

DELIVERING THE LAUNDRY

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WHOOOM, WHOOOM, WHOOOM. The sound of the big boat's steam whistle startled Kenny awake. "That sounds like the ROBINSON," he thought. "It can't be." "She's not supposed to leave until 8:00PM." Glancing at the clock hanging at an angle on the wall of his cramped office, he saw that it was only a quarter till two. Thinking that he had plenty

of time, he had not started the laundry for the Robinson when the crewmembers had dropped it off this morning. He wished he had now! He had been so tired though. It had been a long week, and he had only intended to prop his feet on his desk for a few minutes. Now, more than three hours later, his heart raced! In the five years since he had started his Ships Laundry Service for the boats that called at Calcite, he had never once missed a dockside delivery.

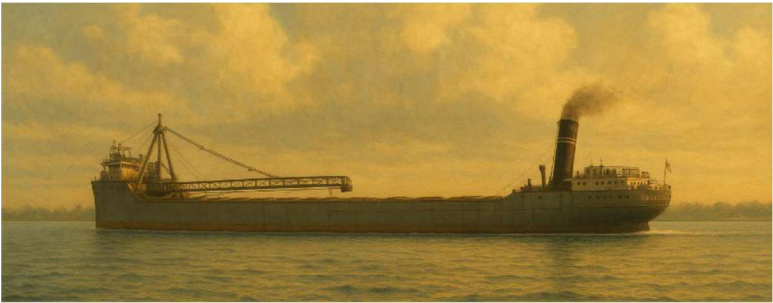
Picking up the phone, he dialed the harbormaster at Calcite. “Chuck this is Kenny, is that the Robinson departing?” he asked excitedly. “Yeah it is,” said the voice on the other end. “Why is she out so early?” he asked. “I thought she wasn’t supposed to leave until eight.” “The Calcite II developed a problem with her loading gear and the Robinson got bumped up,” Chuck said. “Where is she bound?” “Port Huron, then Zug Island,” came the reply. “How soon?” “Should make Port Huron about six in the morning, and Zug Island somewhere around Noon,” he answered. “Ok, thanks,” Kenny said as he replaced the receiver.

Kenny did some quick figuring; it was going to take about six hours to complete the laundry, another six hours to drive it to Port Huron, that’s 12 hours total, he just might make it!

Hurrying into the shop, he started dumping the seven large duffle bags onto the floor so that he could sort the clothes into different piles. Whites in one pile, dungarees and the Dickie’s that so many of the men wore into another. The two stainless steel commercial washers that were his bread and butter would each hold about a full bag he remembered. Still, there was at least a full day’s work ahead...and then the long drive downstate.

“Darn!” “I can’t drive this load tonight,” Kenny said aloud. “I’ve got another boat that’s got to get done too.” “What am I going to do?” he thought. “There’s got to be somebody that I

can call to help.” However, Kenny did not know very many people in Rogers City. Since moving here in 1965, he and his wife and been somewhat loners. With the new baby at home and his busy schedule, they just did not have much time to socialize. Every man that he knew worked on the boats. Here, early in the season, they would be out on the lakes tonight earning their living. Each of their wives busy with children at home. “Do any of them have boys old enough to drive?” he thought. “No, that won’t work.” “It’s a school night.” He felt guilty just thinking it. “Wait a minute,” “Bud’s kids aren’t in school, they got suspended a few months ago.” He was right. Just a few months earlier, Donnie and Jeff had been suspended for a whole two years. It didn’t seem to be that big a deal; dress code violation, but enough of a deal to cause a lot of trouble around town. He knew that they were both young, early teens he thought, but he also knew that they could drive. Kenny had seen them driving their moms Chevy to and from the IGA in town and the big rented house a couple of miles out.



Kenny got along pretty good with both Bud and his wife Harriett. He wasn’t sure that his half-baked, impromptu plan would go over too well though. It was kind of crazy sounding, even to him. He was actually considering asking this mother who had been through so much recently if he could borrow two of her under-age sons so that they could take his new van on a 600 mile round trip to the big city downstate to deliver a load of laundry to a sometimes rough and tumble dockyard! If the shoe were on the other foot, would he agree? No way! “Ah but

that's the rub," he thought. "The shoe isn't on the other foot." He did not have a lot time to consider the plan any further, honestly, he was glad that he didn't.

"What! You gotta be kidding, right?" Harriett was shocked at the request. "I know it sounds crazy Harriett," Kenny pleaded, "but I don't know what else I can do!" "If I miss this delivery it could kill my reputation!" "Everything that I've got is sunk into the business." "Donnie and Jeff are pretty independent, they can handle it." "Come on...Please!" "I'll give you all the money I would have made from the job." "That's almost \$140!"

Donnie and Jeff were sitting there listening to the back and forth exchange between their mother and this obviously desperate businessman. The prospect of such an exciting adventure appealed to them. After all, look at everything that had happened over the last few years. They had survived the race riots while living in inner city Detroit a few years ago. They were also right now embroiled in the midst of a tumultuous legal battle with the local school system. A battle, which had indeed brought them a two-year suspension from any school system within the state of Michigan. Meanwhile, their names, pictures and recent exploits had been printed and reprinted in newspapers from Detroit to Vietnam and every day the mailbox was full of letters from such places. Life was pretty darn exciting; this would just add to that excitement.

"Come on mom!" "We can do it!" The boys joined Kenny's cause whole-heartedly. "You know we can use the money." They were right. Ever since the legal battle had begun, the bills had been piling up. Not to mention the portion of the hospital bill from the recent birth of her seventh child that went unpaid. The euphoric high that comes from having economic security had been short-lived. "But neither of you boys even have a license." "And you're only twelve and thirteen!" she reminded them. "Yeah, but we drive for you when you want us to," Donnie piped. "You know that we can do it," he continued. "It's

not going to..." "Wait! Just hold on a minute," Harriett interrupted. "It's one thing to drive to the grocery store, or to drive Bud home from the bar when he's had too much to drink, but we're talking about 600 miles!" "Yeah, yeah mom, but we know the way, and it's going to be nighttime, nobody's going to see us!" Donnie replied. "It'll be alright mom," Jeff added "Please!" Harriett had to admit to herself that the boys kind of did have her in a trap. If she said no, the hypocritical overtones of her position would be unmistakable. It was true that she did not mind that they drove whenever performing errands that were convenient for her. It was one of the reasons that she had not objected when the boys uncles had started letting them drive the dirt roads downstate two or three years ago. She knew too that both boys were good drivers considering their limited experience. She had also told the boys that the reason for the ongoing legal battle was to preserve their respective rights to choose, and that she wanted them to become and remain independent. Although the protective instincts of motherhood welled up inside, she found that she could not with a clear conscience say no. "Ok, ok guys," she said reluctantly. "You win. But you had better be careful!" Chuckling to herself, she half joked that she was being either a negligent mother, or maybe another Ma Barker.

With the battle having been won, Kenny expressed his gratitude again and stated that he needed to get back and finish the laundry but would return at 8:15 to drop off the van. Walking Kenny out to the van, Donnie and Jeff marveled at the almost new 1967 Chevy, knowing that tonight they would graduate from small town back road driving to over the road long-haul drivers! Their excitement was evidenced by the ear-to-ear smiles.

Although Harriett had insisted that they try to rest up with a nap before departing on their adventure, Donnie and Jeff were too wound up to sleep. Instead, each lay there lost in their

imagination of the upcoming trip, not knowing that this critical mistake would turn the adventure into a grueling ordeal.



Kenny, true to his word, pulled in the driveway promptly at 8:15PM with his wife following in their car. Although relieved that if this plan was successful it would save his business reputation, still feeling somewhat like the heel that he knew he was for devising it in the first place. He could barely stand to look Harriett in the eye while still offering last-minute reassurance. Donnie and Jeff on the other hand were eager to start. They fidgeted from foot to foot while Harriett went through her cautionary instructions, answering “Yes mom, we know!” to each one. Finally, with one more embrace, another kiss to the top of each head, she backed off letting them slip away and stood at the top of the stoop, her eyes swelled with tears. She knew that this was going to be a long sleepless night.

After receiving last minute instructions from Kenny and going over the map in detail, the boys hopped in the van, deciding that Donnie would take the first turn behind the wheel. Starting the

engine and moving the manual column shifter to reverse, he slowly backed down the driveway, glancing up in time to see his mother blow a kiss and wipe a tear from her cheek. The adventure had begun!

The trip would take the boys south on US highway 23, a two-lane road hugging the Lake Huron shoreline to Standish, about one hundred and fifty miles. There they would pick up Interstate 75 to Flint, another eighty or so miles, which was the usual route their family used when visiting relatives downstate. However, the last leg of the journey, the seventy-some-odd miles from Flint to Port Huron on route M21 would be uncharted territory on an unfamiliar road traversed in the middle of the night.

As they set off the excitement of the adventure ahead dominated their conversation and they had no problem staying awake. A scant ten miles down the road Donnie's eyes started growing heavy, and being the older brother, he decided that it was Jeff's turn to drive. His new plan was for Jeff to drive as far as Standish, and he would take the most challenging routes along the interstate and into the city. However, as often happens, plans change. At the next crossroad, in the dirt lot of a now closed country store, they stopped to make the switch. As Jeff opened the door on his side of the van, Donnie was already making his way between the seats to the large, pile of laundry bags that lay so temptingly in the back. As he walked around the van ready to assume his duties, Jeff paused long enough to draw in a few deep breaths of the night air. The lake air was crisp and cool, the last remnant of a stubborn "Huron" winter. He found it refreshing and rejuvenating.

Settling in behind the wheel, while adjusting the seat and mirrors Jeff asked Donnie; "Ok, so I'm taking it to Standish and you're taking it from there, right Donnie?...Donnie?" His only reply was the resonating breathing of an already deep sleep. "It's alright Jeff," he said to himself a little warily, "you got this." Knowing now that he had the opportunity to show-off to

his big brother, and determined to do just that, he pulled out onto the dark deserted highway.



The low drone of the engine, the steady hum of the tires and the crackling reception of the AM radio kept him pleasant company the first thirty miles. The drive through Alpena was interesting too. The first glimpse of the lake brought with it the sight of a ship ahead in the night a few miles off shore, also heading South. No doubt, its belly was full of either limestone or taconite and heading for an industrial port down lake. Perhaps it was even the Robinson. It was easy for Jeff to imagine that it was, and the thought of racing it to Port Huron increased the stakes. Would he be the first to the Seaway Terminals? He had to be! For a few miles, he kept the freighter in sight, but soon the road veered inland away from the lake. The lights from the Laker, still ahead in the night slowly disappeared amongst the ever-increasing forest. The lake, now completely out of sight would not reappear until he reached Harrisville thirty miles away.

The density of the forest increased, the night grew darker and so to it seemed did the drone of the engine, and the hum of the tires grow ominous. Though the quarry was no longer in sight, Jeff was still aware of the contest. Boy against boat, unaware that soon an unwelcome visitor would join him. A visitor known by some as fatigue, exhaustion, or weariness, but known by him as “The Sandman.” He was getting tired.

As he continued South on US 23, the miles seemed to be getting longer and the night grew darker. The shadows of the large poplar, birch and evergreen trees beside the roadway cast by the brightly lit Moon seemed to morph into dark and menacing creatures. With help from the Sandman, now inching closer to the speeding van, trying to close a circle around him. Nearing the edge of fear, Jeff suddenly snapped fully awake, realizing that he was letting his imagination get the best of him. Determined now not to succumb to this latest foe, he rolled the window down a little further and forced himself to focus on the task at hand.

There was a sign ahead, Harrisville 18 miles. “That’s not so bad” he thought, “I can make that.” Thinking that if he broke the trip up into smaller chunks of asphalt it would be easier, he calculated in his head how many parts there were left to Standish. “Let’s see... eighteen miles to Harrisville, that’s one leg, about another twenty to Oscoda, that’s two, Oscoda to Tawas City is around sixteen miles, that would be three.” The miles were adding up. “I think it is thirty miles from there to Omer,” he thought, but Omer to Standish was less than ten he remembered. “Ok then” he said aloud, “that’s five legs and about ninety miles.” “Knuckle down Jeff,” he continued, “just a couple more hours, you got this!”

The wind whistled from the now fully open window, and despite the heavy snoring from his brother, Jeff felt a renewed vitality. “The race” he thought, “remember the race!” Seeking further encouragement, he fumbled with the radio dial only to

find that it was still filled with nothing but garbled static. So improvising the best he could, he started singing a childhood favorite, “She’ll be coming round the mountain”, of course substituting the “she’s” for “he’s.”

After several verses, surprisingly, the city limit sign of Harrisville suddenly appeared around the bend, slowing his speed to 20 miles per hour. “Wow, that first leg went by fast!” Creeping through town along the lakeshore, Jeff scanned the lake for any signs of the Robinson. There was none. The lake was dark with only the moonlight shimmering on the water, looking like a highway across the sea. Leaving the sleepy hamlet in the rearview mirror, he now concentrated on the second leg, “it’s only about twenty miles” he thought, “piece of cake.”

This second leg was easier still. The miles along the relatively straight road to Oscoda uneventful. Occasionally Jeff glanced at the lake to his left, and still seeing no boats in sight, feeling confident that he was ahead in the race. Another song, “There’s a hole in the bottom of the sea” rolled off his tongue. “Yeah, you got this Jeff,” he thought again.

Oscoda now behind him, the third leg began. The next junction was Tawas City, only sixteen miles down the road. As the miles fell away on the again winding road, Jeff had yet another unexpected visitor. The rumbling from his stomach reminded him that he had scarcely touched his dinner, but he was hungry now. He groped for the sandwich wrapped in a reused bread bag, the one made with the homemade raspberry jam that mom had canned last summer. The sweetness of the fruit still tasting as fresh as the day it was picked from the large cultivated rows beside their house. As he rolled down the road savoring his sandwich and the mason jar of grape Kool-Aid, he experienced a gratification, a sense of adulthood that had not been there before.

Tawas City was a small city nestled in the sheltered curl of a protective cove where boats sometimes sought refuge during a nor'easter. US 23 was the main street through town, and the three stoplights reminded motorists of its status as the county seat. As he left the city limits and rounded a curve to the left, Jeff saw headlights ahead. They seemed to be standing still for the distinctive bouncing of the lights along the asphalt were not there. Perhaps it was a car parked on the shoulder of the previously deserted highway. Slowing his speed, he glanced in its direction as he passed. "Was that a bubble on top?" he thought in panic. Yes, he knew it was, and his heart pounded in his chest. "What should I do?" he was thinking. "Should I wake up Donnie?" Lowering his head as if now he could hide the youthfulness of his features, he continued on, frightened to the core. His hands trembled on the wheel, and he was afraid to look in the side mirror to see if the fading taillights would become headlights again, but this time following. The distance between them increased, the lights remained stationary and after topping a small hill, disappeared completely. Now that the incident was over, an abrupt relief came upon him, and with it, the return of the Sandman. The fullness of his belly and the release of the excitement brought with it an overwhelming drowsiness, almost catatonic in state.



This fourth leg of the journey was the longest, almost thirty miles with just a small break through Alabaster and also winding just a little further inland in a few spots. Jeff was now fully in the territory of the Sandman, and his fearsome grip tightened with each passing yard. His eyes glassing over, eyelids weighing heavy like the burden of over-packed luggage. "The race" he said to himself, "remember the race." However, this was a battle that he was losing, and Jeff knew it. Somehow pushing on, he finally saw the brightly lit sign of the Hillbilly, advertising Mountain Dew up ahead at a closed country store that his family often stopped at. This would have to be his refuge. His pride somewhat dampened at the prospect of having to admit failure to his big brother, he nevertheless eased left and stopped right below the sign. He was about twenty miles out of Omer, and still thirty miles short of his goal, but he couldn't continue.

"Donnie, Donnie wake up!" he said. "I'm sorry man, but I can't drive any further. I've got to get some sleep." Donnie struggled awake, asked "Where are we?" "About thirty miles to Standish," Jeff said, "but I can't drive anymore!" "Come on Jeff, you can't drive another thirty miles?" Donnie demanded. "No" was the simple reply. "Alright then," Donnie said, "I got it."

Switching places, Jeff snuggled into the depression in the laundry bags just vacated by Donnie. The warmth from the bags leaving him indifferent to the possibility that some man's underwear might be just below the fabric. He immediately fell into a deep sleep, unaware even of the van pulling back onto the highway, a new commander in charge.

"Jeff, wake up!, it's your turn to drive again." Donnie was shaking Jeff by the shoulder now. "Come on, wake up!" he repeated. Jeff sluggishly stretched himself up, not feeling at all rested. "What, already?" he asked. "Man, I don't even remember falling asleep." Dutifully, he rose, walked around the

van a couple of times, and then climbed back behind the wheel. The van was parked on a straight stretch of road, nothing in sight looking in either direction. “Hmm, I wonder where we’re at?” he thought. But as he turned to ask Donnie, he saw that it would be of no use, for he was already asleep, burrowed deep in the bags.

Easing onto the seemingly never-ending highway, Jeff tried the radio again. Tuning to 800 AM, he picked up his favorite station, CKLW the Detroit area radio powerhouse. Its 50,000-watt signal covered most of the lower peninsula and was his family’s favorite. The soothing ballad of “Leaving on a jet plane” flowed from the single speaker in the dash and he found himself singing along. While song after song played, the van hummed along as if it now knew the way on its own. As he topped a small rise in the road, a sign started to come in to view. Omer 11 miles. “What!” Jeff exclaimed half aloud. “Omer eleven miles!, that can’t be right!” He knew that it was. Good ole brother Donnie had gotten him again! He had only driven about ten miles before pulling the switch of the century. “Dang that boy sure isn’t anything if not clever,” he thought. Just then another song started playing, “I’ll be there” was the new monster hit by the Jackson Five. “Yeah right, I’ll be there” Jeff thought sarcastically about his older brother, but also laughing to himself because he had let himself be taken in again. “When will I ever learn?” he chuckled. Knowing that it would be pointless trying to right the wrong now, he resolved to push on to at least Standish.

Easing off Interstate 75 into the rest area, Jeff figured that he could honestly turn the wheel over to Donnie. There’s no way that he could complain now. After all, not only had he made Standish, the original turn-over point, but had driven another twenty miles. He was right. Donnie was surprised at how far he had gone and took the wheel with out complaint. Even offering a compliment, “Good job Jeff. You get some sleep, I got it.”

Shortly, after 3:00AM Donnie parked the van outside the small guard shack of the Seaway Terminal. “Wake up Jeff, we’re here.” Both boys exited the van and almost sleepwalking went through the door and into the dimly lit shack. A large man sitting behind an old looking metal desk peered at them over the top of his black rimmed glasses sitting at the tip of his nose. Hesitating momentarily, while studying the two haggard looking boys, he asked; “You fella’s looking for something?” “Yea..yeah”, Donnie stammered. “We have laundry for the Robinson.” “Laundry?”, the big man said, “We don’t have laundry service here.” “That’s down in Detroit.” Rising from his chair, the boys watched as he made his way to a coffee pot simmering on the hot plate of a table in the corner. “You boys look a little tired,” he said “want some?” gesturing with his cup. “Yes!” Jeff piped up, Donnie too anxiously accepted.



The boys made their way to a metal bench in front of the desk and sat quietly sipping their coffee while the man shuffled a few stacks of paper away from the corner of his desk directly in front of them. Half sitting on the desk he glanced through the window at the van parked just outside. Then looking back at the boys, he leaned forward a little getting his face closer to the same level as theirs. “Ok, which one of you is Kenny?” he asked with a chuckle. A little startled, they turned to look at each other, and then back at the watchman. “Well actually Kenny is in Rogers City” Donnie said. “Hmm, is that right?” “So, who’s driving the van?” “Well you see,” Donnie started. The big man interrupted, “Are you saying that you guys drove that van here from Rogers City?” Donnie and Jeff again looked at each other with a knowing look in each of their eyes. The jib was up, they knew that they had to tell him the truth. Between them, they stammered out the story of how this adventure came to be. How Kenny was in a bind, how they really needed the money. The man listened with great interest, and empathy. The more they told him, the more he came to admire the two young fellows. As the minutes turned into an hour or more, they had also told him about their recent exploits with the school system, and how their mother had been jailed for a short time for taking a principled stand.

Soon after, the headlights of a pickup truck rumbled through the gate as the first dockworker of the day arrived, stopping just outside. A creaking truck door and the turning of the knob brought a smaller lanky man into the office. “Morning Clarence,” he said. “Morning Joe,” came the answer. “What’s with the van? Joe asked, just then noticing the boys on the bench. While Donnie and Jeff sat nervously on the bench, Clarence explained the situation to him. “Joe, why don’t you grab the bags from their van and take them dockside so that the Robinson’s crew can get them there.” It was more of an order than it was a request. “Is the truck unlocked boys?”, Clarence asked. “No, but we’ll help” Donnie said as the boys rose together.

Once the bags had been transferred, the boys milled around a bit on the opposite side of the van while Joe and Clarence talked a little more. They were unsure what their next move would be. They should be starting back, but now that the cat was out of the bag, would Clarence let them? They overheard part of the men's conversation. "Clarence, you said that these boys drove that van here from Calcite? Isn't that illegal or something?" "Shouldn't we call somebody?" "No, we ain't calling nobody" Clarence said softly. "Look, these boys drove a long way to do a job. They made it here alright, I expect that they can make it home ok." "Besides, would you want someone ratting on you if you were in their shoes?" "We're going to give these men a break." "Business is business, and this is none of ours."



Now that it was clear they would be allowed to leave, Clarence suggested that they do so. More dockworkers would show up soon, and he might have a more difficult time convincing the others of his decision to give them a pass. Once loaded in the van with Donnie behind the wheel, Clarence approached them one last time. Reaching through the window he extended his hand to Jeff, and then to Donnie. His was a firm handshake, a man's handshake, and he wished the boys safe travels back. As

they pulled out and turned right onto Military Street they saw Clarence, a giant of a man, standing at the gate, tipping his hat to them.

As they moved down the street toward the highway, Jeff saw the Blue Water bridge through his window on the right. Although impressive, its stature was not that of the Mighty Mac which straddled the straits between the two peninsulas of Michigan. Once the van hit the interstate, Donnie told Jeff, “Hey, I got the first leg Jeff, why don’t you sleep a little?” Welcoming the offer, Jeff leaned back in his seat but also took note of the latest road sign. After all he thought, “Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me!”



“Jeff, Wake up, we’re home!” The news startled him awake. “Really?” he asked just as Donnie pulled in the driveway. Donnie, maybe feeling some guilt about his earlier trick, had taken it upon himself to drive the entire three hundred miles back. The sun had broken soon after hitting the highway, and the daylight driving was easier than the nighttime had been.

Their mother of course was relieved to see them back safely, and greeted them with hugs and another kiss to the top of the head. She had been up all night worrying about them and had nearly worn out a deck of cards with an endless round of solitaire. Now that they were home, she could put the cards away and replace them with bologna sandwiches to feed her hungry men. After lunch, they retreated to the living room where the TV was playing Peyton Place, or some other soap opera to stretch out on the floor. It wasn't long before both were sound asleep.

The sounds of their siblings returning home from school awoke them. The kids had seen the van in the driveway and were excited to see their older brothers as they bolted through the door. Such greetings had not been seen since the return of Rome's conquering heroes, and the boys drank it in. They regaled the younger ones with the story of their great adventure, every little detail told and retold. The story was told again that night at supper, as Kenny had come to collect his van, and leave the promised payment. It was obvious that Kenny was relieved that the boys had returned safely, and he listened intently to their story.

Once supper finished and the table cleared, Harriett got up to set the table with coffee for her and Kenny. As she turned from the kitchen counter with two cups in hand, she saw again Donnie and Jeff sitting there talking shop with Kenny. Realizing that her hands were half-empty, she turned back to the cupboard and retrieved two more cups, cups for the two new men in her house.

Kenny got up to leave. "Guy's, you did a heck of a job!" he said. "I guess its time to pony up." With that, he reached for his wallet. Counting out the bills on the table, "Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, one hundred, one hundred ten, one hundred twenty, one hundred thirty, one hundred forty." "Harriett, thanks again. I really appreciate it!" "Boys, great job, I'll let you know if I need

you again.” “Got an early morning, goodnight.” With that, he left out the side door with a slight wave.



Donnie and Jeff eyed the money sitting on the table. Knowing what they needed to do, Donnie slid the money toward his mother. “Here you go mom” he said, “just like we promised.” Harriett reached for the bills, feeling tears of pride welling again in her eyes. “Yep boys, you did a heck of a job.” She stated. She rose to leave before the tears turned into a flood. As she did, she purposely left behind two of the ten’s on the table, knowing that the boys would understand.

So, if you happen to be traveling late at night, especially along a deserted two-lane highway and you see headlights approaching from behind, give way. Perhaps it will be a van traveling through the dark, traveling to meet a goal, racing to beat a deadline. Perhaps a couple of boys, soon to become men, soon to be... Delivering the Laundry.