SOMETIMES LIFE IS NOT PRETTY. It was a shock for me when my boyhood Saturday movie matinee Western idol, Tom Mix, died in a car crash when I was ten—in 1940—and idol Tom, after a long career in the saddle of wonder horse Tony, was a still swinging sixty. In my hometown Hollywood I loved Tom’s brash vulgarity. He was the only movie star to light up the night sky—outshining the multi-bulbed HOLLYWOODLAND sign—with a billboard-size white neon autograph spelling out TOM MIX beaconing over the tiled roof of his fantasy Spanish Hacienda in the Hollywood hills.

After I caught the news bulletin on my bedroom Mickey Mouse radio of hero Tom’s shocking death, I rushed down North Alpine Drive, block after block, to buy the first Examiner EXTRA! Edition with the blazing headline “TOM MIX DEAD!” I still have that yellowed Hearst front page glued in my first scrapbook. The all-night newsstand was manned by Angelo, alumnus of Freaks, and we both bawled like babies as we mourned the loss of our silver screen Saddle Pal.

I took home the precious EXTRA! edition of the reviled tabloid, Hearst’s lowbrow Los Angeles Examiner, sneaking it into my bedroom, breaking the No Hearst Papers! rule of my puritanical Presbyterian parents. (For kids, the Key to Joy is Disobedience). My Republican parents subscribed to the dull and sober-sided Los Angeles Times.

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My bedroom door locked, I savored the forbidden tabloid. A big photo of Tom’s smashed favorite car hogged first page. Then the luscious, purple porno prose of the Hearst copywriters took over, painting in lurid, well-chosen words the sickening state of the late star’s mangled body, down to the gaping mouth and staring, bulging eyes. Boy, did I eat it up!

Yet doubt set in. Was my hero, my silver screen and radio pal Tom Mix, really dead? All I had to do was wait for the appointed, early-evening, child-friendly hour, switch on my Mickey Mouse radio, and—don’t touch that dial!—there was Tom, alive as all get out, vocally swaggering over the desert wilderness of my boy’s mind. What a downer when I found out years later it wasn’t Tom Mix at all, but a radio actor impersonating the dead “real thing.” The radio sponsors never tipped off the legion of loyal kid fans of The Tom Mix Show that their Saddle Pal had died. And this deception ran on the airwaves until 1950, fooling kids well into the debut of the rival television era. Tom Mix’s career began with rodeos in 1905; his signature horse, the charismatic Tony, seemed as immortal to us kids as Tom Mix himself. Yet truth was, he was killed off not by a fall from the superhorse Tony—that would have been unthinkable—but by that mechanical monster thing: the custom-made, horrendously expensive, awesome racing car, with horns on its elongated hood. As I found out a few years later—the Age of Disillusionment—my hero had died enjoying his swank roadster at a speedometer-confirmed hot hundred per on a lawless stretch of Wild West Highway.

I confess to a love/hate relationship with the car: the essential tool of the late twentieth century and no doubt of the debuting twenty-first century as well. Gas-guzzling monsters swilling down huge quantities of fossil fuel like there’s no tomorrow, we in the West always call them cars though we may still carry cards marked “Automobile Association” or the inescapable “Department of Motor Vehicles.” As a kid growing up in the environs of Hollywood, I was awed by personal sightings of Gary Cooper’s lengthy powerful Deuesenberg and Joe Von Sternberg’s swank streamlined Cord. Garbo’s woven-wicker paneled Rolls: Who could forget it? Lust and owner-envy of these Tinseltown Dream Cars filled my waking thoughts and fevered dreams. These cars were as sleek as sharks and also potentially as deadly.