

ELLEN HAMACHER AND THE MG THAT WOULD NOT DIE

I suppose I can't blame all my early troubles with women on my cars, but they definitely played a leading role. I grew up believing that owning my own set of wheels would practically guarantee success on dates, but it didn't turn out that way. Maybe it had something to do with my choice in automobiles. When I was growing up, the guys everyone idolized drove a hot Camero, a Plymouth Super Bird, or a Nova with the rear end jacked up. Most of my friends didn't fit this mold, they drove their parent's sedans on dates. I belonged to neither camp. I chose a path less traveled. A path which, in fact, had not been traveled for forty years. I was the proud owner of a 1928 Model A Ford.

There is nothing inherently unromantic about a Model A, even a plain Jane Fordor like the one I bought. Certainly it demonstrated individualism, and I liked to think it gave me an air of mystery. By choosing this car I earned instant stardom, of a sort, and garnered a few extra photographs in my High School yearbook. It caught the eye of several girls in my class, and a few even asked me for a ride. The problem was that none of them were ever so intrigued as to ask for a second ride. I think there was a fundamental difference between the way I viewed this car and the way my dates viewed it. Like Don Quixote, I saw things not as they were but as they ought to be. To me, my Model A was a gleaming reincarnation of a nobler time. Depending on my mood, it could be an elegant town car bearing me and my immaculately coiffured companion to an evening at the theater. Resplendent in my white tie and tails, I would escort my lady friend through the admiring crowds, acknowledging their cheers with a modest tip of my silk top hat. On other days, it was a fire breathing Gran Prix car, thundering its way past the Bentleys and Bugattis that briefly impeded its progress. On rare occasions, I acknowledged the fact that we were no longer living in 1928 and viewed it as an antique. The sun glinting off its polished brightwork, it purred along the boulevard, the envy of any Duesenburg owner unfortunate enough to catch sight of us. The rust, the wobbling wheels, and the stuffing protruding from the torn seats were details I seldom took note of. Surely those were minor blemishes, like a beauty spot adorning a Victorian cheek. They could not dull the essential goodness of my car. At most, my car needed a few days in the body shop to set everything right. (The fact that I didn't have

the wherewithal to pay for those few days in the body shop was another irrelevant detail.) Unfortunately, these same blemishes seemed to attract a great deal of attention from every girl whom I could entice into my car.

A date in the Model A usually began with my explaining the operation of the clutch and the hand throttle to my companion. This was a necessary first step, as the battery had last been replaced during the Truman administration and had long since lost its ability to start the car. Not only would my finances not support the replacement of the battery, they couldn't even cover the purchase of a hand crank. With my date behind the wheel, I would run behind the vehicle and push it until it was rolling fast enough for her to let out the clutch. "OK, try it!" I'd shout as I shoved harder against the spare tire. The car would lurch violently a few times before coming to a complete stop. After several iterations of this, I would fiddle with the spark advance and mixture controls. Reminding her to push in on the clutch as soon as it caught, we'd try it again. Eventually I would find the magic balance between spark and gas, and the engine would sputter to life. Flushed and sweating, I would take my rightful place behind the wheel. Only then would I remember to warn her that the ancient rubber steering wheel bled a mysterious brown goo that stuck to your hands like glue. We'd both climb out of the car so I could lift out the front seat, then I'd carefully study the shop rags that lived among the tools to find one clean enough for her dainty hands. We could then resume our journey.

During our drive, I'd explain the finer points of double clutching as I ground the gearbox through it's paces. If we were taking a long trip, say a mile and a half or more, the engine would begin to backfire as the fuel line clogged with rust. Fortunately I was adept at correcting such problems, and in less time than it takes to tell we would be parked by the side of the road and I would be blowing out the offending fuel line. My cheeks puffed out like Dizzy Gillespie's, I would send a jet of old gas and rust into the gravel beside the road. I'd have the fuel line back on in a trice, and we could repeat the starting routine. By the end of our trip, my sweaty shirt would be plastered against my back, my hands were covered with the mysterious brown goo, and my breath smelled strongly of petrol. I was in the mood for romance, but my companions never seemed to share my ardor. Although they never failed to thank me for the ride and comment

upon what an interesting experience it had been, it didn't seem to be an experience they cared to repeat.

The fact that my Model A did not bring the success I'd hope for on dates did not make me want to replace it. It was my first true love and, in fact, I still own it today. When I entered college, however, the basic requirements of daily transportation slowly forced me to consider a more modern vehicle. The school I attended would not let you have a car on campus (or even in the same county!) until you successfully completed your Freshman and Sophomore years. For me, that milestone occurred in the depths of an Indiana winter. I proudly set off for school in the midst of a blizzard, looking forward to the 150 mile ride in my prized vehicle. With a little less pride, I soon lay in the snow beside the road replacing a shattered piston. A few weeks later a second piston let go, and I began to suspect the Model A was not the best choice for high speed touring. By limiting my top speed to 50 mph I ended my piston woes, but a trip in the Model A was still an adventure. Regular use had seriously depleted the supply of rust in the gas tank, but I could still count on stopping every 25 or 30 miles to clean out the fuel line. Overheating condensers, a finicky dynamo, and disintegrating rear axle bearings all conspired to halt my progress at one time or another. The Model A was still the center of my universe, and it carried my friends and I on many a memorable "road trip", but I was vulnerable to the lure of a new car.

My search for a more reliable vehicle ended in an unexpected location--a back yard in a run down neighborhood half-way between Lafayette and Delphi. I was helping a friend search for junk cars which could supply parts for his father's foreign car dealership. After towing a boring assortment of Fiats and Morris sedans back to the shop, we located a 1957 MGA . It would be more correct to say we found the remains of an MGA. Most of the parts were still there, but the car had not been driven in years. The patchwork of color which graced its bodywork gave testimony to several repaintings, the nose was smashed in to the point where the headlights were cross-eyed, and a tattered top channeled the rain to a few favored spots in the interior. The owner readily agreed to part with his treasure for \$50. We tied a rope from my buddy's Rambler to the MG's front axle, I climbed in to steer, and we set off for his father's boneyard. Along the way, I fell in love. The bodywork may have been smashed, but the steering

was still quick and precise. This was my first experience with a sports car, and I loved the way I slipped into the seats, my body a few inches from the road. A gleaming array of gauges and switches stretched full width upon the dash. The narrow slit of a windshield provided a thrilling view of a hood that seemed to stretch half way to the horizon. Despite the presence of a rusted Rambler immediately in front of me, by the time we finished the trip I was no longer steering a junk car in tow. I was Tazio Nuvolari, thundering across the finish line at Le Mans in my Farina Marina XP250 Zagatto Spyder. I had to own this car.

The details of the transaction were easy to arrange. For \$500 in cash and a few weeks of my time, we I rebuilt the car in my friend's shop. We couldn't do a full restoration for that price, of course, but we did get all the major mechanical systems working, hammered the nose into some semblance of an MGA front end, and covered it with a shiny coat of red enamel. I drove out of that shop on top of the world.

Almost from the moment I first saw the MG, I knew this car would be a better vehicle for dates than the Model A. Although the stuffing protruding from the MG seats looked remarkably like the stuffing coming out of the Model A, the similarity ended there. For one thing, the MG looked sexy. It was also possible to drive the MG without acquiring any filthy goo or noxious odors, and there was a fair probability of making it through an entire evening without a single breakdown. Equally important, the MG could be counted upon to start on command. Part of my \$500 had been used to purchase a new battery (actually, two of them, since in a fit of puckish humor the MG designers decided to use two 6 volt batteries instead of one 12 volt battery) so the electric starter worked like a charm. Last but not least, the MG was a convertible. I basked in daydreams of driving the MG along the coast on a moonlit night, a beautiful woman snuggled against my shoulder while the surf crashed upon the beach. The fact that I lived in northern Indiana, thousands of miles from the nearest beach, had not the slightest effect upon this dream. I was a full fledged member of the sports car fraternity now, and anything was possible.

Despite my good intentions, it was a full three months before I took a date for a ride in my MG. This was a case where the flesh was willing, but the spirit was weak. One of the

hardest things I have ever done in my life is to pick up the phone and ask a girl for a date. Part of the difficulty was that I could never bring myself to believe that any girl had the slightest interest in spending time with me, so I had to find the perfect event to invite her to. Something that was so enticing that she couldn't say no, even though it meant spending the evening with me. Such opportunities were few and far between. In late September, I hit the jackpot. The Mars theater was showing Casablanca, the classic Humphry Bogart film. Ellen Hamacher, who sat beside me in History 201 the previous year, had once mentioned that she liked Bogart films. How could I hope for a better opportunity? Ellen was a beautiful girl, intelligent and witty. She was also one of the few girls on campus I had actually dated before. (Another trait I shared with Don Quixote was that I tended to love pure and chaste from afar.) During the history class, where I sat next to her three days a week, we chatted while waiting for the class to start. I also met her once at the library for a study date, bought her a soda at the Student Union once, and, near the end of the semester, I took her to a movie. This last date ended in disaster. Since we had dated twice before, I decided to try for a kiss. Saying good-night at the door to her apartment, I put my arm around her waist and leaned toward her face. Much to my surprise, she closed her eyes and pursed her lips. Before our lips could meet, however, my straw hat struck her in the forehead. It was an old-fashioned boater, a relic from the 20's that I wore when I drove the Model A, and the serrated brim was as stiff as a board. I jumped back in horror, catching my belt loop on the screen door handle in the process. As I stood on tiptoes, trying to lift myself high enough to unhook my pants from the door, I saw a long ragged line dotted with tiny drops of blood upon her forehead. We tried to laugh it off, but the magic of the moment was gone forever. The next time I saw her she was wearing her hair in bangs to cover the scab on her forehead. I had never mustered the courage to ask her out since.

Having the perfect opportunity was one thing. Actually doing something about it was quite another. Calling a girl and asking for a date was something I found very difficult, even when it was a girl whom I had not seriously injured on a previous date. In this case, I found it nearly impossible to pick up the phone. What should I say? Should I begin by apologizing for ripping her forehead open and ask her if the scar was still noticeable? Although I was not an expert on feminine psychology, that hardly seemed like an auspicious opening. Should I try to

laugh it off as an amusing incident? If someone had perforated my forehead with a hat, I certainly wouldn't want them to treat it as a joke. Heaven only knows what they'd do on April Fool's day! No matter how I approached it, there didn't seem to be any "right" way to discuss the hat. In the end, I decided to pretend the whole episode never occurred. I would call her and ask her for a date without mentioning the last time we met. The "big lie" worked for Hitler, maybe I could get away with it! I picked up the phone and dialed her number.

...Actually, that's not quite true. I spent three days intending to pick up the phone and dial her number. Several times I actually picked up the phone, and a few times I dialed most of her number before losing my courage and hanging up. Finally, on Wednesday night, I could wait no longer. I didn't want to wait until Thursday to call for a date on Friday, because she might think that I thought no one else would call and that I could just call her up on a moment's notice and find her waiting for me. Of course, if other people thought that way, that meant that Wednesday was really the last day to call, so by calling her Wednesday night... This was going nowhere. It was do or die time. I actually felt a little more like dying, but I picked up the phone and dialed her number. All of it. And I kept my finger off the receiver while I listened to it ring.

"Hello?"

Her voice sounded quizzical, not musical like I'd expected. Maybe I caught her at a bad time. Maybe she already had a date and didn't want any calls. Maybe he was there now...

"Hello, Ellen? This is Steve."

"Steve?"

Oh, God! She doesn't know who I am! Has she forgotten so quickly, or is she subconsciously blocking the memory? Should I hang up now, before she figures out who I am?

"Yeah, uh, Steve. From History class. Last year, that is. I sat beside you?"

Listen to me! I sound like a mental case! I sat beside you? Why the question? Don't I know if I sat beside her? Maybe it's not too late to hang up...

"Oh! Steve. Hi Steve."

That's it. She remembers. Too late to hang up now. I'm in for the duration.

"Hi. Uh, how'd you like the final exam?"

OK. So it wasn't the greatest opening line. It did give us something to talk about. I didn't feel I could just blurt out "How about a date Friday" any more than I could say "How'd you like to French kiss in my new car?" These things have to be approached delicately, with finesse. If I was real lucky, I could steer the conversation around to where an invitation would just slip right in. Like it was an inspiration I just had on the spur of the moment. That way, if she said no, it was no big deal. Just a passing thought that had occurred to me.

We talked about the final exam, how we did in other classes, unfair grading, and what everyone else we knew from the class was doing this semester. Somehow, the conversation never drifted anywhere near to an invitation for Friday night. No way around it. I was going to have to do this cold.

"Uh, Ellen? I, uh, remember you said you liked Bogart once and there's a great Bogart flick playing at the Mars this weekend. It's, uh..."

WHAT'S THE NAME OF THE FILM??? My mind went blank. The most famous Bogart movie of all time, and I couldn't remember the name! I could see the characters. I could hear Peter Lorrie saying "Rick! Rick! You must save me!" (I felt a lot like Peter Lorrie at that very moment.) I could hear Ingrid Bergman saying "If you don't help us, we'll die in...in..." DAMN!

"It's, uh, a great film. I really like it. Anyway, it's playing this weekend. I thought, uh, maybe you'd like to go see it. With me. Friday maybe. Casablanca! Yeah, that's it. Casablanca."

That's it. Her roommate's probably on the other line right now, calling the loony bin. The guys in white coats will be knocking on my door with their nets any minute now.

"Really? I've never seen Casablanca before. I've heard it's great!"

What's this? Sounds like genuine interest! Maybe things aren't hopeless after all!

"Oh, yeah. It's great. It's got Humphry Bogart, Lauren Bac - no, not Lauren Bacall. Uh, Ingrid Bergman. That's right. Ingrid Bergman. And Sidney Greenstreet. And Peter Lorrie. Just everybody."

"I'd love to see it, but"

"Great!" I blurted out the "great" before the "but" sank in. The infamous, dreaded, "but."
"Oh, I'm sorry. I cut you off. You were saying?"

"I'd love to see it, but I'm busy Friday night. Maybe some other time?"

"Oh, sure. No problem. Just saw this movie in the paper and thought maybe you'd be interested. I guess it is pretty late in the week already. I meant to call you Monday, but I've got a Physics project due and I've been tied up with that a lot. No problem. I'll keep an eye on the paper and maybe it'll come around again...soon."

"I'm free Saturday night."

WHAT'S THIS?!!! I'm stunned! Did she say she's free Saturday night? That's... that's... that's an opening! Hell, it's almost an invitation! She's asking ME out!!!

"Saturday night's cool. I, uh, can make it Saturday night. I think the movie starts at seven, so maybe I'll pick you up, say, around six-thirty?"

"That would be fine. Sounds like fun. I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too. I'll see you Saturday night then. Bye."

"Bye."

HOT DAMN I GOT A DATE!!!

Saturday morning I was up bright and early (well, bright anyway) washing and waxing my MG. When I had it gleaming like a jewel I took a test drive to the Old Soldier's Home. This was not a randomly selected destination. There was a park across from the Soldier's Home that overlooked the Wabash River. This was very popular with college students, as it was a perfect place for couples to park and snuggle at the end of a date. I knew this by reputation only, unfortunately, but I had frequently cruised the park in the daytime, scouting out the best locations in case the opportunity should present itself some evening. It was a beautiful fall day. Warm air kissed with a hint of burning leaves, shafts of golden sunlight piercing the brightly colored trees, and a ribbon of blacktop twisting and turning in front of the MG. I took the long way to the Soldier's Home, cruising through back roads in the Indiana farmlands, skirting the Tippicanoe battleground, and eventually winding along the Wabash River. The park hadn't changed any since the last time I was there. The secluded nooks and picnic areas were still there, bushes still offered privacy from adjoining parking areas, and the river still flowed serenely through the park. The carpet of yellow and brown leaves scattered over the grass was new, but otherwise things looked the same as they had the previous spring, before classes let out for the summer. All was right with the world.

By the time I got back to campus, however, there was an ominous development. Rain. The puffy white clouds which dotted the blue sky of the morning had gradually congealed into a dull gray overcast. The first tiny drops of rain began spattering my windshield as I pulled into the dormitory parking lot. This was no brief summer shower. This looked like an all day, all night, week after week, drag a rope into the attic and hang yourself drizzle. I had no trouble putting the top and side curtains up before the car got wet, but it was a joyless task. What kind of a date could I have with the top up? I'd driven the MG in the rain, and I had no illusions. The top drumming against the bows, side curtains rattling beside your ears, and the slow, inexorable dripping of cold water onto your knees. Not a setting which would bring out the passion in a young lady's soul. Rheumatism maybe, but not passion.

All afternoon I stared out the window at the incessant rain. I toyed listlessly with my homework, but mostly I stared at the dark gray ceiling and watched the rivulets of water streak down the window. At five, when the cafeteria opened, I trudged down to dinner without enthusiasm. I selected a table in the far corner where I could be by myself and ate in silence. Then I trekked back up to my room, showered, and began to get into my datin' outfit. I glanced out the window, and suddenly there was hope. The rain had nearly stopped, and it looked like the clouds were thinning in the west. I threw open the window and inhaled deeply. The air smelled fresh and clean. Damp maybe, but nonetheless fresh. A little cool, but not so cold as to necessitate the top. Hot damn! I was in business again.

I returned to my dresser and began dousing my body in chemicals. Right Guard, Crest, English Leather, Clearasil, Scope. The works. This was a night for the distinguished look. Pin striped shirt, dress slacks, tie, burgundy sweater, and wing-tips. Everything was just about perfect. With plenty of time to spare, I grabbed the keys to the MG and sauntered out the door.

The weather wasn't quite ready for top down motoring. Although the rain had stopped, water still dripped from the trees beside the road. No matter. I could unbolt the hated side curtains and pitch them in the trunk. Having the top up without the side curtains wasn't too bad,

and there was a good chance I could drop the top later on. After the movie. When it really mattered.

Driving across campus, a glob of water fell from a tree and splattered itself against my windshield. I flipped on the wipers and they obediently sprang to life. Then they stopped dead. Straight up and down. I flipped the switch on and off repeatedly, but still they wouldn't budge. This was highly ungood. Not only was I liable to need them before the night was over, by dying in mid-stroke they were an unmistakable sign that all was not right with my new car. Ellen had never seen this car before. What would she think? I pulled into a parking lot, switched the ignition on and off, and wiggled the wiper blades with my fingers, but still they stood defiantly upright. Next I popped open the hood. I hadn't owned the MG long enough to know the electrics intimately, like I did the Model A, but I did recall seeing a fusebox under the hood. It was difficult to see in the failing light, but I found the fusebox. There were two fuses in it. Later I would learn that one was dedicated to the horn, and the other protected everything else in the car that the British deemed worthy of protection. Headlights, taillights, ignition, and other sundry circuits didn't warrant a fuse, but the British set great stock by their horn. It had its own dedicated fuse, always hot, so you didn't need to bother switching on the ignition before sounding your horn. Just why you would want to sit in a parked car and toot your horn at stationary objects was something I never quite figured out, but the British gave you that option. The horn itself, made by "Clear Hooters Ltd" (I'm not kidding!) gave a cute, friendly little toot that was wholly ineffective as a warning device. All this was irrelevant, however, as the fuses were good and the wipers still didn't work. I replaced the fuses and began trying to trace the wires.

The wiper motor was buried deep within the most inaccessible recesses of the engine compartment, so I decided to start with the switch. It was dark up underneath the dash, so I rummaged around in the trunk until I found my flashlight. The bulb lit up with a feeble, amber glow when I switched it on, but it was better than nothing. Peering under the dash, I spotted the trouble right away. Only one wire was fastened to the switch. The other was dangling free. The switches in my MG used a unique, screw -type connector, dubbed a "Lucas casual connector" by

a mechanic friend of mine. Typical of the engineering that went into British cars, it was unconventional, expensive to manufacture, nearly unbreakable, and required periodic tinkering. A brass machine screw pinched the wires into a carefully machined brass receiver. As long as you periodically snugged the screws on every electrical connection in your car, it was practically foolproof. I had neglected to do that on my MG, and eventually the screw jiggled loose and let the wire fall out. Fortunately it was simple to reinsert the wire and retighten the screw, and I was soon on my way again, the wipers beating merrily against the windscreen.

I pulled into the parking lot of Ellen's dormitory (she had given up apartment life to devote more time to her studies) at 6:40. A little late, but not too bad. A curious thing happened when I switched off the ignition. The car kept running. I flipped the key on and off a few times, and the car obediently shut itself off. A little corrosion in the switch? I felt vaguely uneasy about it, but didn't have time to investigate. I called her room from the front desk, and used the lobby rest room to wash the MG dirt off my hands while she came downstairs. She looked beautiful! Her face was even more lovely than I remembered, shoulder length chestnut hair, soft cashmere sweater, plaid skirt, the epitome of a midwest college girl. We exchanged pleasantries about how nice it was to see each other again and I escorted her to my car.

She seemed to like my MG, maybe not as ecstatic as I'd hoped, but she commented at considerable length about how pretty it was, how low the seats were, and what a change it was from the Model A. As we drove through the streets of Lafayette we caught up on what each of us had done over the summer, what classes we were taking, and how eccentric our professors were. All the usual campus chatter. I parked in the public lot around the corner from the Mars. Once again, the engine refused to shut off until I flipped the switch several times. I was beginning to get concerned about this, especially so because this insubordination occurred in public, in full view of my date. "Must be a little corrosion on the contacts" I explained once the engine had stopped. Then I adopted my best James Bond demeanor and suavely helped her out of the car. The MG encourages such gallantry, as most passengers can't figure out how to get in and out of it by themselves. There are no outside door handles, and the inside door latches are operated by a cord hidden inside the map pockets. I opened the door for her, and gave her a hand

as she stepped out. You really do sit low in an MG, so the hand I gave her while she stepped out and stood up was more than just a formality. She gripped my hand tightly, and somehow it just seemed natural to both of us that we should continue to hold hands, albeit a little less firmly, as we walked to the theater. It was a perfect night. Then we rounded the corner and saw the theater marquee. "WOODY ALLEN TRIPLE FEAT... BANANAS - MONEY - SAM"

"Excuse me" I said to the ticket lady. "What time are you showing 'Casablanca'?"

"That was last night" she replied. We only run the old movies one night. Tonight we're running a Woody Allen film festival."

I looked at Ellen, and she shrugged her shoulders. It was up to me to make a decision. I'd never actually seen a Woody Allen movie before, but I'd read an article by him in a barbershop once. The article was funny, so I decided to take a chance.

"Two, please."

The movies were actually very good. *Bananas*, *Take the Money and Run*, and *Play It Again Sam*. The last film contained a few clips from *Casablanca*, so it wasn't like my plan had gone completely astray. Still, three movies of any type are a bit much for one sitting, and three Woody Allen movies are not the best prelude to romance. We laughed and consumed great quantities of popcorn, but when the films ended the evening was nearly gone and we were no better acquainted than we had been when we walked into the theater. I thought I detected a stifled yawn as we walked through the lobby. I knew my opportunity for romance was fast ebbing away, but I also knew there was precious little I could do about it. "Acting fast" had never been my style. Indeed, I was usually too embarrassed to act at all, and the idea of doing something as brazen as putting my arm around her shoulder without a long, slow prelude was something I just couldn't face. Still, the night wasn't over yet, and I was determined to give it the old college try.

We stepped outside, and I discovered it was a glorious night. The rain had stopped, the clouds had parted, and a full moon bathed the world in silvery light. The sky was a canopy of stars, with a few long fingers of cloud sailing toward the horizon. The air was fresh, but not cold, and heady with the fragrance of the recent rain. We walked hand in hand to the MG.

"Let's drop the top and go for a drive." I suggested.

"OK." she replied. There was no hesitation in that "OK." This was not an "OK" of resignation or indecision. This was an "OK" that boldly said she really did want to go for a drive. Even with me. Maybe, just maybe, especially with me. In no time at all I had stowed the top and was helping her into her seat. Then I vaulted over the driver's door and slid down into my seat. As I slipped the key into the ignition, I saw the red glow of the ignition light. Inwardly I panicked. Why was the light on when the key was off? How long had that been on? Was there any charge left in the battery? Nightmares of dates in the Model A flashed through my mind. Please, lord. Not tonight. Please let my car start tonight. Steeling myself against the worst, I turned the key and touched the starter. The engine caught immediately. It crackled merrily when I blipped the throttle and then dropped back to idle with a lovely MG burble. Thank you God! I slipped it into gear and we eased off into the night.

It really was a beautiful night for a drive. For a few minutes we talked about the movies, describing our favorite parts. Then we both settled down to enjoy the night sky. She leaned against my side. Amazed at my own boldness, I stretched out my right arm and wrapped it around her shoulders. She slid her left hand up to her shoulder and placed it on top of my hand. It seemed the most natural thing in the world. We left the lights of the city behind us and sailed through the country, winding our way along the banks of the Wabash. Almost before I knew it, we were approaching the Soldier's Home.

"Let's stop and look at the river for a while" I suggested. I held my breath. I had analyzed dozens of lines in my room the last few days, trying to find the best way to broach the subject of parking. Now it was out. Would she understand what I was suggesting? Was I too

vague? Worse yet, was I too blunt? Would she take offense and never want to see me again? How did everyone else approach this subject? Lot's of guys in the dorm talked about parking with their girl friend, "watching the submarine races" and the like, but they never actually said how they went about doing it. Now I waited in suspense for her reply.

To my surprise, she didn't say a word. She just gave my hand a little squeeze of assent. Somehow, that was better than anything she possibly could have said out loud. I turned into the park and we glided between the trees. There were a few other cars parked that night, but not enough to infringe on our privacy. I slipped past them and pulled into a vacant cul-de-sac. I eased up to the edge of the pavement and parked beside some bushes. In front of us, the Wabash flowed serenely through the night. I switched off the key. The engine purred happily. With mounting horror, I switched the key on and off repeatedly. Still the engine chugged merrily along. This was no mere insubordination. This was outright mutiny!

"What's wrong?" Ellen looked at me with concern.

"I don't know. The ignition switch doesn't seem to be working. It won't shut off." I flipped the switch a few more times and wiggled the key in the lock. No luck. I looked over at Ellen. "I'm afraid I'll have to disconnect the wires."

With great reluctance, I got out of my seat and popped open the trunk. I got out my toolbox and my flashlight and walked to the passenger door. Then I helped Ellen out. The MGA ignition switch is on the passenger's side of the dash, so I had to sit upside down in her seat, my feet waving in the air, to slip my head under the dash. I switched on my flashlight. There was a brief flicker of yellow, and the flashlight went dead. I flipped it on and off, loosened and tightened the cap, and banged it against the palm of my hand, but no luck.

"Here." Ellen reached under the dash with a small, pocket flashlight. It was one of the flat ones, about the size of a butane cigarette lighter, that turns on when you squeeze it.

"Thanks!" I took the flashlight from her and peered up into the rat's nest of wiring. The ignition switch was at the very top of the dash, immune to prying fingers. Vainly I tried to snake a hand with a screwdriver up to the terminals. No luck. I held the flashlight in my teeth and tried with both hands. It took a lot more time than I thought, and a couple of times I touched the wrong thing and showered my face with bright yellow sparks, but eventually I managed to remove the ignition switch from the dashboard. Now I could go to work on the wires. One by one I loosened the screws and pulled them out, expecting each time to hear the engine die. It didn't. Eventually I removed all the wires, but still the engine putted on. I held the useless switch in my hand and stared at the wires in disbelief. It was like something out of a bad horror movie. The MG that would not die. I had attacked it with a lethal weapon and ripped a vital organ from its innards, but it still lived. I felt panic welling up inside me. What do I do next?

"I'm going to have to disconnect the batteries" I said, hoping my voice sounded more confident than I felt. MG batteries live deep within the bowels of the machine, buried beneath the floorboards behind the seats. I flipped the seats forward and began loosening the access panel. Again holding the flashlight in my mouth, I lifted the access panel out of the car and set to work on the battery terminals. After loosening the nut, I rapped it sharply with a screwdriver handle and then wrenched the cable free of the battery. The engine continued to run. For a brief moment, I thought the car was possessed. This was my payback for all the times I swore at the Model A for not starting. Now I was cursed with a car that would run forever, an MG that would follow me to the grave, it's mechanical heart beating endlessly for all eternity. Then I returned to my senses.

"The generator!" I almost shouted with glee. This car wasn't possessed. It could run without batteries because the generator was still producing electricity. I jumped into the driver's seat, planted my foot firmly on the brake, slipped the car into gear, and let up on the clutch. The car lurched once, and then died. Silence. Sweet, golden silence. Silence broken only by the gentle lapping of the Wabash upon the nearby shore.

I looked up at Ellen. She squinted when the flashlight shone in her face. I had forgotten I had it in my mouth. "Oh here" I said, quickly taking it in my hand and holding it out to her.

Ellen recoiled slightly from the flashlight. "That's OK" she said. "You can keep it. You might need it again." I looked down at the flashlight. It was glistening with saliva. A faint row of teeth marks circled its abdomen, and there were greasy black fingerprints everywhere. Then I looked at the hand that held it. It too glistened in the moonlight, covered with black, slimy battery grease. My other hand looked just as bad. Then I looked back at Helen, in her white casmier sweater. It was clear there would be no snuggling tonight. Even if my hands had been clean, the moment was gone. No longer was she filled with the passion of the moment, savoring the heady experience of a nighttime drive in a fancy foreign sports car. Now she was cold, she was tired, and she was a little bit frightened by the way I had disemboweled my car. Without saying a word, I reconnected the battery and replaced the access panel. I wiped my hands as best I could on an old rag in the trunk and helped Ellen back into the car. I didn't need to bother with the key. The ignition light had popped on the moment I connected the battery. I touched the starter briefly and the engine sprang back to life. We drove back to campus in silence.

At her dorm, I offered her my elbow when she was climbing out of the car. My hands were still too greasy to touch. I started to walk her to the lobby but she waved me off. "That's OK" she said politely. "I can find my way."

I drove back to my dorm in a blue funk. A few days later, after poring over my car with a wiring diagram, I found the problem. When I checked the fuses earlier in the evening I accidentally put one of them between the two fuse holders, instead of in its proper place. It was shorting the horn circuit, which was always hot, to the ignition circuit, bypassing the ignition switch. It was a loose connection, so the switch worked some of the time, but it didn't work when I needed it most. It was easy to fix, and the switch has worked properly for the last thirty years. I never told Ellen about it, though. After the incident with the straw hat and the nightmare at the Soldier's Home, I never had the courage to call her again. Somewhere in this world there is a grown woman who may still live in fear of the MG that would not die. Ellen,

wherever you are, I fixed the MG. I'm married now, with kids, so we can't take it out on dates any more, but I did fix it. Just thought you'd like to know.

*For more stories about British sports cars, read
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