

It was the kind of item the Associated Press picks up and sends out as a news brief: 'Man Loses Control of Car, Kills Uncle in Head-on Collision.' And all across the country husbands and wives read it to each other over breakfast.

"Did you see this?" the husband, or wife, will say. "Guy drops a cup of coffee in his lap, takes his eye off the road, hits another car head on and the man he kills is his uncle."

"I suppose he'll sue Dunkin Donuts, or whoever," the spouse will say, if imaginative, or at the very least he or she will mutter, "His own uncle! What are the odds?"

About five million to one, thought a smiling Ted Patterson as he lay convalescing on the second floor of Huntsville Medical Center. Five million being the amount of money his uncle had possessed, and the one being himself, the sole surviving relative.

Then came a sharp, stabbing pain, the aftereffect of a broken right collarbone. He gestured weakly to a passing nurse, who raced in to adjust his pillow. The look in her eyes spoke volumes: here was a fellow human being, suffering not only physical pain but also tremendous guilt from having accidentally caused the death of his uncle.

"You're so kind," he said, sitting up, and the nurse had gone away. The collarbone didn't bother him much, and the three broken ribs even less, though the doctors said they would when he got up and began walking around. That was all right; he didn't mind suffering a little when the payoff was so big. That was the problem with everyone who plans the perfect murder, he reflected: they didn't want

any suffering or even any inconvenience; they wanted a clean getaway with no hitches. He, on the other hand, was willing to sacrifice to get what he wanted.

He had first come up with the idea of using a car to kill his uncle six months before, in November, while driving from Huntsville to his Brooklyn apartment. He'd gone up to treat the old buzzard to Thanksgiving dinner, even though that meant staying overnight in a motel, said old buzzard not having the generosity to offer him a room. They had eaten their dinner, Ted paying for everything, including the tip, and after a small and unsatisfactory breakfast in his uncle's cramped kitchen the old man had bid him adieu.

As Ted drove away he mentally reviewed the rest of his uncle's uneventful day: after breakfast Ben Patterson would read *The Wall Street Journal* and watch stock market updates on television. Then he would take a brief walk, weather permitting, while his housekeeper prepared his modest lunch: a bowl of soup and half a tuna fish sandwich. Then he would nap, rising to leave the house promptly at 2:30 in his black 1962 Chrysler Imperial to drive three miles to a shopping mall, where there was a coffee shop called Beantown. There he would sip his coffee and, Ted supposed, talk with old fogies like himself. That was what his uncle did, every day, all year round, except on holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's, when Beantown was closed.

Suddenly he knew he could turn this pattern to his advantage. Just as quickly, it occurred to him that the answer lay literally in his hands, which were on the steering wheel. His own car, only a few years old, had both seat belts and an airbag for the driver, while his uncle derided seat belts and never used the antiquated ones in his car. It would be a fantastic chance, thought Ted Patterson, but what if he could pretend to lose control of his car and send it head on into that of his uncle, killing him? Admittedly, there were many things that could go wrong with such a plan: his uncle might somehow survive the collision, or, for some reason, not even show up that day; he himself might be badly injured or killed if the air bag

failed to deploy; someone might witness the sudden swerve and correctly interpret it as deliberate; the sheer improbability of such a coincidence might incite suspicion, as well as sympathy.

But he had to act, and act soon. He owed the bookies twenty thousand, from stupid bets he'd made on the horses and the Super Bowl. Bisconti was especially insistent about being paid, and that little man, so genial and accommodating when Ted was flush, had hinted darkly of what would happen if he didn't see "real money" soon. But how could a part-time postal clerk raise that kind of dough, thought Patterson, as he climbed the foul stairs from Bisconti's. Something would have to be done.

The nurse had entered carrying his lunch. He sat up with what he hoped was an authentic grimace on his face. She smoothed the blanket and tucked a second pillow behind him. "That more comfy?" she said. Much more comfy. He ate heartily, but declined her offer to help him to the bathroom. When he came back a fresh set of sheets was being put on his bed; he fell happily between them, ignoring the snoring of his roommate, unseen but not unheard behind the green plastic curtain dividing their room.

He returned to his reverie. He had decided to put his plan into effect on a Friday; he didn't work Fridays and it made sense to start out then for a weekend visit. He timed his arrival so he would get to the shopping mall at about two o'clock. After waiting a few minutes in the car he walked into a McDonald's and bought a large coffee. He drank only a little of it – he wanted plenty of it on his shirt and pants as evidence for the police – and kept a close eye on the time. Finally he could wait no longer; he started the car and turned north on Route 28, his palms wet on the wheel.

He went through an intersection, deliberately but not too fast, and within a quarter mile had left the commercial district for the country. The familiar valley

opened up before him under shafts of sunlight: the long line of poplars, their gray shadows notching the road like the strokes of an artist's charcoal pencil; the early corn, lime green, in the fields to his right; a smattering of cows -- Holsteins -- in the shadow of the hill to his left. But Ted Patterson had no eye for the beauty of the earth that day; his heart raced and his tongue nervously licked his lips as he scanned the horizon for the black Chrysler. He almost shouted with exultation when he saw it, and braced himself for the collision, which came a split-second after Patterson had dumped the rest of the coffee in his lap.

The impact had been terrific, and for a moment Ted Patterson, smelling the spilled gas, had a vision of being burned alive. But there was no fire, and a moment later he felt friendly hands gently prying him from the wreckage. They laid him gently on the grass by the side of the road. "Forget the other one; he's done for," Patterson heard someone say, and he closed his eyes in happy unconsciousness.

"You're very lucky you weren't more badly hurt," said the emergency room doctor who patched him up, and Ted Patterson had acknowledged his good fortune. The two policemen who came the following day to question him seemed sympathetic, and after a few perfunctory questions did not bother him again.

Ten days after the accident he was given the go-ahead to go back to the city. His car had been totaled in the crash, so he made the difficult trip by bus. Everyone was so kind on the way down, and when he explained the circumstances to the bookies they had given him more time.

He had expected trouble with Bisconti. He'd brought copies of articles on the accident, and while Bisconti looked them over, chewing thoughtfully on his cigar, Patterson had explained the unique relationship between himself and his uncle. "I'll be a rich man soon," he said. "The guy was worth millions."

“A nice break for you,” Bisconti replied, but there had been something beyond suspicion in his dark eyes.

That had been, what, three months ago, and now, feeling much better and with a car courtesy of the insurance company, he made the long drive upstate to Huntsville. It was late summer, and the trees seemed to sag in the heat of August.

He parked outside the law firm of Wilberforce, Wilberforce and Mullens and went up the narrow stairs. The receptionist gave him a big smile – maybe she knows about the millions too, Patterson thought – and he sat and waited a few minutes before Howard Wilberforce Sr. came to the door of his office and beckoned him inside. He offered a withered hand by way of greeting, and as Ted Patterson took it he thought how much the old lawyer reminded him of his uncle. They must have known each other as boys, Ted Patterson reflected, and even then Howard Wilberforce was probably looking forward to one day writing Ben Patterson’s will.

To Ted’s surprise there was another person in the room, a woman of about sixty with a face full of good deeds. Wilberforce introduced her as the Rev. Gretchen Ellsworth, pastor of some Protestant denomination whose name was strange to him. So, his uncle had gotten religion in his old age and left some church a little money? That was fine; he wouldn’t begrudge the clergy five or ten thousand dollars. But the Rev. Ellsworth was saying something to him.

“I was so sorry to learn of the tragedy. Your uncle was such a dear, dear man.”

Patterson let the ready tears come to his eyes. “I’ve never really forgiven myself. I keep thinking, if it weren’t for my carelessness, he – ”

“Oh, but God wants us to forgive ourselves, don’t you think?” she said, her flabby hands clasping his. “He wouldn’t want –”

“Ahem.” They turned and saw Wilberforce standing behind his desk, peering at them over the rims of his glasses, holding what must be the will in his hand. They quickly sat down.

Ted Patterson let his mind wander as Wilberforce began the customary preamble. The paneled walls, and the heavy curtains and shelves of law books that hung from those walls, spoke of money, the kind of money that would be his in a matter of minutes. Then he heard the old lawyer say, “All my personal property, including my home, its furnishings, the office building at 11 Newmarket Street, my stocks, bonds and other personal effects I leave to the Church of the Risen Redeemer of Huntsville.”

“Such a sweet man,” said the Rev. Ellsworth, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. “Heaven rest his generous soul.” But Ted Patterson had risen from his seat in a kind of daze. The – the - church was going to get everything? He swayed and sat down, because he could no longer stand.

Wilberforce coughed again and continued to read. “And to my dear nephew Ted, who loves and appreciates the open road as much as I do, I leave my cherished 1962 Chrysler Imperial.”

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