

ACCELERATING

By James Collins

The 10-year-old 1948 Chrysler was humming along the road. Five of us were traveling to a college dance at Marymount College in Westchester County New York. Earlier we had stopped for gas and the attendant checked our oil. Then we picked up some beer. However, I was the designated driver. It was my car and I was not about to touch any alcohol while the other four college students were enjoying themselves.

As we entered the gateway to the college, we hit several bumps because of the damaged pavement. The jolts were severe. We visited this college several times over the past year and were familiar with the grounds and the parking. The road gradually increased in height over a quarter mile distance and as we topped the rise, we viewed a five-story brick dormitory at right angles to the road. Immediately in front of the dormitory, the road became a 'T' and our car had to slow down for a right or left turn. I increased the pressure on the accelerator to hold the speed at 40 miles an hour as we started to climb the hill.

When we reached 40, I lifted my foot off the accelerator to reduce the speed. I was startled to find that the speed kept increasing. Now the speed reached 50 miles an hour as I was pressing heavily on the brake but nothing slowed the car in fact it kept accelerating. Now I reached down and yanked on the handbrake figuring my front brakes had failed. The engine kept revving up and we were now 60 miles an hour.

I thought the accelerator may have jammed so I reached down with my right hand, grabbed it and pulled up with all my might. The adrenaline was flowing and I was 6 foot two in very good shape. I literally pulled the accelerator pedal off the floor of the car and held it in my hand with sheet metal and screws from the car body hanging from the pedal that I had pulled out of the chassis. The engine was still revving up and we were at 70 miles an hour just approaching the crest of the hill.

I still had not panicked and figured I can shut the engine off by pulling out the key. I did that and had both the keys and the accelerator pedal in my right hand. The engine was still running flat out. Now I reached the brink of panic. The car was totally out-of-control. We were at 75 miles an hour and increasing in speed. I was standing on the brakes and the handbrake was jammed closed. We could smell of the brakes burning and listened as the engine kept revving up.

We crested the hill and I could see the five-story brick building straight ahead about 200 yards. I had the keys out of the car, the accelerator in my hand and I had run out of ideas on how to stop the vehicle. My four compatriots just came out of their drunken stupors to realize that we were all in deep trouble. They were yelling suggestions and at the same time trying to brace themselves.

Suddenly, the car backfired with an explosion like a small cannon. Sheets of flame came out from the front of the car and out from under the side of the hood followed by smoke and smells. The car screeched to a halt and we all bailed out of the car. Just then, a Buick came up from behind us and the young fellow driving asked, "Can I help you?" I ended up sitting next to him yelling, "Let's get the fire

department here.”(In those days, there were no cell phones). The Good Samaritan driver looked at me terrified, jumped out of his car, and ran down the road.

Within 10 or 15 seconds, the fire had burned out. My buddy Russ came over opened the car door and helped me out.

“We've got a get some help," I shouted to Russ, "but this guy just ran away from the car."

"Jim, do you realize, you jumped into his car through the window feet first and ended up sitting next to him without having opened the door. It terrified him. We may not see him for an hour."

Now the car had stopped, the fire was out, the smell was dissipating and we had a chance to examine the car to find out what happened. When we opened the cooling hood, the cause was immediately apparent. In the 1948 Chrysler, there was a large air filter housing on top of the carburetor. In those days, the filter consisted of a quart of oil poured in to the removable housing. Once the attendant added oil, there was a butterfly valve required to attach the housing to the top the carburetor. At the last fill up, the attendant had checked our oil and had apparently forgotten to attach the butterfly latch.

When we hit the bump in the roadway at the bottom of the hill, we dislodge the entire housing, which fell down and jammed the accelerator mechanism closed. There was absolutely no way we could control the accelerator from inside the car and this caused the events described.

The reason the car did not stop when I removed the keys was that the engine was overheating and in those days, you would get ‘after burning’ when you shut off the engine. This was typically 10 to 15 seconds; in our predicament, it seemed like an eternity. ‘After burning’ typically caused a backfire and ignited the oil, which had poured over the engine compartment. That resulted in the fireworks and smoke we experienced.

One solution, which could have prevented the runaway, was overlooked at the time but has since become a standard in my driver’s training education, for all my children and grandchildren. Shift into neutral if you have a problem controlling the acceleration of a vehicle. That will disengage the transmission and though the engine may continue to run away, the car can be safely braked to a stop.

Later that night on the way home when my friends were enjoying their near miss with death, I was driving back to the Bronx on a Westchester highway doing 30 miles an hour trying to balance my foot on the vertical rod that the accelerator pedal normally controlled. However, the pedal now sat on the passenger’s floor. Without the accelerator pedal, the rod moved in all directions it was very difficult to control and to maintain a constant speed. I kept to the center of the three lane empty road and attracted the attention of a patrol car. Two officers in the car pulled up on my right hand side and were examining us. Russ, who had an interesting sense of humor, reached into my glove compartment and took out a flashlight. He then rolled down the passenger window in the front pointed the flashlight out at the police car and yelled, "I'm a supersonic space cadet and this is my Ray gun you are disintegrated." One cop looked at the other shrugged his shoulders and went on their way.

An hour later, we arrived in the Bronx and found a parking space two blocks from my house. We went to the local bar and now that I was relieved of my designated driver duties, I had a couple of very strong drinks, went home and went to bed.

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