.

Also, there was the gas crisis. Did my father not realize the risk he was taking? Probably not. He seemed to be in a very unusual state of mind.

The car was on empty when we reached Coos Bay, with no open gas station in sight. It looked like we were going to be marooned in Coos Bay for an indefinite amount of time. We spent the night in a motel. Next morning, I walked to a phone booth and called the local sheriff. He did not know where an open gas station might be found. My father and I decided to take our chances. Just a little ways outside of Coos Bay, we found an open gas station with a line of cars. My dad filled the tank, which got us to Gold Beach, where my father got more gas.

50 miles out of Gold Beach my father discovered he had left a \$50 dollar bill on the gas pump. We drove back. It wasn't there. The attendant knew nothing about it. My father had intended on giving the \$50 dollars to me. This was bad news. I was totally broke.

Along the way, my father stopped by the side of the road and we both looked intently to the west, out of over the Pacific, hoping to catch a glimpse of Comet Kohoutek. It had been predicted that it would be bright enough to be seen during the day with the naked eye. But we never did see it.

My father spent the night with me in my tiny studio. I gave him the use of my bed, and slept on the floor in a sleeping bag. I can't

remember what prompted him to ask, but he asked me if I was worried about my future. I said yes. I had a lot of anxiety about my future. I had heard, through the grapevine, that MFA graduates were having difficulty finding jobs in education. I did not think I wanted to invest that amount of time and money in acquiring a graduate degree. I imagined I would enter the work force, but doing what, I had absolutely no idea. What does a French symbolist poet do in a world of cars, computers, and gasoline?

Chase chimeras. Write bold, new, innovative poetry. Discover a new aesthetic. All the while earning money by doing something else. Something, hopefully, not too taxing, or time consuming. What that would be, I had no idea. I would simply have to find out by looking.

Cars got smaller after the gas crisis of 1973, all the way into the 80s. Then, not long after Reagan became president, they started getting bigger. Until, by the 90s, Hummers and SUVs dominated the road. Leviathans. Driven, quite often, by young women with sleek, silken ponytails, with one hand on the steering wheel, the other holding a tiny telephone, as they paid the least amount of attention necessary to maneuver a ton of steel in a grid of angry traffic.

