

I Watched So I Wouldn't Get Fined



So there we are were, America, basking as one in the warming glow of our televised rally of national identity and solidarity<fn>Unless you're a fan of that other team, you filthy splitter.</fn>, and what before our wondering eyes should appear, but, this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKUy-tfrIHY>

Well sweet crunchy christ on a stick, people. I don't know about you, but when I'm nestled in with my snacks and my frosty cold All<fn>Not quite</fn>-American macro brew, thrilling to the sight of behemoth Transformer-humans deliver brain damage upon each other, the last thing I need is some kind of stone cold bummer like this adorable-yet-evidently-dead kid speaking to me from the great beyond. At least *Dragnet* offered the comic relief of Officer Bill Gannon strangling a baggie of perfectly good pot when they went and drowned the Shipley kid in the tub. And they also had the good taste to not have the dead kid deliver a post-mortem soliloquy. I nearly coughed up a cheeze-whiz ball. Really, I was so stricken.

(And on top of that, along comes some car company tugging my heart strings with a father-son vignette set to Harry Chapin's *Cats and the Cradle*, a Platonic-ideal piece of schmaltz that has nothing but nothing feel-goody about it, and which makes me wonder if buying that brand of car might seal

the deal on me being the worst, most neglectful father in the history of ever. Never mind that Harry Chapin himself died in a car accident at the tender age of 39, thereby adding another layer of bathos to an already horrifically depressing depiction.)

This ad is not without precedent, though, and as your Narrator of post-mature chronology, it is certainly my duty to share. Settle in, young ones, as we trip back through misty water colors &c.

When I was a wee sprite, back in the day when Super Bowls had Roman numerals like II and III and IV, one of the most popular shows on the electric picture radio was *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. (For those too young to remember, imagine the *Crocodile Hunter* with no discernible personality.) Wheezy old geezer Marlon Perkins would narrate as footage rolled of his partner, Jim, wrestling bears and taming the wild anaconda. Inevitably, as Jim was being pulled under to a certain death, Perkins would exclaim, "Look out, Jim!" And then the camera would turn to avuncular old Marlon pitching the Mutual of Omaha life insurance line.

"You know, not all danger to life and safety occurs in the jungle."

And as Marlon was speaking, they would pan over to an average<fn>*Cough, white, cough.*</fn> family in their living room engaging in some average family behavior. And as Marlon spoke, the dad would just slowly fade away. "And how will your family take care of themselves with you gone?"

Then it was back to Jim frolicking with a school of piranha or some such. Family fare, every Sunday, just before the *Wonderful World of Disney*.

This stuff, to put it mildly, freaked me right the fuck out. I mean I'm 6, maybe 7 years old, and gentle mannered Marlon is making me think about my Dad's mortality. Fuck. About MY

mortality. The hell was wrong with these people, anyway?

But still we watched, faithfully. And one week, I swear on a stack of Richard Dawkins' polemics, they showed the family sitting around the dinner table. And I knew it was coming, just knew that Dad was going to disintegrate before my very eyes. Again. But I was wrong.

This time – and one time only, you bet your bottom dollar – this time Dad took a stricken look in his eyes and planted his face directly into a pile of peas and mashed potatoes and whatever the hell else Lipton-soup based recipe was on the play. The food went everywhere. And Dad was deader than shit. I remember my Mom giving a little gasp. And then it was back to Jim and his anaconda.

Unlike the gentle-yet-horrifying slow fade of the other spots, this was so over the top insane that I started laughing. I was duly shuffled from the room and told to brush my teeth and wash behind my ears.<fn>Yeah right, as if. Take that, Mom!</fn> “And straight to bed with you young man! The very idea, laughing at death!”

In those days, there was no twitterverse to explode. I have no idea what kind of response they got to that little vignette, but I can only imagine that the so-called “telephone” so-called “rang” off the so-called “hook”.<fn>Whatever all those things are. Were. Whatevs.</fn> I’m picturing a long desk staffed by a gaggle of frazzled Ernestines taking message after message from the irate citizens of our Nation, chiding the media elites for bringing such a gruesome depiction of death into their homes.

I was determined to watch every week to see that crazy shit happen again. But it never did. Like the Goldwater daisy-nuke ad, one airing was all it got. Apparently America likes its death delivered in a misty fade out, not in some messy spray of mashed potatoes and peas. So distasteful.

And somewhere in ad man purgatory, the guy who thought up that ad for Mutual of Omaha was watching the drowned kid last night and thinking, "I'll keep the chair warm for you, you poor bastard. Whoever you are that thought this one up, I've been dying for some company. Take your time. Your legacy is secure."