***Tempus Fuggit***

My father’s name was Sidney. My family and others who encountered him in later life referred to him as “El Sid.”

I liked that sobriquet. Not only because he was a singular character, but due to my vivid memories of the 1961 movie El Cid, starring Charlton Heston as a Castilian Knight battling Muslims in North Africa in the 11th century and the voluptuous Sophia Loren in her prime as his steadfast wife, Doña Ximena. At age 10, Ms. Loren proved cinematically to me, as I suspect she did to many other males in real life, that here was a woman who could make even a dead man rise to the occasion. Check out the film’s climactic scene if you’re wondering what I mean.

El Sid was from the so-called “greatest generation.” Born in 1919 and raised in Brooklyn, New York by European immigrants matched in an arranged marriage, his hunch-backed father, Sam, sewed garments in a sweatshop. His diminutive mother, Nettie, cooked from recipes from the Old Country that bound their family while managing their small tenement apartment near Flatbush Avenue.

El Sid told me when I was a boy that he’d had to grow up fast because his parents were somewhat challenged by the English language and the new American customs they faced. A serious-faced photograph of him in a tweed jacket at age 12 confirmed this. At least twenty, one would guess looking at it.

El Sid worked nights at a local metal factory during high school to help support his family before enlisting in the Navy after the outbreak of the Second World War. After the Navy gave him a crash course in mechanical engineering, he’d shipped out to the South Pacific where he served as a second lieutenant helping command a personnel landing craft. A black and white photo of that shallow-draft ship, built to drop troops on beaches and then, as he put it, “ski-daddle before the artillery hit,” hung over a bolt-action rifle in the basement of our home that he said was a Japanese Arisaka.

Since my father had told me he got sea-sick practically every day he was out at sea, I was having trouble when I was in grade school imagining how he’d gotten that rifle. “Picked it up at a souvenir shop on shore-leave in Seoul,” he admitted, telling me he’d been spared the bloodiest venues in the Pacific. “We were the lucky ones. I saw a Jap suicide bomber crash into the conning tower of one our battle ships with its captain, who I knew, still in it,” his face darkening.

I don’t know if it was his experience ski-daddling from the Japanese in the war or something else that made him such a terrifying driver when I was growing up. Whether driving to the airport for a family trip or some other event, El Sid always waited until we were running late to join my mother, sisters and me sitting with growing anxiety in his car before running stop signs and red lights and ignoring every speed limit and a variety of other traffic laws along our route to make it to our destination on time. And every time the cops pulled him over for those transgressions, he managed to talk his way out of a ticket by letting them know of his service to his country.

When I finally asked him why he tortured us that way, El Sid’s response was “*Tempus fuggit.*”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Look it up,” he said. “That’s Latin. Means I don’t like wasting time.”

My father liked to remind his family that he’d studied Latin in high school, often repeating what he claimed was the opening sentence of *Caesar’s Gallic Wars* as his proof. Certain by that age that El Sid had made the somewhat vulgar-sounding phrase up, I consulted a dictionary.

“That’s the way we pronounced it in Brooklyn,” he explained when I informed him his pronunciation of “*fugit*” differed significantly from *Webster*’*s*.

When I was a high school senior, the captain of our basketball team who everyone called “Dag” button-holed me in a hallway and asked if my father drove a maroon Oldsmobile.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Your father ran me off the road this morning on my way to school,” Dag reported.

“That would be him,” I confessed.

For El Sid, *tempus* kept *fugiting*. Years later, after I’d moved to Santa Fe and he’d reached his late-60s, I introduced him to a friend who asked him why he was reading a book while doing sit-ups on the floor of my apartment. “*Tempus Fuggit*,” El Sid instructed him, using the Brooklyn pronunciation and glancing over at me. “Can’t waste time.”

A few years later, not long after El Sid had gotten a new hip and was in his mid-80s, I arrived at my parents’ Scottsdale home with my kids to find him motionless, pinned beneath his bicycle on the inclined driveway to their garage. One motionless hand gripped a remote garage door opener. Blood trickled from one of his legs. Fearing El Sid’s time had finally *fugited* forever, the three of leapt out of the car.

“It’s just a scratch,” he muttered as we lifted the bike off him.

“What happened, Pop?” my kids asked.

“I was trying to save time riding in. The garage door opener didn’t work fast enough,” El Sid explained.

We flew back East for my father’s funeral two days after he died peacefully at home at 93. The only opportunity I had to see El Sid one last time was at his gravesite. I nodded when the hearse driver asked if I wanted him to open the casket to say goodbye.

I kissed his too grey forehead. It was hard and cold as a block of ice, temporarily stunning me. What had I expected?

If only you were here now, Sophia, I thought as we left the gravesite. El Sid and I might have had wasted one more time together.