

Walkin' Willie on the Golden Mile



I parked my 1965 MGB for the last time on a desolate stretch of E. Jefferson well after 2:30 AM. Just on the outskirts of downtown, the red warning light for the charging system had begun to flicker and then glow brighter and brighter until it seemed like the warning light itself was sucking the power from the car like some sort of sports car kryptonite. Gradually, the spark plugs fired with less and less intensity, and I could smell the unburned fuel pouring out of the exhaust manifold. The glowing idiot light reminded me that I'd bought this car against the advice of everybody except the used car salesman.

Not with a bang but a whimper the car slowly lost life, and the gears whined as they strained against the dead weight of the engine. Reluctantly, I pulled in against the curb.

E. Jefferson snakes its way along the Detroit River from the high rises of downtown to the fancy suburbs that front Lake St. Clair. Along the way,



it passes through what is rightfully regarded as the worst section of Detroit, a decaying industrial area surrounded by the remnants of the homes of the former factory hands of the arsenal of democracy. In its heyday, it'd been a blue-collar, bare-knuckle, bar-fighting neighborhood, and by the early eighties when I drove through it on my way to and from college every day, it'd become even tougher. The combination of white flight and declining industry had made it a sort of no-man's land, bereft of all retail activity or any other sign of civilization. Downtown commuters ran the gauntlet twice a day, insulated from the danger and desperate poverty by their radial tires and ability to make monthly car payments.

I might have stopped in the relative safety of downtown when I'd first noticed the red warning light, but I'd turned my back on good sense on the day when, against my father's counsel, I'd decided to buy my ragtop dream.

Afraid even to get out of the car, I peered through the horizontal slit of the rapidly fogging windshield. Up ahead about half a mile in the parking lane, I discerned two shadowy figures working on a darkened car. Delighted to

find such obvious Samaritans, I got up from the MG and strode briskly toward them, glancing frequently over my shoulder for potential predators.



As I approached, the men stopped and stared warily. One held a car battery, the other a tire mounted on a polished rim. The car, I could see now, rested with its rear axle on wire milk crates, still rocking slightly from the motions used to remove the wheels. I also saw for the first time another car parked just ahead, the trunk and doors open, but with no lights of any kind. Wanting desperately to flee but afraid to turn my back, I stood still and panicked. One of them mumbled to the other, and they moved to the other car, depositing their booty in the trunk with a few groans and thunks. I breathed easy when I realized they were leaving.

Not so. With true American stick-to-it-iveness, they returned to pluck other goodies, ignoring me completely. One crawled under the dashboard, and the other began to work on the front wheels. I couldn't decide whether I was safe or simply next on their list. In the middle of my panic and indecision, Walkin Willie made his appearance.

To say that I knew Walkin Willie would be an overstatement, because to my knowledge, no one knew him, they just knew of him. In fact, his name was an alliterative eponym, bestowed upon him by some lunch-counter layabout at a restaurant further down E. Jefferson in Grosse Pointe Park. Willie had passed the restaurant twice a day, once in each direction, for as long as I'd been going there. He never stopped, talked, or even turned his head despite the occasional taunt or heckling from the local smart-alecks. His appearance never changed. Barrel-chested and husky, with his dusty but not stained white t-shirt, white pants, and industrial black oxfords, he resembled nothing so much as a discharged Navy cook. The rolled-up navy-blue knit cap he wore year-round contributed to the maritime air. From the fraying, stubby sleeves of his shirt, his arms protruded like amputated tree limbs. Except for the slight bump at the elbow, there was nothing to suggest that the arms were jointed, so thick were his forearms and wrists. At all hours of the day every day, Willie walked E. Jefferson from downtown to the end of the sidewalk in St. Clair Shores, some eleven miles away, his personal safety assured by his self-absorbed glare and oaken stoutness.

Until this dark night in the company of car-vultures, I'd never given much thought to Willie, but I found suddenly a great fondness for him. I fell in behind and walked step for step with him, not even glancing back despite the quivering hair on the back of my neck. We quickly passed my MG which looked somehow much more forlorn than when I'd left it ten minutes

ago. The pendulous dangling of Willie's arms gave rhythm to our steps.

At one point, rusty bicycle parts issued forth from a dilapidated storefront devoid of glass, its plywood covers long ago scavenged for firewood, alcohol, drugs, or food. Heaped like a mudslide from the store to the street were bent rims, naked frames, flimsy rust-chrome fenders, and other items of trim and bicycle frivolity. They crunched and banged under Willie's beeline tread.

Further down, The Church of Jesus Christ Our Lord And Savior C.O.G.I.C. queried the state of my soul with a hand-painted plywood strip banner. "Have you been saved?" it asked in ten-inch-high red letters on a white background. From the sidewalk, I could see clearly the drips and splatters of red that indicated the haste and carelessness with which the message had been crafted. I wanted to tell someone that indeed I had been saved on this dark night, but the cinder block facade peppered with glass blocks stood firm against any entreaty from the street.

Clumps of dried clay fused into the concrete dotted the walkway in the next block, evidence of a recent demolition. On either side of a raw open space in the middle of the block stood two completely derelict buildings, the newly exposed brick side of one painted with an ancient advertisement for a previous occupant. "Fairview Workmen's Supplies" it said at the top in a large, heavily-serifed font. Underneath in smaller type was a litany of available items: "gloves", "overalls", "cornhusker's lotion", "bandannas", "boots". High-tech gear of another age.

Across from Belle Isle, Detroit's island park, we approached the Belle Isle Party Store, its bright lights straining thru dull and yellowed inch-thick plexiglass. Beer caps, cigarette-pack cellophane bits and other vice-oriented litter washed up to its door like tidal debris to driftwood. Nestled in the tangle of trash and weeds at the base of the cinder-block wall, a slumbering drunk awoke at our approach. Ignoring Willie, he stumbled toward me, mumbling through his several teeth a request for spare change; as he neared, the stench of streetlife (equal parts stale beer, body odor, and stained underwear) brought up the bile of nausea in my already uncertain stomach. I walked right by, but then he turned to follow, placing his hand on my shoulder. This was enough to drive me into the store.

Only a convict would've felt comfortable inside; as far as I could tell, not a single item was available for customer self-service. Everything lay behind the chest-high counters topped with murky plexiglass that ran to the ceiling. Barely visible, the clerk sat in a cloud of cigarette smoke near the

register, talking on the phone in what I took to be Arabic, filled, as it was, with phlegmy, spitting sounds. He didn't seem to notice me standing in the middle of the dirty linoleum-floored pen, but when my drunken pursuer tottered in, the clerk immediately arose, slid the telephone down his chin, pressed his face to the speaking hole and began an invective that, if not clear in semantics, was blatantly obvious in intent. The drunk responded with some mumbled MF's, and the clerk began to pound on the plexiglass, driving home whatever point he was trying to make. I turned and went through the door, then ran to catch up with Willie who was just passing under the shadow of the shuttered Uniroyal tire plant up ahead.

After a few tense miles, we came upon the apartment building where a friend of mine lived, so I ducked into the entrance and buzzed his apartment. Willie continued toward downtown.

If he knew that I'd tagged along, he never gave any sign. As I waited in the other-worldly light of the fortified vestibule, I watched him disappear into the darkening plain of concrete and asphalt. Somewhere an anonymous car alarm blared, and the city emitted dull, grating, suspicious murmurs, but Willie seemed an island unto himself. As I prayed for my friend to answer the buzzer, I decided that the skyscrapers looming ahead could erupt, gushing torrents of red lava into the streets, and Willie would walk just the same over the torrid rivers of molten rock as he did on the orderly ribbon of concrete that led him to wherever he was going.

At last a groggy voice scratched through the speaker, and I knew that my ordeal was over.

Waking on the sticky vinyl couch the next day, I finally owned up to what I'd been denying all along: the car with its hard to get parts, temperamental disposition, and other impracticalities was a bad deal, and I'd been just plain stupid to get it in the first place. Along with this admission came the reality of the eight remaining car payments for something that no longer functioned as a car.

Later, I watched my car roll away at the end of a tow truck hook, the hindquarters resting on a wheeled dolly in place of missing wheels. The radio had been ripped out too, but none of this was as galling as those eight remaining car payments. I resolved to pay the whole thing off in three months, and that's how I ended up working nights as a parking attendant at a pricey restaurant on Jefferson out near the marinas in St. Clair Shores.

Near Nine Mile Road, the lakeshore throws out a narrow spit of land, and this, passing for a harbor, has become home to the pleasure-boating crowd. Anyone with any pretensions at all to the Upper-Middle Class either docks his boat or pretends to have a boat docked in the several marinas nearby. In front of the restaurant, yellow rope spells out "Welcome to the Golden Mile" on a background of varnished teak. The sign is a huge pallisade, driven plank by plank into the shoulder of the road. Blue and white icons of a lighthouse, a sailboat, and a cedar tree float in the center of the sign like a coat of arms.



Missing from the heraldry, however, is the number one symbol of The Mile, the whiskey glass. Socializing and drinking are the primary activities in this haven of conspicuous consumption, boats just make an attractively-themed backdrop. After fielding too many calls from drunken boaters unable to find their way back to the marinas at night, the Coast Guard placed an oversized revolving beacon atop the apartment building at the head of the spit. Unable to miss such an absurdly visible signal, even drunken boaters could navigate to the spot, and they promptly began running their craft into the breakwalls and docks nearby. From our parking attendants' booth on the corner of the street that led to the spit, we could watch the rescue vehicles speed past to scrape another besotted car salesman or shop owner off the rocks. The mariners that did manage to avoid the rocks told their sea stories at the scores of bars and restaurants like the one I worked at.

So this was the clientele served by the restaurant, and though I couldn't abide their *petit-bourgeois* smugness, I did enjoy test-driving their high-powered cars on the street *cum* dragstrip that led down to the lake. (There is little of what one would call a professional code of ethics among the lackeys who park cars, so I'd recommend that you park yourself.)



The primary allure of the job was that the pay was tips only, with no withholdings for federal, state, or local taxes. This bonanza was tempered by the withholding made by one of the restaurant partners at the end of every night. Joe would come out to the parking booth after the bar closed, demand to see the rolls of singles we'd amassed for our servile labor, then extort what ever he thought was fair. He'd then dispatch one of us to bring around his perfect 1959 Cadillac Coupe deVille and give one of our dollars back as a tip.

The "juice", as he referred to his deductions, was more a matter of principle than need, for he was a high-level functionary of a large Macomb County organized crime group involved in waste disposal, cement, and

contracting. The restaurant, it was widely known, was a money-laundering front that Joe dabbled in, much as a wealthy doctor or lawyer would maintain an antique or oddity shop to relieve the tedium of professional life. Besides, the gossip ran, it kept him away from his grossly fat Italian wife and close to the attractive women that populated the bar from about 9:30 to closing time.

The women were of the late 20's, early 30's variety, upper-middle class and either wild, slightly dissipated brats still living at home or divorcees on limited income alimonies seeking to indulge their vices on somebody else's bar tab. To a woman, they were attractive in that department store cosmetics counter sort of way, with flashy clothes and late-model sporty cars, though it must be said that the divorcees gave up a few points to their maiden brethren.

Their male counterparts were generally older, some single, some divorced, and some quite obviously married, but they shared in common a fondness for gold jewelry, showy tailoring, and excess hair tonic. The dating/mating ritual they played out every night behind the leather wrapped doors was only partly visible to us lackeys in the aluminum attendants' booth across from the canopied entrance, but we caught snatches of the piano bar sing-alongs through the periodically opened doors and saw the preliminary sparring that occurred when they arrived in caravans of shiny new cars, hopping from one cocktail lounge to another along the glitzy lakeside strip. Chasing loneliness with bitters, guarded chatter, and expensive liquor is a moveable feast, and sharks must always keep moving.

It was pretty brutal stuff, with clear winners and losers at the end of every night. The first-place contestants usually left with their companion *du nuit* sometime around eleven, slightly intoxicated and chattering excitedly while one or the other's car was brought around. (After the lady was safely tucked into the passenger seat and the door closed, his lordship would confidently and discreetly make arrangements with us for the disposition of the other car. Wink, wink.) The runner-up pairs came out a bit later, more intoxicated and without the excitement of victors but with a sort of resigned satisfaction. The real sad cases emerged alone near closing time, and, often, some poor, disillusioned soul would attempt to engage one of us in a drunken dialogue, still seeking companionship even after the game was so obviously up.

During the flurry of door-openings in the last half hour of business, we could hear the piano guy murder "[Only the Lonely](#)" or try his hand at a contemporary country hit entitled "Don't The Girls All Get Prettier at Closing Time." It didn't matter; whatever he played sounded like low-rent

Mantovani and only added to the chilling feeling that was not altogether owing to the late night or the broken space heater in our little shack.



Still carless, I would ride my ten-speed home through the darkly quiet streets past the faded mansions of Grosse Pointe, often passing my one-time protector, Walkin Willie, on his return trip down Jefferson. Sometimes I would pass him on my way out too, but there was no guarantee when I would see him, for Willie followed no schedule in his quest to wear the sidewalks along the river and lake under his heavy tread.

Perhaps because he served as a reminder of my ill-fated romance with ragtop glory, I didn't think too much about Willie, but he did draw an unrequited obsession from one of my fellow lackeys in the car parking business. Where I was a down-on-his-luck college student stooping to servitude, I suspect that parking cars might have been the pinnacle of this kid's economic endeavors. Raised in an Appalachian breeding warren of a suburb nearby, he savored his opportunity to hobnob with the UMC. The women, the cars, and the clothing of our clientele were a constant source of wonder and awe for this poor guy who, despite completing the tenth grade, had been judged unfit to enlist in the army.

Willie drew that same sort of wonderment from him, mixed with envy and scorn. "Doesn't he ever wash?" he asked when I told him that Willie always wore the same clothes, "Man, I could never get away with that!" The first time we saw Willie pass, I told the kid what I knew about Willie and his comings and goings. When Willie passed us again on the return leg of his journey, the kid rushed out to speak to him. As usual, Willie passed without comment or acknowledgment. The next night, the kid told me he would get Willie's attention this time, but he only issued a self-satisfied giggle when I asked how. Later, it rained, bringing in a rush of cars, and he almost missed Willie. Fresh from docking a Chrysler Imperial in the back lot, the kid came up front only to see his prey moving away from the restaurant. He quickly reached into the parking booth to grab the tattered copy of *Playboy* we kept inside, catching up with Willie about a half a block later. He backpedaled in front of him, seductively bouncing the centerfold for Willie's edification. Willie stopped, then looked down at the kid's shoes. The kid stopped and looked down, and Willie stepped around him and went on his way. The kid sagged in letdown and confusion, sending the corner of Miss September to the sodden ground. The muddy water bled halfway up the poster, ruining her perfect complexion.

Later that same night he offered the returning Willie a cigarette ("there ain't

a street bum alive that won't take a cigarette," he proclaimed), but the result was the same. Subsequently, he tried food (stolen from our four-star kitchen), clothing (lifted from the lost & found), and, finally, in desperation, he even offered Willie a thinly rolled joint from his own jealously-guarded stash, but he never got a response, only the same arboreal resoluteness with which Willie greeted all he encountered. I got a little tired of the kid, but I began to appreciate his determination, which was not unlike Willie's.

Meanwhile, the cream had risen to the top in the car lackey world. Recognizing my superior ability and following the normal progression in his business, Joe appointed me his bagman; I now performed the nightly extortion from the attendants and delivered to Joe his due. Whether I contributed a share from my tips or got it all from my sub-lackeys was a matter of indifference to Joe, though he fully expected that I would put the squeeze on the others. (Sad to say, I didn't exercise the full perquisites of my position; I only made sure that I was scheduled to work during peak tip shifts.) My newly-won position also had as one of its responsibilities the care and maintenance of Joe's precious Cadillac. He really didn't use the car; he had a beat-up 1972 AMC Matador with which he made his daily rounds in his other businesses. At the end of the day, he'd drive to the restaurant in the Matador, then leave in the Caddy. In the mornings, he'd return the Caddy to the garage behind the restaurant and pick up the Matador. My first duty when I arrived at the restaurant in the afternoon was to vacuum and wash the Caddy, then bring it to the local service station for gas and whatever other maintenance it required. While I was cavalier with the patrons' cars, I treated the Caddy like one of those Faberge eggs.

He used the Matador for work, I assumed, because of its generic profile: it was a plain-jane, brown four-door, the kind of car that no witness could identify following a bank robbery. I subsequently learned that the car was part of his winnings at cards with one of his associates, a frequent patron to the restaurant. I found this out from the loser himself, one of the few genuinely nice people I encountered among the patrons. He was a huge guy, six-foot-five or so, built like the thug-enforcer everyone assumed he was. Tony (a fitting name, I suppose, for someone in his line of business) usually parked his car himself, but then he'd always stop by the parking attendants' booth, chat for a while, then leave a one dollar tip anyway. He rarely made any reference to his job, and his conversation ran to decidedly non-thugish topics like literature, art, and film. He was crazy about French New Wave cinema, especially the films of Jean Luc-Goddard, but I must admit that I had a hard time picturing him buying a ticket at some fashionably-seedy art-film house. (Did he mouth the subtitles?)

Anyway, it turns out that he hated Joe, whom he worked for in some loosely-defined way, but he was bound to him by an excessive gambling habit that apparently extended far beyond losing a beat-up old clunker in a card game. Because of his gambling addiction, he actually had very little, and the car had belonged to his enfeebled grandmother before Joe took possession. During the periodic upswings in his luck, he had tried to buy back the car, but Joe wouldn't sell. It was clear that the car was a kind of token of their relationship.

Only once did he mention the nature of his job, and then only indirectly. That night, he pulled up in a shiny-new Lincoln Town Car with a flashy blond in the passenger seat. Perhaps because of his companion, he drove under the canopy for valet service. I opened the door for his guest, and he came around to take her arm. "New car?" I asked with a smile. He gave me an unaccustomed look of anger and loathing that firmly put me in my servile place. "Company car," he returned after considering for a while, and I realized that I was seeing him drunk for the first time. He escorted the blond to the door, but before I could pull away, he slipped back to rap on the driver's window. I pressed the button, and the window lowered with a confident whirr. "Sorry kid," he grumbled with a half-smile, and he slipped me a ten dollar bill. He was about to turn away, and then he said, "Hey kid, you know why they give me a Lincoln?" "No," I responded cautiously. Unsmiling, with a distant look in his eyes, he delivered the punch line: "Cause it's disrespectful to fold a corpse." He stared at me for a while, and for a moment I thought he was going to cry. Then he smiled, slapped the car the way you would a dog or other trusted animal and forced a semi-hearty "Heh!"

I didn't see him leave that night, usually a sign that he stayed for an after-hours' card game. The next day, we had a long discussion about Francois Truffaut and how he never realized his true artistic potential because he'd sold out to monied interests in his later films, but we never mentioned the previous days' incident.

Shortly thereafter occurred the incident that ended my career as a CPA. The kid and I were sitting in the attendants' booth trying to keep warm and watching a playoff basketball game on a portable TV we'd scammed from the coat-check room. In the clear, cold spring night, the Coast Guard beacon flashed like a metronome in the budding tree branches overhead. It was well after eleven o'clock on what had been a slow night, and the game was in double overtime, so we were caught unaware when someone rapped on the side of the booth that faced the street. Already startled, we were even more surprised by the appearance of the individual on the other side

of the glass. She had tangled, flaming-carrot hair and a freckled, mottled complexion to match. Her thick eyeglasses were set in out-of-date frames that were held together at the bridge of the nose by a wad of yellowed tape. While not obese, she was excessively fleshy, a tendency which showed more in her face than in her body, which was covered in several layers of cast-off shirts, vests, and jackets.

Despite her less than glamorous appearance, she behaved as if she were a positive siren whose gaze could work magic.



"Howdy y'all," she crooned in the genteel tones of a Southern belle, "could you possibly be of assistance to me?" She batted her fluorescent eyelashes over blue-gray eyes. I was immediately uncomfortable, a fact that was not lost on the kid. "Ahm havin a bit of car trouble over there." She gestured across the street to where a beat-up Dodge station wagon sat alone in the parking lot of the 7-11. "I got off the Interstate a while back, but the gas station up there didn't have no service, just junk food. I saw the flashin light down here and thought maybe there was somethin open." Again, the eyelashes performed their little routine, and she smiled generously, revealing crooked, yellowed teeth with only a few gaps.

Sliding the door open, I tried to get past her, but she stood her ground so that I had to brush up against her as I passed, and I swear she pushed her pelvis forward a little bit so that she ground into me as I went by. Flustered, I explained nervously that I'd take a look, and I moved off across the street.

The car was an absolute wreck, rusted, dented, sagging, and smelling of burned-up oil and unburned fuel. The cargo area and back seat were piled high with black plastic trash bags, a fact that was barely visible through the grimy windows, one of which was covered by a ragged piece of plywood held on by duct tape. She opened the driver's door with a creaking thunk, and I opened the hood, the mere act of which coated my fingers with gritty oil. When she started the car, the lumpy knock of the motor immediately convinced me that the case was terminal: it was probably the clearest example of ruined bearings I'd ever heard, and it was a miracle that the car had even made it the mile and a half from the freeway. "Whatta ya think?" she inquired cheerfully around the open door, "can ya get me back on the road?"

"Well," I fumbled, "I'm not really a good mechanic... it started right up

though, that's always a good sign." "Well I don't know nothin about cars, so yer the best expert I got right now." Again I was given the eyelashes and the sweet smile. "Let me check a few things," I said hesitantly. The car continued to knock and sputter; I performed a sort of pantomime of inspection as I reached for a couple items under the hood but stopped short of touching anything. Just then I felt a hand push and gently squeeze my butt. "Well, perhaps you have someplace I could stay for the night," she whispered as she leaned into me from behind. "I, I wouldn't get to close here," I stammered, "it's pretty dirty under here." I slid across the front of the car and away from her. "Let me go check across the street. One of the busboys is a pretty good mechanic, and he might be working tonight." She smiled again, but it was pretty clear she knew that I was brushing her off. I prayed that the busboy-mechanic would be inside.

As I passed the attendants' booth, the kid leaned out and smiled. "Man, she's hot for you," he said in his best junior-high mocking voice, "looks like someone's gonna get lucky tonight." I ignored him. "Is Curtis working tonight?" I asked desperately. "Nah, Joe fired him the other day after he broke some dishes." "Well, I'm going inside. Come get me when Boomhilda leaves."

I went and hid in the kitchen where the cooks were watching the game. I expected to be in there a while, but only a few minutes later, the kid poked his head in the door. "She's gone already?" I asked. "You won't fuckin believe it man, she's talkin to Willie," he exclaimed. My mouth must've hit the floor. "No shit, man, Willie stopped and looked under the hood. Then they got in the car. Come on man, they might be leavin." I rushed out to verify what I could scarcely believe.

From the attendant's booth, it was hard to see if anyone was in the car, what with the grimy windows and all, but I could discern the knit cap and general profile of Willie sitting in the passenger seat. I could also see what appeared to be hands moving about in gestures. Then, Red got up out of the car and walked into the 7-11. She returned a few minutes later with a six-pack of beer and got back in the car. They sat there for the better part of an hour while the kid and I staked them out.

"Do you think they're humpin? he asked after a while. "Don't think so, but I'd believe anything now," I said, concentrating intently on the scene across the street. "I'm gonna find out," he asserted, then walked off to the 7-11. He walked by the car, paused, then went in the store. He returned a few minutes later eating a Clark bar.

"So?"

"They're talkin."

"You mean she's talking."

"No, he's talkin too."

I had to find out for myself. I walked behind the car as if I were going into the store, and I heard the bright Southern accent chirping away. Then I heard a low, quiet voice, not as deep as I would've guessed, as it went on in a clear, confident monotone. I returned across the street.

"So?"

"You were right. He's talking."

"Don't he sound weird?"

"I guess."

"Do you think he's gonna do her?"

"Could be." All previous restrictions on human conduct apparently did not apply on this night.

Just then, they emerged from the car and began walking up Jefferson, side-by-side on Willie's accustomed path. When they were about a block away, I thought I saw them join hands, but it was difficult to tell in the darkness.

We were stupefied. Our speculations ran wild, but our best guess was that they would return together and continue walking back down Jefferson to wherever it was Willie lived. We were almost right.

They did return, and they were carrying plastic bags clearly marked with the logo of the 24-hour drug and auto parts store up the street. As we continued our surveillance, they opened the hood and began pulling stuff out of the bags. I saw a distributor cap, wires, and what might have been spark plugs, but they didn't have a hope of getting that thing running straight unless they'd also picked up a completely rebuilt motor.

Just then, Tony walked up with his usual cheery greeting, "Hey guys, what's new?"

"Strange night in beantown," I replied, "we've got an incredibly ugly redhead and our autistic street person forging a bond in the parking lot across the street."

"Huh?"

I gave him a brief summary of Willie, and the kid gleefully described the way she'd come on to me. "Sounds like a good movie. Maybe Simone Signouret and Yves Montand for the leads," he mused as he squinted across the street at the two forms bent under the hood. I nodded my assent. "Of course," he reconsidered, "they'd have to change it so this place is a bistro, and the car would have to be a Citroen 2CV." He finished his cigarette by flicking it across the street and walked away. "Let me know how it turns out," he shouted back as he passed through the heavy doors of the restaurant.

The few regulars that'd shown up that night began to trickle out, some alone and some in pairs. Joe was one of the first out, on his arm a petite brunette who used to frequent the place with her husband before their recent divorce. They sped off in Joe's Caddy, the brunette rigidly ensconced on the passenger side of the expansive bench seat. Meanwhile, Willie and Red still stood in front of the dilapidated Dodge.

Then Tony came out (apparently not enough hands for cards) and walked to the booth. "The drama continues to unfold?" he queried. "There's no way they'll fix that wreck," I declared, "there must be some unexpected plot twist coming up." He mulled this over for a while, one hand in his pocket, turning over the keys and loose change down there. Then, he walked away without comment, toward the back lot, and I presumed he was leaving. A few minutes later, the Matador pulled out of our driveway, and I panicked, thinking Joe's car was being stolen, until I saw that Tony was driving. He wheeled the car across the street and pulled into the lot next to the Dodge. He got out, walked over to Red and Willie, talked briefly, then shook hands. As he walked back across the street, Red and Willie began unloading the contents of the Dodge into the Matador.

"I kept a key," he explained with a grin as he approached us. He pointed at the kid. "You don't work here anymore," he said in a firm, emotionless voice, "and you left right after Joe did, isn't that right?" Things were moving a little too fast for the kid, but even he understood what Tony's tone implied. "Now, get outta here." The kid moved off, half-heartedly waving good-bye with his hand at his hip.

Tony turned to me. "And you don't work here any more either," he said

with a smile, "though I think you'll get used to it." He slipped me three one hundred dollar bills. "The cheap son of a bitch still had grandma's plate on the car," he explained as he offered me a cigarette, "so I figure he never transferred the title either." We stood there not talking, leaning against the booth, watching Red and Willie load up the Matador, and drawing long, satisfied puffs from our cigarettes. Before we finished, Red and Willie pulled away, back toward the Interstate. When the taillights disappeared in the distance, we flicked our cigarettes across the street, looked at one another, nodded, and walked away.

I never found out how Joe reacted to the whole thing because I never dared go back. Fortunately, the unofficial status of my employment meant that he had no record of my address or phone number or even of my last name. I never found out what happened to Tony either, although frankly, I doubt that much changed in his life.

I thought about him when I watched *Jean de Florette* and *Manon du Printemps* for the first time; you know, that's the two-part film where Gerard Depardieu plays the hunchback from the city who goes to the countryside to start a new life only to be driven to insanity and, eventually, death by a scheming, land-hungry peasant who was in reality his estranged father. I'll bet he liked that film, and I think he would've chosen Depardieu as the actor best-suited to play the role of Tony in the car swapping drama that played out that night.

Joe, I read in his obituary, died of an extremely painful form of stomach cancer, and Red and Willie, I like to believe, drove their Matador to some idyllic glen or seaside cove where they spend their nights snuggled together against the chaos of struggle and flight.