



RANDY'S RIDE

a short story
by
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My friend Randy just stood there. He didn't have much choice. There wasn't even so much as a bucket within a quarter mile, Help wasn't coming soon enough and, to come to the point, his car was engulfed with a raging fire. He had called me on his cell phone and, since I was only a few minutes away, I got there in time to see this fireball that was patterned after the shape of what once was his 1966 Ford Galaxie 500 7 Litre. It was kind of a dusty blue but Randy always bragged that the president of Chile had ridden in a black one in some kind of parade back in the Eighties. His convertible had promise but it had needed a lot of work to fulfill it. Even so, he had shared the thought that if it was good enough for a South American president it was good enough for him to bring it back to its original glory. He had spent a lot more on the car than it was probably worth to bring it back to life. As the heat from the fire bathed me uncomfortably, I couldn't help but remember how proud he was when he bought that damned pile of forty year-old metal. Over time he restored it as much as he could. All that obsessing, money and time reaching forward to the sky transformed by flames with occasional embers escaping upward was a sad punchline to what would become a very bad joke. The fire engines arrived in time to see the flames reaching skyward as the last remnants of his prized possession gave the one finger salute to the world.

What caused this? Spontaneous combustion? Perhaps a gas leak ignited by a short circuit was the culprit. We both stood there looking at this display as his car cooked in the early evening Magic Hour. "Any idea what happened?" I asked. He said he had no idea but the first hint of trouble came when he noticed smoke from the back seat. "Maybe you put something in the trunk that was flammable," I theorized. "No, that had not been the case," he related as he choked on his words. He had just picked the car up at the upholsterers and the car was completely empty. There wasn't so much as a toothpick in the glove box. "Damn, those seats looked amazing," he said. The old seats in the Galaxie had interesting pleating with piping. The original leather seats had been done by people with a passion to do good work. In 1966, it seemed American automakers had a more pride than they do now. Those seats *were* exceptional. When Randy got the car it was so ratty looking I didn't want to be seen in it. The engine was just about shot and the rusted muffler announced its sorry arrival at every destination. He hung in there and finished the restoration with the last task being the upholstery. How ironic that he had the newly reupholstered car only hours before it decided to fry itself.

A week and a half ago we were cruising around on a really mild fall evening and trying to decide if we were hungry or not. Ventura Boulevard was not as busy as it usually was, probably because of the new season of television. I suggested that we cruise the neighborhoods over the weekend

and look at the fall colors. Randy said, "Don't go getting' gay on me, dude." Well," I said, "I'm just sayin' that it's gonna be nice out and leaves are changing." "That is such a gay thing for two dudes to be doing together!" he joked. Truthfully, I was a little tweaked. "You know, sometimes you can be a real asshole! And you shouldn't say stuff like that," I barked. I wondered for a moment what the hell he could be talking about. While Southern California's fall colors are nothing compared to the east, it's still fun to get out and take some pictures. We got back to the subject at hand and we both figured that "Whispers Café" near Encino would be just the low-key place to grab a bite and then carry on with our individual existences. It was one of the things I liked about hanging out with Randy. We could have a meaningful conversation about something political or otherwise socially relevant, eat an inexpensive meal, continue the conversation and exchange views and wrap it all up on the way back.

During the months he was refurbishing his Galaxie, I'd often drive over to his building and we'd take his car to whatever local place with plastic menus we had randomly picked. Whispers Café used to be a French patisserie until they changed ownership. If you like egg dishes it's a pretty good place. Anyway, that's where we landed. Randy reminded me that it used to be a "French bake shop". I didn't correct him. What use is it to explain the difference between a "bake shop" and a "patisserie" to someone whose focus in life is 1966 Ford anything. He was really bitching about the fact that corporations had destroyed everything and that their quest for money and power had all but enslaved Americans, no, the *people* of the world. His case in point: he said that a long-time client had tried to "jew him down" on a contract he had already agreed to sign. I chastised him for using that term but he retorted, "It's OK; I'm Jewish." "You're Jewish? I asked. "With a name like Randolph Epstein I'd have never guessed. It's not cool to say it either way." "Like I been sayin'," Randy pierced back, "you're gettin' a little too PC these days, bro." He continued on with his rant. "And another thing," he went on, "I can't even get American made parts for my 500... and it's an American icon." He went on to complain that he had to compromise a little on some of the "rebuilt" aspects of his "icon". The car was really shaping up and the only thing he had left to do was the upholstery.

The seats in this particular model were stitched blue leather. The 1966 Galaxies came in 42 different styles of interior and this one was once beautiful. The previous owners didn't take care of the leather and it had cracked and split beyond repair. Whoever would do the restoration on this car's interior really had their work cut out for them. There were four vertical pleats and the same number of horizontal pleats. Randy lamented

that he would probably have to ship his car to China to get the seats redone. I told him he could just drive to China. He was not amused.

Whispers Café is a quiet little place where locals often go to unwind, tell tall tales and enjoy convivial conversation along with a few adult beverages. You would see regulars in there just about any time you would go in. Edgar Mallory was always at the bar, he's a regular, and he overheard us talking about the car. Edgar was a retiree who was always eager for a conversation and a Moretti. "There's a guy over in the Republic who'll upholster your car and he'll do it cheap," he chimed. "Republic? Where's the Republic," I asked. Randy felt it not only important to educate me but to demonstrate his oratorical abilities. With his hand on my shoulder and his pomposity in full-bloom he began. "Y'see Santa Monica is a 'sanctuary city' which means they violate the laws of these United States of America. What the hell, when you live in the Republic of Santa Monica you can flip off the feds and do whatever you want. Federal laws need not apply. Screw America, we know better than a bunch of old farts who signed a piece of paper in the 1700's. As the fine socialist government of the Republic of Santa Monica would have you believe, the U.S. Constitution is an invalid relic because as Bob Dylan said, 'the times they are a changin'.'" I didn't want to encourage him so I turned to Edgar. "Where did you say that was?" He told us that Hector Gonzaga had a family business off Lincoln and that he was very reasonable. He also theorized that his sixteen children and his wife lived in a one bedroom apartment behind his shop. I found that hard to fathom. "Hector don't speak much English but he does damned good work... cheap, too. You can probably have his kids detail your car while you're at it." Edgar was a funny old guy who had a dry sense of humor. I asked him if they were illegals. "You ain't got to be concerned about 'em coming across the border, there's whole farms of 'em already growing crops of Mexicans here."

Instead of looking at the changing leaves on Saturday, I rode over to the Republic of Santa Monica with Randy to check out Hector's shop. It appeared the whole family was there working on various projects. Two of his children were stitching together the pleather surface of what looked like a restaurant booth. Pointing to a tightly pleated arch of one of the seats I asked what it was. Hector looked at me like a deer caught in the headlights. One of the kids (I later learned his name was Enrique) spoke up. "Dad speaks only a few words in English. That's called a 'camelback.' It's pretty popular at many restaurants." By this time Randy was trying to communicate with Hector and, as many people do, believed that if he spoke loud enough his meaning would get through. "CAN YOU DO THIS?" His voice, at a high decibel level, left my ears hurting. Hector

shook his head in the affirmative, “Do that, yes. ¿Qué color usted desea?” Randy shook his head, lost, as usual. I turned to Enrique and shrugged my shoulders. “He’s asking what color you want,” Enrique volunteered. Randy, turning to Enrique, pleaded for help. Enrique must have had great parenting because not only was he helpful but seemed pleased that he could help. “Over here, we have some imitation leather-patterned vinyl that is just like the same products made in the U.S. but at half the cost. We can match the stitching of the original and, as you can see...” Enrique lifted a few more layers to reveal a color and leatherlike embossing that was nearly a match to Randy’s. “We can come very close to the original.” Randy was happy with his choice and made arrangements to bring the car over on Monday. He planned on calling in sick so he could deal with this very important issue. On the way home he said, “I told you everything’s made in China. Those slants can really make just about anything and as soon as they perfect cloning they’ll probably be making ‘us’ too!” I told him he need not worry that they would make a clone of him because they would just have to explain another defective product. He laughed, “Good one!” “Besides,” I corrected, “he didn’t say it was made in China but he did mention that it was half the price of the same U.S. product.” “Uh-huh,” he huffed, “and that means that a U.S. corporation is making twice the profit they should be making. I’m not stuffing their pockets any more than necessary.” I should not have had that third martini at lunch because his idiotic reasoning was beginning to seem logical.

This afternoon he picked his car up at Hector’s. Randy called me to let me know how excited he was to get his treasured Galaxie 500 back. It was finally complete. No more restoration, no more tweaking the engine, no more obsessing over the chrome and replacing damaged or aging parts. The car was done. It was a surprise when I got the call later from Randy that his car had burst into flames. As mentioned before, I rushed over to where he was. I couldn’t believe it. In a way, I felt that it was Karmic justice he was receiving for all of his bigoted comments. We just stood there as billowing smoke rose skyward. A fire truck finally arrived and a crew put out the flames. The battalion chief came over to me. “This your car?” “No,” I said, “it’s his. Damn shame, too, he just had it completely refurbished. Just got it back from the upholsterer today.” Even though the fire had engulfed the car there were remnants, now drenched, that had not been consumed by the flames. The chief walked over to what was left of the back seat, took a knife and cut a small square of the singed fabric-backed artificial leather. He flapped it in front of his nose, sniffed it closely and examined the surface. He paused for a moment then walked back to the car. Bracing himself on the top of the door he leaned forward to take a closer look at the back seat. As he turned he was shaking his head. He lumbered in our direction and there was an almost sadistic smile

on his face. Coming face-to-face, he held the fabric and shook it above his head. "This," he stated flatly, "is imported pleather, fake leather." "And that means 'what?'" Randy asked. "Well, this afternoon while you were enjoying the plushness of your ride, the sun, magnified by your window, heated the seats to the point of ignition. Since the padding your upholsterer used isn't fire rated by the State of California, it wasn't to code and that, my friend, is what caused your fire. This stuff's been on the rejected products list for weeks." Poking at Randy's chest, he admonished, "You shoulda had 'em use American-made materials. Good luck getting insurance to pay off on this one." The battalion chief began to walk away. "Oh, and... have a nice day." He climbed into his battalion chief car and began to drive away. From his car window he passed by shouting after he passed, "Buy American!"

A few days later I drove by where the car was; it's still there. Eventually the metal on the car will turn to rust and it will find a home in a junkyard somewhere. I remembered back when I thought the car had lots of potential. So much work went into it and now it was nothing but shrapnel alongside an overpass. Using the best materials on that car was the right thing to do but, in the end, "cheap" won. But "cheap" only had a momentary victory. The laws of consequence had dedicated the end of this story with the very first bad decision. Randy went back to Hector's but there was nobody there. The neighbors said they were vacationing in Mexico and didn't know when they would be back.