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“The Other Planet”

I am from the other planet—the one where a doctor takes his son on evening house calls after a little league game. I sit in his car in the dark, slowly pounding a hardball into my glove. Leaning against the dashboard, I can look up to see a crescent moon beside the rear view mirror. I’m dreaming that I’m Mickey Mantle, with a game--saving, diving catch at the warning track.

Dad sits inside the farmhouse, beside an old four-poster bed. There’s a family gathered at his side. He’s reaching for comfort in a black leather bag. But the real comfort is from his presence there, and in his unquestioned dedication. There is respect and sincerity in the room, both before and after he leaves.

On the way home, after calls are completed, we stop the car in view of town, but across the river. A bridge is silhouetted against distant city lights and as the engine revs, the heartbeat of a 10 year old boy quickens.

“Zero to 70 in less than 6 seconds,” says the voice in the dark, and then, “Five bucks, if you can just lean forward and grab the dashboard before we get to the other side of the bridge.”

Just before the sentence is completed, rubber burns and tires scream...the car lurches forward, then relentless momentum. He always gets the jump on me by punching it before he finishes the sentence—and then I’m reaching forward, straining to exceed his expectations in the night.

The fastest car and the biggest heart in a small town—now there's a doctor. Everybody knows who he is and what he always does--loses money on investments, but never loses a patient, not without a "hellacious" fight. It makes up somewhat for the chaotic days and sleepless nights--to be a local hero.

But here's the deal. He was damn good--the smartest kid in school, from grade school through college. Unafraid and battle tested, he worked relentlessly and without complaint. Epitomizing an era—he pushed, bragged and improvised, always doing more than he knew how...but doing it with the most important of all ingredients, passion. It was always the bottom of the ninth, or fourth and goal at work, because it all mattered so much to everyone. His family never questioned, at least not out loud. But that was then--and another place.

Here, it's becoming a struggle to see "doctoring" as the best job there is. Now every "fricking" politician, academician, bean-counter and policy wonk knows a better way to do it than those who would die for it. Like the old cowboy, the old doctor may soon be forgotten. When he is gone, many of us, like Yoda, will feel a brief disturbance in "the force." To truly understand the loss—you need to know the other planet.

