

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

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Mechanics 101, 2nd Semester

(inspired by Chuck Rumfola)

JOE BUFFALINO DANCED INTO WORK at Geary Motors every morning of his 45 years on the job, the other two mechanics, the odd-jobs driver, the two clerks and two salesmen in the office, keeping time on him, wagering bets on him, counting off the minutes until he punched the time clock, saying his hands were already occupied with tools. He'd been so long on the job that he predated the hiring of every one of them, sometimes three or four deep in history, especially in the sales force. Yet to a man, and to all the buyers of second hand or repaired cars over the years, any motor Joe Buffalino worked on was music at work, a hummer on the open road, a subsequent subject of conversation, at the barber shop, the pool room, and undoubtedly the whole office force down the street at Stetson's Faultless Cars, Inc., sole competitor at motor repair in the town.

There, the salesmen hungered for a technician like Joe. "You gotta get him here, Harry," one salesman said to Harry Stetson, the owner's son, "and I'll give him at least 5 per cent of my commissions. Hell, I ain't done that in 20 years of selling road-worn buggies. Not a once, and you can bet on that. Jiggys over there says they come back just to shake Joe's hand after they take a rig for a ride, see where their money's going. He's a friggin' magician, Harry. You gotta know that by now, the way he knows engines of any kind and any use."

"Don't talk like that in front of our boys. They might not appreciate it." He looked around to see if there were any eavesdroppers stationed for secrets, whispers, the last word from the front office.

"Hell, Harry, these guys have known that since before they came to work here. The whole street knows about Joe. A car stutters and coughs and stops out on the highway and any time the driver asks a local for help, they hear, "Get Joe Buffalino out here, from Geary Motors, give him a listen and get a lesson on how to start an engine back in working order, Every time, 'less it's crap f'ever." A pause ensued, to which was added a final judgment, "You got your own special one-man advertisement without paying him any extra for it."

It went on like that for all the years after Joe came out of Korea and his stint in the war where he also earned repute as a master of *things extraordinaire*. One such adventure found him solving the delivery of food, ammunition and sundry supplies up the side of a steep mountain constantly under enemy fire. Such tasks were usually performed by Korean laborers who spent long hours on long trails up mountains of every sort and description, this latest rise almost straight up from its own Hell of a sort.

Joe took care of the beast; he jacked up the rear end of a six-by truck, took the tires off a set of double wheels, used one rim for the power source and the second rim rigged on the top of the steep rise and ran a cable up and down that beastly mountain; to which, he latched ammo or food or supplies and geared up. Those deliveries were clear, clean, quick and body-saving, the Korean laborers finally getting a well-earned rest on that dog of a mountain.

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Other achievements came and went in his growth as a magician in mechanic's garb; greased up, greased down, oils of different weights coloring his working hours' skin, cleaning up and cleaning down before he entered his home at night, the elder Stetson saying to his son Harry, "Don't let Joe out of your sight, Harry. He'll carry you off to the moon if he's of a mind, him and Neil Armstrong'd be the pair of pairs."

And few of them knew the humor that ran in Joe Buffalino's blood, a heavyweight's dose of it that lurked in the hidden alleys of his mind, along with solutions to problems that had not yet inserted themselves into his daily duties, like switching tools in his tool rack to confuse the silent borrowers of tools, making them face up to their heist of sorts. It was merely an embarrassment for the moment, a lesson learned ... but it did the trick, Joe seeing a line of mechanics come and go in his long career at Geary Motors..

The plum of plums, off course, would be saved for special occasions ... a special customer, a special personality coming out of left fields of customers; the hard liners, the raised voices, the kind that said with stubborn pomposity, "*I-know-for-damned-sure-what-ails-this-rig-of-mine-and-you-can't-tell-me-by-listening-and-nodding-your-head-that-you-know-more-than-me-what-ails-it,*" all said in a singular breath as if it was his ABC of retorts.

Such a singular customer came on an odd day, rain a heady threat all that Friday afternoon as clouds loomed in place, not a breath of wind astir to move them, the weekend at hand for the crew at Geary's shop.

Joe was putting the last touches on a Buick convertible with a hood almost as long as a *3rd and 4* near the goal line, when his shop boss, Jiggysy Cutler, said, "It's past quitting time, Joe. You got that baby near ready to go? You got big plans for the weekend?" He always spoke lightly to Joe, tempered, patiently, knowing the value of the man he respected with a sense of wonder to boot.

When the phone rang, Cutler, with a disgusting face, answered, "Jiggysy here. We're about to close down. If you have a problem, it'll have to wait for Monday." He pulled the phone away from his ear, held it aloft, and he and Joe Buffalino heard a panicked voice say, "This is Homer Vastling. I was about to pull three wagons of hay into my big barn, and the motor on my rig sputtered, coughed, kicked itself likely and shut down. I can't get a peep out of it, the rain is sure to come down, and I need the rig fixed."

"I'm afraid I can't help you, Homer. My last mechanic is working past his quit time, and then he's gone for the weekend. You'll have to wait for Monday." Vastling was one of the pre-eminent farmers in the valley, his holdings spacious, wide, impressive.

"I can't wait. I'll lose the whole three loads."

"Cover them with canvas. Buy it if you have to." Cutler made a face in a silent addition.

"I'd have to go to Ellsville to get it. I don't have the time. I'll pay double for Joe Buffalino if he's the mechanic still there. Can I speak to him, to Joe. I'm up the creek on this. I don't know beans about engines or motors or

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rigs besides hoes and rakes and plows, all by hand all my life. I need help. If it doesn't go on when I turn the key, I'm a gone goose. I really am."

"Well, Mr. Vastling, that'd all be up to Joe," as his stance and response had obviously changed, "Joe's weekend, I'd assume, is lined up from the minute he leaves the shop, which is soon." He saw Joe snap the key in the ignition slot and the engine roared into life.

The purring sound, like a second nature at work, filled the Geary shop as Cutler handed the phone to Joe Buffalino, grease and oil adorned, a smile on his face that Cutler wasn't sure was a reaction to the sound of the engine or a genuine contemplation at play in his mind.

"What've you got. Mr. Vastling?" Joe said.

The reply was, "You gotta help me, Joe. I'm in a real bind." The voice was distracted, impulsive, impatient.

"What've you got. Mr. Vastling?" Joe said.

The second reply was almost word for word from the first one: "You just have to help me, Joe. I'm in a bind. I need help."

"What've you got. Mr. Vastling?" Joe said for the third time, and one could almost hear the gulp at the other end of the phone, as the reply, toned down from a demanding whine to a careful explanation of strife, "It's the engine on my Do-All Buddy hooked up to three loads of hay that have to go under cover in my barn. I called my son over in Reality and he must be busy at something and he has my tractor, so I'm stuck, Joe, stuck in the muck, or what'll soon be muck if you can't help me."

Joe knew the answer before he asked, "Is it a Kohler motor on that unit of yours?" He knew them like the back of his hand, outstretched for perusal, stubby fingers at first look, sensitive at touch of steel and its counterparts.

"Yes, it is."

"Okay, Mr. Vastling, I'll have to let my wife know I won't be home on time and you have to agree to do a few things before we get started."

"Yes, anything."

"Take that motor off the Do-All and bring it down here to the shop."

"Yes, sir."

"And you'll have to wash each piece I take out of it, wash and clean and dry and oil up for me. Each and every piece. Understood? I'll need your help to get this done, if you want to save your hay, save it from this rainy day coming down the line to us.."

"I understand completely. I'm on it." The phone clicked.

Out-of-breath Homer Vastling brought the small motor unit to the shop, along with repeated and profuse thanks before Joe Buffalino even started his repair work. But tools of the trade were lined up on his bench and he began taking the unit apart, piece by piece, placing each one, one

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by one, in a small canvas sack for proper care and handling by Homer Vastling, bound now to assist the mechanic. He started the messy clean-up.

Parts practically flew into Joe's hands as he disassembled the engine, each piece extracted went into the collective bag for care by the farmer, the work proceeding at a fast rate, and amazement expressed first on the customer's face and then voiced as he said, "How will you know where to put them back?"

"I'll know," Joe said.

"But how? I don't see any diagram of the motor. How will you know? This is important to me." There was more than plea in his voice.

"Me, too."

"But how?" said again as amazement crossed his face with each word, each shaking of his head, quandary holding him fast.

"With help from you and not questions."

At that point, Joe Buffalino grabbed a handful of nuts and bolts from a container on the bench top and placed them in the bag, Vastling not noticing the transaction. Only Cutler, behind the glass partition at his office, spotted that sly transaction, and a healthy smile crossed his face.

When Vastling had cleaned and dried each part and oiled them, the second bag was filled with all the cleaned parts, and Joe Buffalino started assembling the motor. It took less time than the disassembly, and Vastling shook his head in amazement as each piece was placed into the motor structure.

With one swing of his hand, and a concurrent switch of the motor's *on button*, the unit began to hum, the music of that repaired unit filling the shop as if a maestro controlled the very air.

Vastling was still in a state of shock, his mind slowly absorbing what he had seen no other man do in his life. The wonder of it all continued to leap around his face, disbelief trying to set itself in place and failing by each purr of the engine.

Joe Buffalino was wiping his hands dry of oil, Jiggys Cutler was still looking through the glass partition, his own evening still delayed, when Homer Vastling looked down into the second bag and saw a few unused parts scattered in the bottom of the canvas bag, like children lost at play, no way to get home, all alone and nowhere to go.

"What about these?" he screamed so that even Cutler heard him. "What about these? Where do they go?" His hands were on his hips, the stance accompanying his words, a stature in place, a demand, an amazement, an innocent belief yet wicked assumption of catching a master at fault in his chosen trade. "What about these? Did you miss them? What if the motor dies if I get the wagons hitched? What do I do with them?"

Question and curiosity, as well as demand, scowered for enlightenment.

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Joe Buffalino cupped one hand at one ear and tipped his head for listening, only the purr of the motor came to each listener, the scattered actors in this small drama.

The soft entrance of Jiggys Cutler's laughter, from off-stage, came first, seeping into the wide spaces of the shop, toting the unsaid message. It alerted Homer Vastling who suddenly recovered himself, who suddenly placed hands on hips in silent approval of his own first ignorance and realization of what he had just seen, endured, finally embraced, as Joe Buffalino began putting his tools back into their allotted spaces on his rack, his day on the job finally done.