

THE LEGEND OF BOBBY JOE SKYHAWK  
By M.Vidakovich

The first thing the car salesman noticed were the Parachute pants, clearly an odd choice for someone of this man's age. Brian Calkin gazed at the customer as discreetly as he could. The showroom floor was busy, as it was a Saturday and the weather was perfect. But this particular customer deserved a closer look. Brian's Assistant Manager, Tony Cristo also noticed him from his office. So Tony walked out to the floor and stood next to Brian.

"Guy's gotta be, what.. eighty years old?" he announced in a whisper.

"And what's with that tee shirt?" Calkin added. The tee shirt in question was an authentic Big Daddy Roth Rat Fink silkscreen. A popular design from the 1950's and 60's, Rat Fink was a green, slimy looking demon who was usually squeezed into an old Ford street racer. It was the infamous and once legendary California-Detroit vibe at it's finest; a shirt worn proudly by surfers and gear heads alike. The two young salesmen looked at the shirt and wondered "*Who the hell is "Rat Fink?"*" while turning their heads to suppress their giddiness. After all, this guy happens to be a potential customer.

The old man, Bobby Joe Rakestraw of Marshfield, Massachusetts, was mumbling as he attempted to unfurl

himself from the burgundy Nissan Sentra that had been placed center stage in the South Shore Buick/Nissan showroom. Tony nudged Brian in the arm; *"Watch him, he's gonna head right over to the Buicks."* The old man did just that, rubbing his bicep as he walked, muttering something about;

*"I tell ya' Penny, I don't think I could even squeeze you into one o' these Dinky-ass little rice burners."*

The Penny in question was Bobby Joe's wife of sixty years who had passed recently. The trip to the dealership was done more out of bored reverie than any kind of need for a new car. With Penny gone, there wasn't a single thing in the world that Bobby Joe Rakestraw needed anymore. Not unless there was a place that sold the best parts of your life back to you. And for him, his departed wife was the best part among the best parts.

"What'd I tell you?" Cristo said. Then, "Go get him Brian, who knows, these old guys can surprise you." So Brian Calkin straightens his tie as he walks toward the man who is now standing with his hands in the pockets of his black, clownish looking pants. Brian could hear the old man jiggling keys as he stared at the fire red version of the new, fully loaded 1988 Buick Skyhawk. Calkin stands up straight and introduces himself. When the old man doesn't answer back, when he just stares at the salesman in front of him, Brian reaches into his bag of come-ons.

"Sooooo..you're lookin' at the new Skyhawk eh?" Still no response as the elderly customer returns his gaze to the car.

"Sir, my name's Brian Calkin. Can I ask you your name?" Calkin felt a bit like an idiot, but this guy was unnerving him a little.

"Rakestraw" the man finally said with a lilt of enthusiasm in his voice. "Bobby Joe Rakestraw."

"Hey Mr. Rakestraw, I noticed you looking at the Nissan's over there a little earlier....really fine new line of cars sir. We think very highly of them."

"'Course you do" Bobby Joe snapped back. "Their name's right there on the sign." as he points out the window. Brian couldn't help but look down at the customer's tee shirt again. Then Bobby Joe lifts his chin toward the salesman and asks,

"Why's everything so tiny in those damn things?" as he points to the new Japanese sedan he had just crawled out of.

"The seats, the pedals, even the buttons on that piddly-ass dash. I'll tell ya why," and Calkin knew just what was coming and wasn't surprised when Rakestraw leaned in and said,

"Damn orientals are tiny little bastards. *That's* why." Brian leaned back and laughed in a genuine snort.

"You're a funny guy Mr. Rakestraw", he said.

"Call me Bobby Joe" the man said, showing a slight trace of a crooked smile.

The salesman then asks; "Hey Bobby Joe, you don't sound like you're from around here. 'Mind me asking where you're from?"

"Midwest.....Michigan", Rakestraw shot right back as he ran his hand over the thick, wide and deep Eagle GT radial tires on the Skyhawk. "Shit, these've gotta be 234/50ZR sixteens, at least. Maybe seventeens." Bobby says. Then, Brian asks,

"You from Detroit?"

Bobby, still stooped at the rear tire, looks up and says,

"Therabouts."

The salesman nods his head as Rakestraw straightens up.

"What brings you to New England?"

Bobby Joe is now sitting in the front passenger seat.

"Wife" he says, answering Brian's question. "Now, this is a seat!" He then stretches out in the soft and plush grey fabric of the decidedly roomier GM consolation to America's still thriving demand for bigness and comfort. He then gets out of the car.

"Those tires," he says pointing at the Eagle GT's, "They come with the car?"

"If you want them, sure".

"Well they're on the damn car, that's why I want them."

"Oh, you want this one, the showroom model? I'm sure we've got one just like it out in the lot if you want to wait while I look...."

"Naw, naw, naw.." Rakestraw said waving, "I want this one" as he pats the front quarter panel, hard. "B'sides, I was already out in the lot. I want this one."

Brian was excited, but not as excited as when Bobby Joe said he wanted it now, and that he'd pay cash. And as if he were telepathically sensing this always welcome but somewhat rare phenomena, Tony Cristo runs from his office, beaming.

"Aw Christ, here he comes," Rakestraw says to Calkin. "Tony sticks out his hand,

"I could read your body language there sir, and I could tell that you really like this car."

"Body language? This body hasn't any language for a long time kid. But yeah, damn right I like it. Heh. Can't wait to take it out on the ol' 502" he says.

*Calkin, Cristo and Rakestraw sit in the cramped office waiting for the final detailing on Bobby Joe's new car. The old man tells them of his late wife, Penny, a Boston native, and her long bout with MS. He had met her right out of the Army. Coming home from Europe, he landed in New England*

instead of the usual New York drop off spot for returning G.I.'s. The first thing he did was to go to a dance with some of the other soldiers at a Hampton Beach, New Hampshire amusement park. There, he met Penny. She was with another guy, but it was love at first sight for Bobby Joe. He noticed that Penny's date was driving a "Taxi cab-ugly lookin' green Chevy." So while the man went to get Penny and himself a few beers, Bobby worked up some nerve and walked up to her. Then, as he motioned toward her date's car, he smiled proudly at Penny and said,

"Wait'll you see what I'm gonna be drivin' some day soon; when my ol' ship comes in." This was followed by a few more good natured digs at her date's green Chevy. Bobby then delivered a few one-liners that were older than the Vaudeville era many of the evening's attendees were born in. Penny smiled and said;

"My, you do go on now, don't you Soljah?"

One thing led to another. The guy with the green Chevy was just a first date. Bobby Joe and Penny got married and stayed in Boston for a few years. There, he worked at a few body shops that repaired cars. As you can guess, Bobby Joe Rakestraw had a thing for cars and turned out to be quite a tinkerer over the years. Then, after hearing about all of the hiring that was being done by the auto companies in the Midwest, The Rakestraws, now with two kids, packed up and

*headed to Michigan.*

As Cristo and Calkin were listening half heartedly to his story, one thing had them both exchanging glances as Bobby Joe told his tale;

It was that "Take it out on the ol' 502" comment Rakestraw had made on the way to the office. There wasn't a highway, freeway, or road anywhere around named or numbered 502. In fact, "5" preceded no roadway anywhere that either salesman knew of. As the three men wondered out loud where "502" might be, a mechanic, overhearing the conversation poked his head in and asked jokingly,

"OK, so who got the DUI?"

"Whattaya mean?" asked Calkin.

"502. That's cop for drunk driving."

The red Buick with the oversized Eagle G/T radials and brushed chrome mag wheels, speeds along the twisty two lane that leads to Duxbury Beach. It's well past ten PM as Bobby Joe Rakestraw slams a George Jones tape into the dashboard. As the mournful voice of the singer caresses all eight speakers in full spectrum stereo, Bobby Joe turns the volume up. The speedometer reads 85mph. He reaches into the cup holder and grabs the paper container that contains about a shot of Seagrams' VO left at the bottom. Rakestraw throws the rich Canadian whiskey down his throat as he then wads up

the cup and tosses it in the backseat.

"Hey Penny, watch this one", Bobby says out loud. Then he punches the accelerator to the floor as the Buick briefly hesitates and then surges forward while the exhaust pipes scream bloody murder. Bobby then attempts a George Jones style yodel as he throws the shifter into high gear. He's a mile from the beach front as the "Cranberry Twister", a series of tight, sinewy curves, lies up ahead. Bobby drops it into third gear as he leans the car into the tricky set of three tight curves while the Eagle G/T's grip the perfect Massachusetts black asphalt at seventy miles per hour. The tires don't even squeal as the body stays locked tight to the chassis. Bobby Joe smiles. Coming back onto the straight highway, he sees the bridge leading to the beach ahead. He also sees the police flashers in his rear view mirror.

Both the police cruiser and the red Buick are now sitting on a grassy pull off that borders the road less than a mile from the beach.

"You local or Staties?" Bobby asks the officer before he can get any words out. The officer doesn't respond as he then asks Bobby for the required documentation. While Bobby reaches into the glovebox, the cop notices the pants that he normally sees on many of the kids that he pulls over on Route 3; the usually mouthy, drunk, late teen to twenty-



something's on their way home from the clubs in Quincy, Weymouth or Boston. Then, like the two car salesmen, he notices the RAT FINK tee shirt Bobby Joe has on. This one's black with yellow, red, and green silkscreen on it and the cop has to turn his head and quell the belly laugh that's waiting to burst from his large diaphragm.

"Mr. Rakestraw" he finally says, and then asks Bobby Joe if he's aware of how far over the speed limit he was going.

"Little fucker's fast, isn't it?" Bobby says as he slaps the steering wheel and smiles at the cop. "Watch this" he says as he pushes the car into first gear while the oversize tires throw huge chunks of sod up at the cop and his partner who has just approached the scene.

The two officers jump into the cruiser and hit the flashers. Bobby Joe has turned around and is once again manipulating the curves back at the Cranberry Twister at 75mph. As soon as the cruiser is on Bobby Joe's tail, he spins the car around and heads back toward the beach again. The Skyhawk's going so fast that it takes the cruiser about twenty seconds or more to get the car in their sights. The roads are dense with trees that seclude the berry bogs lying behind them. This helps Bobby Joe to disappear as soon as he rounds one of the curves. The officers finally decide to radio in a request for backup. Then, they see the Skyhawk's

taillights approaching Old Oaken Bucket Hwy. Bobby Joe doesn't even slow down as he veers to the left, then straight down the dark two-lane. Within seconds, he's gone as the cruiser, with backup approaching, see nor hear any trace of the red Buick way off in the distance.

There was also no one at the address of the beach cottage that was listed on the Massachusetts Operators License of Bobby Joe Rakestraw either. This was the first place the three squad cars visited after the red Buick had vanished into the night. They waited for an hour, then, they figured they'd have a car check back every hour on the hour. Had this been Boston, the cops would have broken in and made themselves at home while they waited however long it took. But the Plymouth-Duxbury area was a laid-back and peaceful spot on the map; inhabited by many well to do citizens. And Rakestraw was eighty three years old. Not exactly a gang banger in the eyes of the police.

Bobby Joe touches the picture of Penny that he's fastened to the middle of the dashboard. He's done it in the same way that many locals have placed the small figure of St. Christopher over the years, for sacred guidance along life's troubled highways.

"Let's go sugardoll." He says. "And where to this fine

evening? I know. You wanna have dinner over at the Compass Rose, doncha? Well, all right then."

Bobby places the cup of whiskey into the holder and pulls the car onto Tremont St. He doesn't waste a second as the tires squeal and the manifolds roar, filling the salty air with the long gone sounds of the Detroit Dragway on a Saturday night. He has the green light, which allows him to blow right through Millbrook Road and onto Route 139. After checking his peripheral vision for any cops back at the intersection, he then turns up the radio which is cued to a Country Music station out of Brockton.

"When Your Hot, You're Hot", a Jerry Reed favorite comes on as Bobby Joe sings along with the curmudgeonly words of rebel retribution that are there in the final lines of the song:

*I said,*

*"Well I'll tell ya one thing judge, old buddy, old pal,*

*If you wasn't wearin' that black robe*

*I'd take you out in back of this courthouse*

*And I'd try a little bit of your honor on you, understand*

*that, you hillbilly?*

*Who gonna collect my welfare?"*

*"Pay for my Cadillac?"*

*Whadda you mean 'contempt of court'?"*

*"Whooooooooa Judge!"*

"Whoo-haaa!" Bobby yelps as the song fades. He gulps down more of the whiskey. Then, as he's navigating the curves that are leading him to the Compass Rose Restaurant on Green Harbor, a set of flashers appear in the rear view mirror. He must have "messed up", he thought. The only place they could have come from was the intersection of Millbrook and Cox Corner.

"My peripherals must be gettin' bad" he mused. Shrugging his shoulders, Bobby Joe simply floored the Buick, already traveling at 70mph and blew across the Harbor River bridge and onto Ocean Street. When the cruiser finally stopped circling the oceanfront downtown of Marshfield, Bobby Joe was well into enjoying his favorite pizza at The Venus Grill. He looks up at the tin ceiling and says between chews; "Sorry dollface, the Compass Rose was.....a bit crowded."

And the red Skyhawk? The police never found it.

A gold watch.

That's what he actually received on his last day at

Chrysler Tech. It seemed like the punchline to a dirty joke. Or an Academy Award from Industrial America for the best acting performance in a supporting role. Bobby Joe was allowed, even encouraged, to bring a few family members to the presentation. The kids had grown up and moved, so he brought Penny. On a long aluminum table was a cake, some bottles of soda pop and a pint of whiskey that a coworker had snuck in. When the boss, Dick Armstrong, finally walked out from a meeting in his office, the festivities became official. In a manner resembling a Middle School assembly, Armstrong pulled the watch out of its box. Penny observed the still attached price tag as it dangled back and forth. Armstrong said few brief words, and then presented the gift to Bobby Joe. He patted the now retired employee on the shoulder. Then he peered into the watch that Bobby Joe was limply holding as he checked the time and said,

“Whoa!, Gotta go!”

“Hey, it works!” He then added, referring to the gift as he grins at his former employee and walks away. Penny Rakestraw is burning two holes into the polyester short sleeve shirt stuck to the sweaty back of Dick Armstrong with her dark eyes as she holds her husbands arm and finally says,

"Let's get out of here."

The cops could only get two pictures. One was from Bobby Joe Rakestraw's Massachusetts drivers permit. The better one however, was a still photo from the dash mounted police-cam now being circulated. It was the picture with Bobby Joe in the anarchic looking Rat Fink tee shirt; his thin hair blowing in the ocean breeze, smiling and waving at the officers before he and the Skyhawk had taken off to who knows where. There had been three other occasions where a flash of red and a grizzly roar were all the police could hold onto as the brand new Buick would leave long strips of black rubber all over the coastal roads of this marshy area. The Plymouth County Police had now gotten involved, and every time anyone checked Bobby Joe's house, no one was there; night or day, not even a trace. So on a Saturday night, or, "Night of the Flying Buick" as the police had now coined it, cruisers from the state, county and other towns surrounding Duxbury, had stationed themselves in a well thought out manner. They left no stone unturned as patrol cars hid themselves at the major and minor intersections that Rakestraw had been known to cruise, the places where he went to "hit the ol' 502."

To go "*drunk driving*" as he had told the two Buick salesmen well over a month ago. The stakeouts started at 7PM, a few hours before the late summer sun dipped down for the night and slumbered somewhere in the Berkshires.

Well before the party started.

Bobby Joe unfurled the warm laundry from the basket and picked out the now notorious black, yellow, red and green Rat Fink tee shirt. He then stored the rest of the clothes away in the small dresser drawers about three feet from the bed. The room was nice, he thought. At night, he was close enough to hear the gently lapping waves on the beach. He'd been renting the room for about six months now. After Penny died, he tried unsuccessfully to stay in the Rakestraw home. Soon enough, he left. He figures he'll put it up for sale. No hurry though, as the house is all paid off. And someday, he's got to get that address on his drivers permit changed. No hurry there either, he thought.

The State Troopers were stationed at the main highways while the local cops patrolled the area's closer to the beach. The Plymouth County Police were at the now infamous Cranberry Twister. It was a beautiful night as the strong breezes from earlier in the day calmed to a whisper. A

cruiser was sitting at the intersection just before the junction so as to get a jump on Bobby Joe should he come roaring through. The county had cleared a small area behind some bushes for the vehicle to hide. There, they waited. And it wasn't long before the county cops heard the low, throaty roar they had come to memorize.

"Gotta be a quarter mile away." the Trooper behind the wheel said calmly. His partner then strapped himself in. The unlit Police cruiser stood invisible behind the bushes. Out of the passenger window, a pair of headlights were moving closer. Then, a high pitched whine could be heard as the cops looked at each other and said simultaneously, "It's him." And as soon as the shiny red Skyhawk flew by, the driver said; "Christ, he's gotta be doin' ninety!" He then flipped on his flashers as the 500 horse power Ford police cruiser peeled sod and threw rocks while it spun onto the two lane.

"Ninety-Eight" his partner said looking at the radar gun. "What the hell is he runnin' in that thing? It's just a Buick for chrissakes!." The two-man team threw all caution to the wind as the driver slammed the accelerator to the floor and left it there. At one point, they had taken one of The Twisters' curves on two wheels. Bobby Joe was still far



ahead.

"What is the deal with this old coot? He's gonna kill us all." The driving officer's voice now registered something that sounded like fear. They soon approached the fork in the road that would either take them straight to the beach or, left, down Old Oaken Bucket Highway and into even deeper darkness. This is where the road straitened out for about a mile. The cops looked at the speedometer. It read 115mph. This meant that the red Skyhawk, about six hundred feet up ahead, had to be going at least 120. The county sheriffs' then made a call to all of the nearby patrols, feverishly conveying their situation. How were they going to stop this though?

"However this shakes out? It ain't gonna be pretty" the driver says to his partner as they are now rapidly approaching the fork. They've gained a little bit on the Skyhawk, but Bobby Joe's still doing at least 105-110mph. Neither officer can begin to guess whether the old man will take the highway left, or, God forbid, head straight for the beach which is preceded by an old wooden bridge hovering over an inland straight. As the screaming sirens and flashing lights of the oncoming backup approach from two different directions, Bobby Joe flies right by them at

110mph, straight toward the bridge. A State Cruiser, two Marshfield Police vehicles and a pair of Plymouth County Sheriffs' meet at the intersection in a swerving and squealing mass of dust. As they stand outside their cars, all they can do is just watch as the screaming red streak on wheels helmed by Bobby Joe Rakestraw succumbs to gravity and flies twenty feet into the air, heading right for the golden sands and high tides of Duxbury Beach.

They never found him or even more puzzlingly, the Skyhawk. The police, all twenty of them stood and waited for the inevitable; a crash, a splash, or a mushrooming ball of flames. But they heard nothing; Just the soft, wet thunder of the waves. When they had stopped frantically talking into their two-ways and finally raced to the beach, there weren't even any tire tracks. The tire markings had stopped right in the middle of the old bridge where Bobby Joe had taken flight.

Human circus loving citizens along the northeast coast ate it all up. For weeks, headlines reading "FLYIN FELON", and "WHERE' JA GO BOBBY JOE?" screamed from tabloids spreading all the way from Portland and Manchester, down to

Hartford, Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York City. But Bobby Joe Rakestraw was nowhere to be found.

The police finally uncovered the room Bobby Joe had been renting in his last days. Before doing an investigation of the house, they gave the large second floor rental a thorough ransacking. They didn't care. They were made to look like fools. And now, they have a huge mystery that's also been dumped into their laps. One of the detectives found a manila envelope in a bottom dresser drawer. In it were old pictures of Bobby Joe in his Army uniform, pictures of the smiling Penny, pictures of the Rakestraw children growing up in Michigan and some letters. On the bottom of the pile was an 8 by 10 inch black and white photo. It was a picture of Bobby Joe smiling proudly with his arms folded across his chest as he leaned against a shiny new 1947 Lincoln Continental Club Coupe. It was determined to be a picture that had been sent to Penny. Maybe it was the *"Wait 'till you see what I'm gonna be drivin' someday"* car that he boasted to Penny about early in their courtship; their first meeting at that New Hampshire amusement park right after the war. Written in faded pencil on the back of the picture was;

*"Here it is, my pride on wheels, as shiny and bright as any. But it pales as just a bucket of bolts, next to my*

*lovely Penny! Please be my greatest pride, please be my blushing bride, then we can ride and ride forever; and my jewel of the sea will sail with her pop-eyed palooka from ol' De-troit; together to the forest sunsets and the oceans moonrise, as I smile there and disappear into your blue eyes.*

*It is what I wish for.*

*With all my love.*

*Bobby Joe*