

Rods and Cones

A Short Story by Patrick Rule

I pulled my 1969 fire red Mustang into a spot marked: VISITOR PARKING ONLY. I stepped out and started walking across the lot towards Washington High School. Washington is a rural community of 15,000 people, near St. Louis. It's close enough to enjoy the benefits of a big city, yet maintain an identity all it's own.

It was a sunny, warm, late spring morning, and I could smell freshly cut sweet clover in the breeze. I headed towards the smoking lounge, which was located under a covered walkway between the main school building and the gym. I always thought of the lounge as the only place at school where a few kids from all social cliques gathered to do the same thing together; Smoke. I spotted my best friend, Alex, leaning against a post with a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"You'll never believe what I just did." I said, walking up to him.

"What did you do this time," Alex asked.

"There's this Telephone Repair truck set up just before the turn on to Dogwood," I said. "They have their traffic cones lined along the highway in front of their truck."

"So what's the big deal?"

"When I went home for lunch, I knocked over three of those stupid cones right before I turned."

"Bullshit, Neil." Alex said, "You haven't got the balls."

"Did to!" I said, "Thunk, thunk, thunk, turn, home. It was a blast."

"What did the Phone guys do?" Alex asked.

"Nothing. While I was on my way back to school, I saw the cones lined back up the way they were."

"It's nice to see the Phone guys set the cones back up for you. Would be a shame if they don't get knocked down again."

"When's your last class?" I asked.

"Fourth hour, Gym class." Alex said, "I'm out of here at Twelve Thirty."

"I've got Accounting, but I'm out then too. Meet me in the parking lot after class, and I'll give her another go."

"You're on." Alex said as he walked into the gym.

I walked into the main building and headed down the corridor towards my class. I thought of my latest exploit and raised my hands in spurious triumph, but put them down right away. I noticed the other kids were looking at me in a strange way, although they usually look at me like that.

I couldn't concentrate in my Accounting class, and kept looking at my watch. I was feeling lucky because I only had to sit through four classes a day, and graduation was only six weeks away. In a few months, I'd be going to school at the University of Missouri, and none of this would matter anymore.

I started thinking about my family, and what they were going to do while I was gone. My dad died when I was sixteen and I was left to take care of my Mom, and my sister, Miriam. For the last two years, my Mom worked as a Legal Secretary for a law firm in St. Louis. Miriam was fifteen, a Freshman, and I had custody of her from 6 am to 6 pm, while Mom was at work. It seemed at times that Miriam had custody of me because I had to chauffeur her to Dance, Piano and Karate lessons after school. I was lucky I had only four classes a day or else I would never have any free time.

I looked at my watch fifteen times between Noon and Twelve-twenty. I killed the last ten minutes of class by trying to figure out why time moves so fast in the outside world, and so slow in classrooms.

Finally, the bell rang and before I realized it, I was opening the door of my Mustang. I jumped in, turned her over and raced the tach up to 4500 R.P.M's. I backed out of my spot with a squeak, and Alex pulled up next to me. I pulled my sunglasses out of their case and slowly put them on. I reached up and pulled a cigarette out of the pack hidden over the visor, and punched the lighter. As I lit my cigarette, I hit the power window buttons and rolled my windows down. I then turned to Alex with a shit-eating grin.

"Bet you I can hit four of them before the turn." I said.

"Ten bucks says you can't hit three." Alex said.

"Your on!" I said.

I peeled out of the parking lot, popped Led Zeppelin in the tape deck, and floored the accelerator. The Mustang roared down the highway, and I looked up at the mirror to see Alex right behind me. When I came over the hill, I could see the Telephone truck with its line of neatly spaced orange traffic cones in front of it. As I approached my targets, I could feel the adrenaline pounding in my heart. I edged the Mustang over, and heard the cones hit with a thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk. I almost rolled the car trying to hit the last one. I turned right on to Dogwood, and the Mustang took the corner sideways. I quickly righted my vehicle, raced up Dogwood, then squealed a left onto Sycamore. I whipped a left into my driveway, and screeched to a stop. I had just jumped out of the car as Alex pulled in behind me.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

"That was great!" Alex said as he got out of his car. "You hit four of seven, a new record!."

"You owe me Ten bucks!" I said. "Pay up!"

"Alright asshole, here's your money." Alex said as he handed me my ten. "Man, you almost lost it on that corner. I swear, I thought you were going to roll her down the highway."

"I have to admit, it was quite a rush." I said. "Let's go inside. I've got a big fat joint we can celebrate with."

"At least I'm getting something for my money." Alex said.

We walked inside the house, and headed straight to the basement. Our basement was one of those family projects that take forever to complete. Dad and I put up the frame when I was 14 and the walls when I was 15. We put carpeting down and ceilings up just in time for my 16th birthday party. Then dad died, and I had to finish all the detail work by myself.

However, I still had my own space that was unfinished, with the exception of my Pink Floyd and Rush posters, and a large, cigar shaped Led Zeppelin balloon that hung from the rafters. The only furniture in the room was a stereo shelf made out of plywood and cinder blocks, my stereo, a little refrigerator, and the couch I made from an old roll-away bed and some foam cushions. My speakers sat on milk crates at either side of the couch, and doubled as end tables.

I opened the door to my den and turned on my officially licensed St. Louis Cardinals Football Helmet light. I motioned Alex to the couch, reached into the fridge for a couple of sodas, and headed for my stereo.

"How about some Floyd?" I asked.

"Dark Side of the Moon?" Alex asked, with a smile.

I put the tape in the cassette deck, clenched my fist as if it were a microphone and said, "This is Neil Mahoney on the only station that rocks the nation, K O N E. This one goes out to all you coneheads out there, here's Pink Floyd."

Alex gestured to me in an inappropriate manner.

I reached into my helmet light, and produced a perfectly rolled marijuana cigarette. I held it up, in order to show off my piece of fine art work, ceremoniously placed it in my mouth and fired her up. Alex gave me a proper salute, and I passed it over to him.

"Oh man," Alex said as he coughed, "Those Phone guys were pissed off. One of them came running down the highway when he saw you."

"Fuck'em," I said, "They get paid by the hour."

"Hey, you don't think they'll call the cops do you?"

"Hell no," I told him. "I didn't do jack shit. Now pass that over here."

Alex passed the joint and said, "You've got some pretty big balls, that's all I have to say. Hey, you think those Phone guy's will set them back up again?"

"Yes, and it's your turn next," I said. "Double or nothing on five cones. And we'll see if that ratty old Oldsmobuick is up for the test."

"It might not be a souped up Mustang, but she can handle it." Alex said.

"Let's finish our business here, then head out for round two." I said, as I cranked the stereo beyond acceptable limits.

We sat and listened to our music, smoked our joint, drank our sodas and thought our thoughts. I closed my eyes and started thinking about how my Dad was always pulling something over on Mom. On her 40th birthday, he got her a card that read: Happy 100th Birthday! Mom just smiled at him and said, "They must sell only four of these a year." I missed my Dad, but I was angry with him. He left me with all of his responsibilities, and I didn't want them anymore.

Alex slapped me on the arm and said, "Let's go Neil, it's my turn."

"Ok, Alex, but I have to be back by three. Today is Karate day." I jumped up and turned off the stereo with a chop.

"No problem," Alex said, "We're outta here."

I sprayed some Lysol around the room, turned off the light, closed the door and followed Alex upstairs. I stopped by the bathroom to brush my teeth and put some Visine in my eyes.

When I stepped out of the can, Alex came up to me in a panic and said, "I think there's someone here."

"Oh bullshit." I said, "Don't be paranoid."

"I thought I heard someone outside. I'll go check." He walked into the front hallway and opened the door.

"Is that your car there?" A voice said from outside.

"No, It's my friend's, he's in here" I heard Alex shout through the screen door.

"What's going on?" I said as I walked into the front hallway, "Who are you talking to?"

"Just the cop standing by your car!" Alex told me.

I looked out the front door and saw a brown Washington Police car sitting on the curb. I turned towards my car and saw a policeman standing next to my Mustang. I could feel adrenaline pumping through my veins beyond any levels I had established earlier in the day.

"You!" The officer was pointing to me, "Get your butt over here! Right now!"

I stepped out the door and stood on the front porch. "Yes Sir?"

"Is this your car here?" The officer asked as he walked toward me.

My voice cracked as I spoke. "Yes Sir, it's mine."

"Let me have your drivers license." The officer said.

I handed him my license and asked, "Can I help you with something, Officer?"

"Didn't you hear me pounding on your door?" The officer asked.

"No, we had the stereo on," I said flatly.

"I walked around this whole house, and I didn't hear no stereo," the officer said, "You trying to fuck with me?"

"We were in the basement. I swear to God we didn't hear you," I pleaded.

"Don't bring God into this! You shut your mouth and stand right here." The officer said as he looked at my license. He picked up his walkie-talkie and said, "Car Two- Twelve to base, I have a 423 suspect, Mahoney, Neil Patrick, SSN 456-83-6833, DOB 3-17-65, Height 5 foot 10 inches, Weight 170, Hair red, eyes hazel, no distinguishing features, scars or tattoos, over."

I could hear garbled words coming over his radio.

"Vehicle is a Red, 1969 Mustang, license plate Ocean, November, Tango, two, niner, zero, over." the officer said.

Just then, a yellow and blue telephone truck pulled up behind the cop's car, it's blue trouble light revolving with mock urgency. "You wait right here, and boy if you move, I won't be firing any warning shots." the officer said as he walked towards the truck.

I looked at Alex and said, "What the hell's going on?"

"I just opened the door, and he was standing by your car. I don't know what's going on, but you're in shit and I'm not." Alex said as he headed for his car. "Officer, is it ok if I leave, sir?"

The officer turned from his conversation, looked Alex over, and said "Well, alright. But you better stay out of my sights!" He then shot a glance at me, and turned back to the men in the truck.

I watched Alex pull out of the driveway and felt like I would never see him again. I turned and looked at the cop. He had one hand on the roof of the truck, and the other was resting on the butt of his revolver. He was tall and slender, a jogger's build, I thought. He had short black hair under his hat, and a bushy black moustache. He was chewing gum and smoking a cigarette. Just then, the men in the truck got out, and the three of them walked over to the passenger side of my car.

"You stay right there!" the officer said as he pointed.

The three men converged by the passenger door. One of the Telephone men -- a burly guy with a tattoo of E.T. on his right forearm -- bent down, then stood up again. I could see the men talking to each other and pointing at my car.

"Ok Mr. Mahoney, Why don't you step over here!" the officer said. I walked down the sidewalk to the driveway. As I stepped around to the passenger side of the car, I looked down and saw that last hideous orange traffic cone. It was twisted behind the front wheel, stuck between the frame and the body. I must have dragged it for a half a mile, and the thought pleased me. Then I felt the cold steel grip of a handcuff on my right wrist. My face was promptly smashed into the roof of my Mustang.

The officer reached up, grabbed my left hand and pulled it behind my back where my right hand was waiting to be reunited.

"What are you doing?" I said, as the officer snapped the other half of his handcuff on my left wrist.

"You are under arrest for Tampering with Public Utility Property, Section 423.52 of the Criminal Code." He said.

I squirmed in my handcuffs as the officer read me the Miranda Warning. As he read, I checked out his name and badge number.

"Hess, badge number 2369." I said. "Officer Hess, This has got to be some kind of joke! I have no idea how that got there."

The other Telephone man -- a short man with horn-rimmed glasses -- came over and said, "We'll press charges. Just call our supervisor when you get him downtown." The burly man walked over to where the cone was wedged in, and pried it out.

"I'll need that for evidence." Hess said "Just put it by the trunk of my car." Hess dragged me over to the passenger side of his brown police car. He opened the door, pushed my head down and said, "Sit down and keep your mouth shut."

He slammed the door shut, walked around to the other side of the car and reached in the front window. I jumped at the "clunk" of the power door locks, and a sinking feeling of panic and disbelief came over me. He was going to take me downtown for running over orange traffic cones.

Hess got in the car, and started the engine. "Thanks fella's," he said to the Telephone men. He picked up the radio handset and said, "Car Two-Twelve to base, 423 suspect in custody, proceeding to base, out."

As we pulled away from my house, I noticed that a small crowd of neighbors had gathered. We drove by and I ducked my head so no one could see my face. I didn't think at the time that my red hair must have stood out in the brown police car, like those traffic cones did on the highway.

We took a right on Dogwood. I felt uncomfortable in my new jewelry and I was worried about Miriam missing her Karate lesson. However, I could see the humor in my dilemma, and I wanted to take advantage of it.

"You must be proud of yourself today Officer Hess, you've captured Public Enemy Number One." I said.

"Don't get smart with me. Tampering with public utility property is a serious offense." Hess said, "If I let you get away with it, everyone will be doing it."

We were coming up to the highway, returning to the scene of my crimes. "It was an accident!" I said. "A little dog came running across the road, and I swerved to keep from hitting it."

"According to the Phone guys, you've swerved from quite a few little dogs today. You've hit those cones on two separate occasions," Hess said, pointing out the window. "That's reckless and imprudent driving, public endangerment. Hell, I can probably find a dozen things to charge you with. Shut your damned mouth."

"Hey, you can't talk to me that way. I've got your name and badge number, and believe me, your superiors are going to hear from me." I said.

"You want to ride in the trunk with that fucking cone?" Hess asked.

I looked out the front window and saw the remaining traffic cones along the highway. Six cones were left, three were standing, and the rest were strewn about the shoulder where I had left them. Looking at all that carnage I thought that I had done my duty well.

We turned left onto the highway and started heading back towards the school. There was heavy traffic on the highway. The clock on the dashboard read 2:32, so I knew there would be an audience when we drove by.

Traffic was all jammed up as we crawled past the entrance to my school. I could see fifty or so classmates gathered along the side of the highway. There was Alex's Oldsmobile sitting on the lawn between the parking lot and the highway. The police car lurched to a halt behind a blue Datsun that had stopped suddenly in front of us. Everyone was shouting and pointing and waving and honking their horns. Alex gathered three cheerleaders, who were there waving pom-pom's, a couple of girls from the marching band, who were playing saxophones, and Miriam held a sign that read:

MAHONEY 7

CONES 0

I wanted madly to wave back, but I was in no position to do so at the time. I turned and looked at Hess, but quickly turned away in fear. Although I could only muster a fleeting glimpse at Officer Hess, I have never seen anyone so pissed off before in my life. Not even my father.

"Fucking juveniles!" Hess shouted as he hit the lights and sirens. A cheer came from my little audience and Hess floored the accelerator. The wheels squealed, and I turned to see clouds of smoke where the tires had once been.

"That was the best scratch I've ever seen!" I said as we sped through freshly parted traffic. It was the nicest compliment I'd ever given a cop.

We turned left onto Main Street, and Hess said, "You think you're a smart guy, don't you. Real cute, knock down some traffic cones, be a real hero. I think you're shit."

I started to speak, but decided to exercise my right to remain silent. When we arrived at the police station, I was uncuffed, printed, photographed, and chastised by the other officers. While I was being frisked for the fifth time, an older officer said to me, "You fuck with the Snake, and you get bit!."

"Who's the snake?" I asked.

"That's Gary 'the Snake' Hess. He hates all you teenage pukes. It's a good thing you didn't try to run." he said.

"Why's that?" I asked in a smart-assed tone.

"He once shot a kid who ran from him." He smiled.

"When do I get out of here?"

"Never!" Hess said as he grabbed me by the back of the neck. "Let's go into interrogation room one, so I can get a statement."

"I want to speak with my attorney. Don't I get one phone call?"

"Are you sure you don't want to make a statement?" Hess asked.

"I want to call my attorney." I demanded.

Hess pushed me into the interrogation room and said, "You can use the phone on the desk. But make it quick."

I sat down, picked up the phone and called Mom. When she answered, I could tell she had already been well informed of my situation by Miriam. "What

the hell have you been doing? Have you gone crazy? What's gotten into you? When you get out of there, I'm going to kill you." She said in a millisecond.

"Calm down Mom, I need your help." I told her.

"I've already called Dan Stewart. He's the Prosecuting Attorney for the City of Washington. All you have to do is go through processing and you will be released. He's going to drop the charges." She told me.

"Why was I arrested in the first place?"

"Because you deserved it." She said. "You are to go directly home and wait until I get there. You can also park your car in the garage and leave it there, permanently!"

"How am I supposed to get home from here?"

"Walk!"

"It's three miles."

"Good! That will give you plenty of time to think about what I'm going to do to you when I get home," She said. Then she slammed the phone down so hard my ear rang.

Hess walked into the room and said, "I just talked to the DA. The charges have been dropped, you're free to go."

I stood up to leave and Hess closed the door behind him.

"Before you leave, I just want you to know one thing. If you ever fuck with me again, I'll kick the shit out of you!" He said, then he punched me in the stomach.

I doubled over and fought to catch my breath. Hess opened the door and said, "You should be more careful. Now get the fuck out of my sight."

I struggled out of the inquisition room gasping for air, and turned down the hallway towards the front of the station. Hess followed me to the front door, opened it for me and politely said, "Have a nice day."

"Fuck-off pig," I said with a wheeze, as I stepped out into freedom. I headed up Main street, holding my stomach as I walked. It took me a half hour to get to the highway, but by that time, I had recovered from the blow Hess gave me. I walked past school, and saw the sign that Miriam held, discarded along the side of the highway. The fact that she was there supporting me somehow made up for tattling to Mom.

I walked over the hill, and saw the telephone truck sitting there, without cones. I decided to cross the highway so I didn't come anywhere near that truck. When I passed it, I crossed the highway again and cut through the neighborhood to get home.

I walked in the door at 5:27, and Miriam was not there. I started to freak until I saw a note on the fridge that said:

Neil,

Alex took me to Karate. Hope your trip to prison was fun. You're in deep shit.

Love, Miriam.

I heard Mom's car pull into the driveway. She rarely came home early, and the expression on her face when she walked through the front door, made me wish I was back with Officer Hess. Much to my surprise, she came over to me and gave me a hug.

"Are you ok?" She asked. "They didn't hurt you did they?"

I wanted to tell Mom about the unparalleled treatment I received from the Washington Police Department, but I didn't want to upset her anymore than she already was. "I'm fine Mom. I'm just a little embarrassed."

"Why did you run over all those cones? What's the matter with you?" She asked.

"Nothing, and I didn't mean to hurt anybody, I was just having fun."

"Having fun, that's playing ball or going out on dates, not running cones down. We'll see how much fun you're going to have while you're grounded." She told me, "No phone, no television, no stereo and no car for two weeks."

"What about Miriam, how's she supposed to get around for two weeks?"

"Alex told me he'd do it for gas money." She said.

"Alex? He told you?"

"Yes, he called me from school after you were arrested."

"That son-of-a-bitch."

"Watch your language." She said, slapping me upside the head. "Now get in your room and don't come out until I call you for dinner."

I closed my bedroom door and threw myself down on the bed. I couldn't believe that my best friend was the one to rat me out. Hell, I wouldn't have done it the second time around without his encouragement. I didn't know what I was going to do for two weeks without modern technology, and I couldn't bear the thought of riding the school bus. Any coolness I gained from this encounter would be forfeited the second I step on the bus.

But the second I get off that bus, I'm going to find Alex.