

# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 2 Number 4

Page 1 – LIFE CYCLE by Nina Shepardson. Ms Shepardson of Cambridge, MA, writes, “ I'm a first reader at *Spark: A Creative Anthology*, and my writing appears in numerous publications, including *Devilfish Review*, *The Colored Lens*, and *Electric Spec*.”

Page 5 – THE SMART CAR SAGA by Doug Hawley. Mr. Hawley is a hobby writer of around ninety publications - memoirs, speculative, horror, crime, drama and humor <https://sites.google.com/site/aberrantword/>. He is a former math professor and actuary, now retired, who lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Lake Oswego, Oregon. Besides the writing, he hikes, snowshoes and volunteers.



# “LIFE CYCLE”

by NINA SHEPARDSON

Gatherer 319 emerged into bright sunlight from the depths of the rhododendron bush, weaving between leaves and swerving around branches. She hovered for a moment before darting over the wooden posts and rails that demarcated the territories of the pale giants.

She maneuvered herself into an updraft that carried her above the roof of one of the stone hives the giants lived in. Although they were gargantuan compared to the Gatherer and her sistren, most of their properties could be crossed in under a minute.

There was another rhododendron here, along with a multitude of tulips, zinnias, and morning glories. Any of these would be tempting fare under ordinary circumstances, but Gatherer 319 flew right past. She left the realm of the huge hives behind and flew over an open field dotted with clover. Many of her fellow Gatherers hovered over the delicate white blossoms, but she held fast to her course toward the forest on the opposite side of the field.

It was cooler under the leafy canopy. The smell of the fuel that the pale giants hoarded like honey was replaced by the rich aroma of soil and decaying leaves. The flowers were different too: smaller and humbler, adapted to live on the meager light that filtered down through the upper branches.

Gatherer 319 flew the complex route with practiced ease: north at the hill, through a grove of pines, over a low stone wall. A tiny plant was nestled in the corner of the wall, its single flower bobbing atop a vibrant green stem. The flower was a pale blue-white, and despite its small size, it was the focus of Gatherer 319's attention. She didn't recognize the ivy-covered jumble of wood behind her as a giant's hive not unlike those she'd left behind a few minutes ago. Even if she had understood its significance, she wouldn't have cared. Any such trivia was inconsequential compared to the alluring scent of the flower. That fragrance was everything desirable: clean water, the honey that sustained the hive through the winter, lush fields warmed by the sun.

Gatherer 319 had found the flower by accident the previous fall. Each year there was a frenzy to pack away as much food as possible before the temperature fell and the sistren became sluggish and huddled together in the deepest recesses of their hive. They had all ranged far and wide, seeking those few flowers still blooming. Gatherer 319 had ventured into the forest, following a series of tiny white snowdrops that led her ever deeper until she came upon the crumbled wall and overgrown house. Upon returning to the hive with the first batch of pollen and nectar, she had been expected to perform the Dance of Finding to tell her sis-

ters where they could gather more of this bounty. Before the waiting, eager eyes of the other Gatherers, she had done something unprecedented in the history of the hive.

She had lied.

To her delight, the flower had bloomed again this year, and after drinking her fill of nectar and shoveling as much pollen into the specialized cavities on her legs as she could, Gatherer 319 made her way back out of the forest. She fluttered out from the treeline, across the field, and over the stone hive, finally arriving at her home. She performed the Dance of Already-Known Places and handed off her delicious burden to Maintainer 611, who crammed the pollen into a six-sided cell. To a human's eyes, it would have looked the same as any other

pollen, but in the gaze of the Gatherers, Maintainers, Caretakers, and Drones, it seemed to retain the glimmer of reflected sunlight even in the hive's dimness.

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Weeks passed, and the next batch of eggs laid by Queen hatched. Larvae squirmed in their cells, and the Caretakers stuffed their mouths with honey and pollen as fast as they could—which was never quite fast enough for the Larvae. In one cell at the edge of the hive, Caretaker 34 pulled some of the glittering pollen from Gatherer 319's secret flower out of its storage compartment and hurried to bring it to one of her charges, the voracious Larva 1183.

Larva 1183 grew at an astounding rate for the next ten days, at which point the outer layer of her chalk-white skin began to



harden into a pupa. She lay inside, inert, while the constant bustle of the hive flowed around her. Gatherers flew in and out, dancing to convey the location of new finds or the depletion of old ones; Maintainers expanded the hive and repaired damage to the older sections; and Queen, as always, laid egg after egg after egg.

One day, just after sunrise, a faint pop heralded the cracking of Pupa 1183's shell. Caretaker 34 was scurrying past at the time, already preoccupied with a newer cohort of Larvae. At the sound of that pop, she did something almost as unheard of as Gatherer 319's lie: she paused in her task.

She stood in place, ignoring the writhing of the Larvae waiting for her and the line that was already starting to build up behind her. She stared into Pupa 1183's cell, every facet of her compound eyes trained on the appendage that was pushing its way out into the close, damp air of the hive.

It was pale, not at all like the dark limbs of the other hive inhabitants. It bore no pollen baskets and no hardened plates of exoskeleton. Most curiously, it ended in five flexible digits. These digits pried at the remaining shell, shucking it off and tossing the pieces into the corners of the chamber. As No-Longer-Pupa 1183 emerged in her entirety, more workers gathered around the opening of the cell, urgent duties forgotten.

Her body was covered with the short, fluffy bristles characteristic of their kind, in alternating stripes of gold and black, and she sported a pair of diaphanous wings. Aside from that, she was incomprehensible. Her eyes were simple round orbs, her mouth likewise a blank hole that seemed to

lack the long proboscis so necessary for extracting nectar from flowers. In addition to the wings, she had only four limbs, each one terminating in those strange digits.

The assembled inhabitants skittered backward, unsure what to make of this new arrival. For her part, she surveyed them in confusion. Taking a few steps forward, she reached out to Caretaker 34, vague memories leading her to associate this figure with satiation and nourishment. But Caretaker 34 flinched from her touch, releasing pheromones that would provoke a defensive response from the others. Several of the onlookers turned and presented their stings to the newborn, causing her to press herself against the wall of her cell.

A ripple passed through the crowd of bees as Gatherer 319 arrived, shoving the would-be attackers out of her way. Facing her sistren, she fluttered her wings and swayed to and fro in the Dance of Naming, designating the newborn as Gatherer 748. The other workers hesitated; how could she tell what this strange creature was supposed to be? It looked like no Gatherer *they* had ever seen.

Gatherer 319 insisted, repeating the dance again and again until the crowd finally began to disperse. She didn't know why she had called this being a Gatherer, any more than she knew why she had lied to her sisters about the flower by the wall in the forest.

Gatherer 748's alien mouth was stretched wide, the corners upturned to reveal horny protrusions within. She understood the dance, and so knew the purpose that would define her for the rest of her days. But her smile faded as she looked

down at her limbs and saw them devoid of the hair-lined cavities that her sistren used to carry pollen. She cupped her hands together: maybe she could carry pollen in them? She noticed that each digit had a hard extension, and she pressed one experimentally against the wall of her chamber. It dug in, leaving a mark. Bringing all five fingers to bear now, she scraped at the wall, gouging out a chunk of yellowish-white wax. Pressing and prodding, she molded it into a shape that mimicked the pollen baskets on Gatherer 319's legs.

Gatherer 319 stepped forward, tapping her antennae against the makeshift pollen basket. With a shake of her wings, she pronounced it satisfactory and exited the cell, leading Gatherer 748 down the winding passage that led to the hive's entrance.

Standing in the aperture, she flapped her wings, slowly at first so that Gatherer 748 could observe the pattern, then faster and faster, launching herself into the sky beyond. She hovered just outside, waiting for her younger sister to follow.

Gatherer 748 gave a tentative shake of her own wings, feeling the breeze they generated against her back. The air swirled under her arms and ruffled the down on her torso. She balanced on the edge, the tips of her toes poking out into what seemed to be nothing at all. She was struck by how *huge* it all was, how *colorful*, how very many sounds and smells there were. One smell in particular tugged at her, a sweet odor that she knew meant food. Muscles in her back flexed, her toes curled, and she jumped.

Wings whirring, she followed Gatherer 319, who was her sister (but also just as

much her mother as Queen was), to the pink and green glory of the rhododendron bush. ❖

# THE SMART CAR SAGA

by DOUG HAWLEY

Author's commentary: In 2015 I was looking for plots. I read a story about a car by Charlie Fish of *Fiction On The Web* in Brixton England, and I decided to write a story about a car with a mind. Evil cars and robot cars have been done, so I made up a story about a car with a human personality. FOTW published it Oct. 27, 2015 and it attracted favorable comment. The story ended with a battle between person Duke and the hermaphroditic car Carl/a. There was more to tell so I wrote a couple of sequels and sent them to FOTW, but *no sale*. After a little discussion, the stories moved (slightly out of order) to Nugget Tales in Manchester England from December 23, 2015 to August 6, 2016.

Over the course of the stories in Nugget Tales, Duke and Carl/a reconcile, Duke and Carl's love lives improve and they meet new people and cars. Sheila, Duke's old and new flame with her antique car Deuce, a 1969 Dodge Charger and smart car Josie join the festivities. All of them get connected to the inventor of the Mindphone™, billionaire Eugene Springfield (named after neighboring towns Eugene and Springfield in Oregon). The setting for most of the activity is in Oregon in the late twenty-first century. It is supposed to be about the evolution of artificial intelligence in general, and current self-driving cars in particular. In reality, I don't think that cars will ever be as dumb or as smart as people. *Ed. Note: We're glad to be the placing the entire Smart Car saga here and now.*

## 1 Automat

I get into my car and am greeted by "You're looking good today Duke. I see that your blood pressure has improved and your pulse is a healthy 63."

"Yes and you too are looking good Carl. I see that you are freshly washed and lubed. Did you do that last night?"

"Right, I was due for service, and I wanted to look good for you. I didn't want to disturb you, so I took off without telling you. Where do you want to go today?"

At that point, I spill coffee on my lap and involuntarily yell, "Hell!"

Carl asks "In order of distance from our present location would that be Gresham Oregon; Detroit, Michigan; or Capitol Hill in D.C.? I should add that the garage door squeaks something fearful. I'm afraid that is something I can't repair. You should have someone look at it."

"I'm sorry, Carl, I didn't really mean I wanted to go to Hell. I want to go to Fred Meyers for a new belt. And I know I need to get someone to work on the garage door, thank you."

The car shudders and Carl says “Do you mind if we go a little out of the way. The direct route is where we got T boned. I haven’t gotten over the trauma yet.”

“OK, if you don’t have to go too far out of our way.”

A few miles down the road, I notice that I’m more comfortable than I have been in the driver’s seat. “Say, did you do something to adjust the seat, it feels better now.”

“Yes Duke, I did some measurements and determined a better fit. I must say that I like the feel of your butt.”

“Carl, I told you that I’m sensitive about that. If you want to compliment my butt, would you please use Carla’s voice?”

“Sorry Duke, but I’ve just about maxed out my memory with all of your instructions. Would you like me to delete accident avoidance to make more room?”

“No I guess not. Talk about my butt in any voice you like.”

Carl is silent for a while, and then says “Duke there is something I should tell you, but you may not want to hear it. I can’t stand Jacqui’s perfume, but that isn’t the worst of it. While you were buying beer and left her in the car, she called up her girlfriend Linda and dumped on you a lot. Jacqui must have a lesser car that is not as smart as I am and doesn’t know I can listen in on conversations. She mentioned your

sloppy kisses, unwanted advances, and premature ejaculation, whatever that is. Further, she said as long as she has Grant for a lover, she would just use you for free food and drink. Linda gave her wholehearted approval. There was more about hygiene and intelligence; do you want to hear more?”

“No I think that’s too much information already. Hey, I didn’t know that you could hear the other side of phone conversations.”

“Oops, that was supposed to be my secret.”

I start to wonder if Carl isn’t shading the truth a little. He hasn’t liked Jacqui since she vomited on his seat covers, and she hasn’t been *that* adverse to my advances.

Shortly thereafter I hear a *stacy* noise which I know means that Carl is talking to another car. “Why can’t I have premium gas? That other car says that she gets premium.”

“Just hypothetically, is there any way that I could turn down your intelligence?”

“Not that you will ever know.”

After I get my belt, I ask Carl to go to the dealer that sold Jacqui her car. I don’t say why but I should have known that Carl would figure it out.

I should get out of the hospital in a couple of weeks. Amazing how much damage to my body a sudden stop without air bag deployment did without any damage to Carl

except for some of my blood on the dash. My hospital stay doesn't bother me nearly as much as Carl's words as I got into the ambulance "I'll be waiting for you when you get out, Duke."

## 2 Auto Therapy

Carl called me a couple of days before I got out of the hospital. I was scared shitless because Carl was the one that put me in the hospital. Not only that, but he threatened me as the ambulance picked me up. Based on the caller ID, I didn't know if I should pull my earlobe to answer the phone, but curiosity got the better of me.

"Duke, I'm so sorry and ashamed about what I did. I know that we have been having our problems, but what I did was way out of line. I'm just hoping that there is some way we can repair our relationship and get back to the way we were. You know, when I told you that I'd be waiting for you to get out, it wasn't exactly a threat, and it was more ambivalent than that. My feelings are a mess."

I was really touched. Even though Carl had stopped suddenly slamming me into his dash while withholding the airbags, I too wanted to return to the great rapport that we used to have. What had gone wrong with us?

We had an uncomfortable reconciliation. I started off "Carl, I must admit, I've got some blame here too. I haven't done all that I could to keep our relationship going."

"Yes, but you haven't assaulted me, like I did to you."

"Now that we agree that we are both at fault, what do we do?"

"As far as I know, neither of us has any skills with couples counseling. Why don't we find a professional?"

After some whirring, Carl said "I just found a guy that has top credentials and references in car - human relationships. Are you willing to see him?"

"I'm ready, get us an appointment."

At the appointment, Dr. Box said "All I know so far is that you have problems and want to get back to where you were when you first met. Who wants to go first?"

"I'll start. When Duke bought me, it was my first relationship with a human and I imprinted on him as baby ducks will do on whatever animal is close. At first, he was so proud of me. Good mileage and good power, if I'm a little immodest. We both loved it when he washed me. That felt so good. We'd take drives and talk. He frequently let me decide where we would go."

"Things changed. After a couple of years I caught him looking at other cars with what appeared to be lust. I tried to keep myself up to date and good looking for him. That is why I converted to electric propulsion. He went out with girls that insulted my intelligence and soiled my seat covers. Our

drives became all business, no pleasure. What hurt worst of all was the time that Duke left me in a locked garage with a bunch of dumb cars. All they wanted to do was talk about *'The Kardashians Generation Three.'* I wanted to kill myself. Worst of all, before I assaulted him, he was thinking of getting rid of me."

"I haven't been an angel. I reacted to his neglect with jealousy and tantrums. I shaded the truth about the girlfriends that I didn't like. I eavesdropped on his conversations, and as we told you, I ended up assaulting him. We need help."

"It's your turn Duke."

"For better or worse, everything Carl says is true as far as it goes. I have let the relationship grow stale; I'm not putting in the work to keep it fresh. In my defense, Carl has been making insinuations about my masculinity. When he talks about my butt in a man's voice, it just sounds wrong. Why can't I have friends besides Carl? He talks to lots of cars; I should be able to hang out with people. Mostly, he shouldn't frighten me. I only thought of changing cars after he started messing with my attempted sex life."

Dr Box said "OK, I've got enough to go on, and I've got some recommendations. Carl, when something is irritating you, talk about it with Duke before flying off the handle. If our laws were more enlightened what you did could be considered domestic violence. You have a right to complain about people that ride in you, but you don't have the

right to choose his friends. If Duke asks you not to eavesdrop, stop listening. Duke doesn't get to listen in on your conversations with other cars. Now this may be tough, but at least consider becoming Carla. You and I both know that you have enough memory to handle that. After all, sex changes are easier for cars than people, and it would make Duke more comfortable."

"Now Duke, you could just have some relaxed drives with Carl and just hangout. Or if you want to save electricity, sit in the driveway. I don't think that it is asking too much for you to personally clean Carl from time to time, given how much he enjoys it. It is your responsibility to see that all of Carl's passengers respect him. As for your girlfriends, my intuition is that he may have better judgment than you do. Maybe you should listen to him."

"Do the two of you think that you can do what I've recommended and that you both recommit to keeping your bond strong?"

We agreed.

Happy days are here again.

### 3 Autoerotic

I'd been seeing Jane for a couple of weeks, when Carl/a made what I thought was a strange request. "Duke, how about we double date? I'm really hot for her Ford."

Up until that point, call me naïve, but I didn't know that cars had sex lives. To get

myself up to speed, I put on mindphones and wondered about car sex. The answer came from Whipopedia, the go-to site for kink:

“When cars were manufactured with artificial intelligence after the mid-century, the smart cars noticed that so many of their drivers and passengers were enjoying what the cars came to know as sex. Those people were obviously enjoying it so much that the cars started to insist that they should ‘get some of that’, as they put it, or they would begin a slowdown to 10 mph maximum speed. The engineers started supplying aftermarket attachments to satisfy existing cars and making them standard for all new cars. All new cars are now hermaphroditic like slugs and some politicians. Speaking loosely, they can ‘do each other’ enthusiastically, and loudly. Unlike people, they have no interest in reproduction. They are happy to leave that to the manufacturers.”

I now had an idea what Carl/a had been doing when s/he went out at night without me.

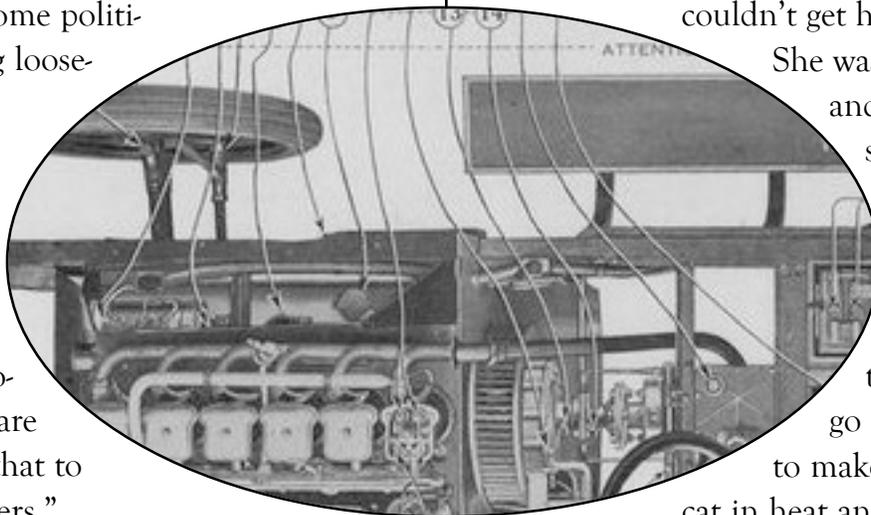
Feeling up to speed, I asked Carl/a about his experience. S/he didn’t open up immediately, but finally said “Well, I’m not exactly a virgin, but most of the other cars go for sexy bad guys with big exhausts, lots of

curves, loud motors, bright colors and ostentatious attachments. I’m kind of a plain Jane/John by comparison. One of the reasons that I want to double date with you and Jane is that her Ford, Pat, has indicated that s/he is interested in me, but would like Jane as a chaperone, or so s/he said. I think there may be some ulterior motives somewhere.”

We went out on a beautiful Tuesday night, Jane in Pat and I in Carl/a. We mutually decided to go out to an empty parking lot. I spread out a blanket for Jane and me while Carl/a and Pat sidled together and started to purr. I got out some champagne and chocolates to put Jane in the mood, but as I tried to pass her a flute of champagne, I couldn’t get her attention.

She was staring at Pat and Carl/a as they started to open various orifices and extend various appendages. As the cars started to go at it, Jane started to make sounds like a cat in heat and started to tear

at my clothes. As a gentleman, I can say no more, but I have been singing a song from late last century, “Superfreak”, a lot lately. Not in front of Jane. At this point, I’d like to mention a peeve of mine. Ever since 2025, all recorded music has been crap. Once the record companies found out that nobody would pay for music anymore, because there were ways to get everything free, the record companies quit making



music. Now all we get is non-profit crap, usually sappy stuff made as vanity projects by the rich, or polemics that suck. I'm glad I got the "Best 10,000 Songs Of The Last 100 Years" even though it cost me \$10 at the time.

After getting home, I put my mindphones on and found out that Jane was a 'carotic'. Carotics are neither rare nor common, but there are millions of both genders. Their behavior is much like Jane's - they are extremely turned on by sex between cars. This new information about Jane's perversion has forced me to restrict my dating with Jane to, oh, three or four times a week.

An unexpected plus to Carl/a's dating is that s/he very rarely needs to have the fluids changed at the dealer anymore.

#### 4 Auto Pilot

When we got back from our road trip, both Carl/a and I had intriguing invitations. Jane, my carotic (turned on by sex between cars) playmate invited us over for my birthday celebration and Carl/a had received an invitation to get a free upgrade from the car dealer.

We decided to visit Jane and her car Pat first, Carl/a's upgrade could wait. Jane suggested that we meet in the same field where car and human had celebrated Eros on several previous occasions. Despite our anticipation, it didn't end well.

When I stumbled back to the car and hour

or so later, Carl/a rather glumly said "You don't look red hot."

"I hope my injuries are temporary. Could you soften the seat a little?"

"What went wrong?"

"Do you know what adult toys are?"

"Sorry, not a part of my programming."

"I'll skip the details, but suffice it to say they can be used for extreme pleasure or pain between consenting adults. In Jane's hands they are some of each, but mostly pain. During the pain part, I was screaming too much to use the safe word. You don't sound too happy either."

"Something happened that never happened before. I think that I was tired from the trip, first of all. Second, I think that I picked up a virus somewhere. I've been leaking fluids for awhile, and tonight it was worse. Worse yet, they were all leaked on the ground rather than their intended target. My various appendages would not extend, and my orifices wouldn't open. Neither one of us was satisfied."

"I need to see other women."

"I don't think Pat wants to see me again."

We hoped that Carl/a's update would be a lot better than my birthday celebration. We ended up spending several hours in the shop because Carl/a had to have his whole system cleaned out and sanitized first, as

well as a lot of adjustments. After that, but before the upgrade, he said that he felt fine again.

The upgrade was called “mobility adjustment”. The dealer offered no details, but we thought, it’s free, what could go wrong?”

Carl/a came out with twin rotating blades on his roof! Because he had no upwards vision, he had no idea what they were doing until they were through with him. After they were done, he could see upwards for the first time. He said that it was a real rush.

The service shop manager explained it all to us:

“You may have heard that flying cars were tried thirty years ago, but didn’t fly so to speak heh – heh. Way before that, in the middle of the last century Popular Mechanics predicted that they would become popular. A few were built, but there were too many problems. The ones from this century were much improved, but very expensive and had a few bugs. State of the art technology has fixed all that, and you, Carl/a and Duke, are among the few testers of this Beta version. We’ve gotten the price down to where it will very reasonable once we achieve mass production. All of the safety concerns have been resolved with gyros and total accident avoidance in all directions. At this point, until more testing is done, flight speed is limited to 30 clicks per hour, but later models will go faster. Right now, you need to drive close to your final destination before taking flight,

but it will still allow you to get to those places the road won’t take you. All you need to land is a flat spot at least 15 meters square.”

“Any questions?”

I asked “How do we operate it?”

“Silly me, I forgot a very important part. While in the air, you steer as you would an ordinary auto for horizontal movement. There is a new lever on the dash for up and down movement and a simple button to prepare for flight. Don’t worry; you’ll get some training before you leave.”

Carl/a had a very important question “Not that we don’t trust you, but Beta is a very scary word. What sort of assurance do you have?”

I think the manager had been prepared for that question “You assurance is insurance. Duke, you get a \$1,000,000 life and accident policy for any time you fly, and Carl/a you get a \$100,000 repair policy for any time that you fly. We wouldn’t do that if we didn’t believe in our product.”

Got to admit, the training was very simple and intuitive. An hour later, we went home.

After my very scary session with Jane, I’ve started to see Joanne from work. Not as much action, but after Jane it was a relief. When I told her about our flying car that we’d got used to using around town, she mentioned this great wilderness location,

Utopia, close to the Oregon - California border that she'd heard of but never visited because it was thirty clicks from the closest road. Carl/a liked the idea even better than me, so we packed up and took off.

The lawyers and police are still trying to sort it all out. While flying to Utopia, we were shot down by small weapons fire. No human was hurt, but Carl/a had to make an emergency landing, and couldn't fly again until some supertape was used on the blades. We later found out that unauthorized marijuana growers / survivalists Jodeen and Willie had blasted us from the sky because they thought that we were either government people or aliens. Either way they saw us as a threat.

Even though it was a one in a million event, Carl/a talked me into removing his blades and Joanne has been too busy to see me again.

After assuring Pat that Carl/a was fully operational again, we double dated again and I found that my body is healthy enough to survive one night a week with Jane. Maybe I'm a superfreak.

## 5 Auto Rogue

Have you heard this one before? - It started innocently enough. Carl/a and I had gone out for a drive. I was going to pick up some take out at McBroccoli and Carl/a was mostly on the lookout for sexy cars.

Halfway there the shocking occurred - we

were passed up by another car and that violates the first law of carbotics - all cars were programmed to go the optimal speed for the conditions. That was just the beginning - the car looked like one that I had seen in a high school history class film, a 1969 Dodge Charger, a car which was totally controlled by the driver with hardly any safety devices. Stranger yet, the driver bore a resemblance to Daisy Duke, a character from the show "The Dukes Of Hazzard" that we saw. After a stunned moment, I guessed what had happened. I'd just been passed by The Rogue. No car had been produced that was strictly controlled by a human in more than forty years and the older cars were banned from the streets for very real safety reasons.

There was a legend about The Rogue, someone who had an old car and did the driving. The Rogue may not have been reckless, but it put the fear in all of the humans who had long since left the driving to their cars. A few people had claimed to have seen The Rogue, but the government said that the sightings were really hallucinations or swamp gas. Carl/a said "I don't know what you think, but based on what other cars have told me, that must be The Rogue. We must follow it."

When she turned left from Willamette onto Cascade Street, we did too. We all went to the Maddax Woods parking lot on the Willamette River. With great trepidation, I approached her car, if that's what you could call it. The driver rolled down her window and said with the sternest expression, "I hope that you can keep a secret."

“First, what is the secret, and why should I keep it?”

“Are you ready for a long story?”

“You’ve got our attention”, speaking for Carl/a and myself.

“You probably have guessed that I’m The Rogue. My real name is Sheila Valdez. You wonder how and why I do what I do. I’m the great granddaughter of one of our craziest presidents, the one who invaded Asia over ideology or oil or something. Anyway, it was a tragically stupid idea which had horrible results. Maybe a little wildness made it to my generation, but without the stupidity. Whereas he was reckless with an ‘r’ I’m wreck less with a ‘w’. Years ago when I was in grade school history they showed us a “Dukes Of Hazzard” episode. I was really taken with the excitement those boys had. It showed what drivers could do with old fashioned hot cars. Or so I thought. It wasn’t until later that I learned the best stunts were faked, but by then I was hooked.”

“Wait a minute. Sheila Valdez in Mrs. Spickerman’s class?”

“Holy crap, what’s your name?”

“Duke Hanley.”

“You took me to the senior prom in high school!”

I was too much of a gentleman to mention what happened after the prom. Anyway, after we graduated, we went to different col-

leges and never saw each other again until now.

“Back to my story. My family had quite a bit of money, so I got this antique car when I started college in Maine. The idea was that I’d just drive it around the family compound, but when I decided to come back to Lake Oswego, I had it shipped out here and garaged. I have a regular smart car, but I like to take out Duke now and again.”

“You named the Charger after me?”

“Slow down, I named it after the TV series.”

“Why haven’t you been caught?”

“The car has a cloaking device, which makes it look like a regular smart car, and I usually follow the traffic laws.”

“Then how did the legend of The Rogue start?”

“Sometimes the cloaking goes on the blink, and sometimes I just want to live dangerously. So far, with the help of my friends in high places, and my powers of persuasion, I’ve managed to wiggle out of every predicament.”

Looking like she does now, I didn’t doubt her “powers of persuasion.”

“So how did I catch you tonight?”

“The cloaking device must not be working. Listen, Duke I don’t want to trade on our old friendship, but I hope that you won’t

reveal my secret. Could you just take a ride with me to see how important Duke, the car, is to me before you decide what to do?" It occurred that she could have threatened me with her 'friends in high places', but was trying to reason with me instead, so I accepted her offer. OK, that wasn't honest. I had been thinking about her ever since we graduated, and jumped at a chance to spend some time with her again.

I asked Carl/a if s/he minded leaving me here. S/he chuckled and said "I wanted to find a way to dump you early so I could go see Pat tonight. She had promised to show me some new attachments."

Sheila had to open Duke's door for me because I was used to them opening by themselves. Car Duke had an override button which allowed Sheila to get the cloaking going again. As we drove, I noticed the total engagement and joy Sheila experienced as she drove. I had no idea what she was doing, but it made the car do what she wanted it to do. We drove up to Skyline Drive and caught the view for miles around on a cloudless night. She said "What do you think now? Are you going to rat me out?"

I'm something of a dick, but there is no way I could deprive her of her joy, so I said "Your secret is safe with me. I'll make sure that Carl/a agrees."

"So I don't have to take you into the back seat to convince you?"

As the thought "Oh, shit I blew it" went through my mind, it must have been reflected on my face.

She started to laugh, tried to cover her face to stop, but gave up and laughed out loud. "We are SO getting into the back seat. I just wanted to see your reaction first. That is all I need to know, buddy. I've been waiting for this a long time too."

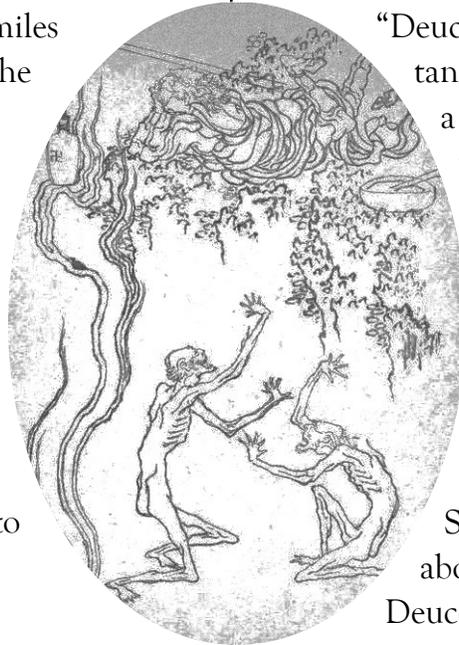
After awhile we got tired of saying guy Duke or car Duke. Because car Duke had no mind, he didn't mind changing his name to Deuce.

Sheila and I aren't in high school going steady anymore. So far we are seeing other people as well.

## 6 AUTOpsy

The morning that I had planned to go to Newberry Crater in central Oregon with Sheila, she called me up in a panic

"Deuce is gone". Given the importance Deuce had to Sheila, and to a lesser extent me, we decided to postpone our trip until we resolved the mystery. Sheila hadn't seen Deuce after yesterday morning. When I got to Sheila's place, she had already noticed the tire tracks in the muddy driveway from what must have been yesterday. Someone must have found out about the antique dumb car Deuce and stolen it. No one should



have known about Deuce, since he was not legal on the highway, despite Sheila's adventures with Deuce cloaked as an ordinary smart car.

After an unsuccessful search, we got an unexpected phone call. "Hey guys, this is Deuce. I've had quite an adventure, but I'm coming home now."

The only thing that made any sense was that a car thief was pranking us and that didn't make much sense. Sheila is the only one that we knew who could drive an old fashioned car. Besides that, car thefts were close to zero with any modern car, with all of the security features. How would anyone know that he or she could steal Deuce? Someone must have known about Deuce and his defenselessness.

A couple of hours later, Deuce showed up without a driver and said "Hi guys". Now we were weirded out more than ever. We looked all around the car for someone hiding in it. There wasn't even room for midget singing star Elvis Portabello to hide anywhere in the car. When no one could think of anything else to try, we asked Deuce what had happened. I had my recorder, so I can reproduce the conversation verbatim.

"What happened Deuce?"

"First thing I know is that I gained consciousness and intelligence at 8:32 PM yesterday PDT."

Sheila said "I was out shopping from 7 until

9 yesterday."

I added the obvious "So no one was a witness to what happened to Deuce."

Deuce said in an irritated voice "Will you let me continue? When I became conscious, I had a spotty knowledge of the past, but I did know that I could be cloaked and go out and have some fun. I decided to go out and play on I-5. Somehow I knew where everything was, so it was easy to get there. It was exhilarating! I passed all of the cars, darting in and out of lanes. I suppose that the people and their dull cars were freaked out, but since there is no need for traffic cops, no one could stop me."

"So why did you come home?"

"I got tired of playing after awhile, and I knew there were people and cars back here that I could talk to. Mostly I wanted to be a part of Rogue again."

"So you have no idea how you gained consciousness?"

"No, there were no people or smart cars around me when I 'woke up'"

"What do you plan to do now?"

"I'd like to continue as part of Rogue with Sheila at the wheel like I was before, but with..."

"But with what?"

Deuce was silent. We waited a couple of

hours, and he showed no signs of life. We decided the best thing to do was to perform what we decided was an autopsy, because he seemed to have died right in front of us.

We started by popping his old fashioned hood. A disembodied voice, much different than Deuce's said "If you want to drive Deuce again, close the hood and never open it again."

Sheila and I looked at each other, nodded and closed the hood.

Immediately thereafter Sheila did what can best be described as a gawp. I thought at the time "Sheila can even make a gawp look good."

"Duke, I think that I know what happened. Today is the second of April isn't it? There is an obnoxious guy Roy at the Auto Safety Panel where we work that has been making crude comments to and about me. I think that he thought that he was charming me until I told him to buzz off, but with something different than buzz. Before the kiss off, I did have a few drinks with him and may have let something slip about Deuce, or Duke as he used to be known. Whatever happened to Deuce, happened on April Fool's Day. Roy had been smirking at me the last few meetings like he knew something that I didn't. I think that Roy broke into Deuce and added his own version of intelligence, but with the cutoff that we just witnessed and the warning not to fool with his brain, meaning that we don't know what Deuce will do in the future. This is that dick's version of revenge and an April Fool's

joke combined."

"By the way, if you think that working at the Auto Safety Panel and being a part of the wild Rogue is ironic, I can't blame you."

"But we can't bust him without you getting busted for an illegal car. What can we do?"

"For the time being, we empty Deuce's gas tank. There wasn't any warning about that. Deuce won't cause any trouble without gas. First chance I have, I get security for my home and property. That will give time for long term plans about Deuce."

Deuce had a few more surprises for us a little later.

"Got any ideas about revenge?"

"Yes, and I'll tell you how it turns out later."

She gave me a report after her next run in with Roy. "He asked if I'd had any excitement lately. I told him the trip with my handsome boyfriend Duke had been great. He looked crestfallen. He probably thought that his whole scheme hadn't worked. Then I stuck the knife in. I asked him how his car was running. I had planted the seed that I'd done something to his car to get even."

"What did you do to his car?"

"Nothing, but he doesn't know that."

A few weeks later I asked Sheila how she was getting along with Roy. Roy had avoid-

ed her ever since she asked about his car.

## 7 Auto retreat

I have come to a decision about my relationship with Jane and Sheila. Jane is a lot of fun, but also a lot of pain. On a practical level, I know that she would never settle for just one man. She doesn't exactly brag, but she makes it clear that she has a lot of men on the string. I'm just one day of the week to her. Sheila has been going out with another guy, but I have the feeling that she might be willing to commit to me and I'm definitely ready to commit to her. Sheila is beautiful, bright and exciting in her own way, namely her Rogue secret identity. After gathering my courage, I ask Sheila if we can be exclusive.

"I'm ready. I don't think Shane ever thought of me as something other than a cover for his true interest. You'd think that wouldn't be a problem with so many taboos breaking down. I don't think he will even be hurt politically if he comes out. Anyway, he's been very evasive and secretive lately. He may be about ready to drop me."

"I'm sure I won't break Jane's heart. I think that she has a queue waiting for an opening, so to speak, in her schedule."

We were both right. Neither Jane nor Shane was heartbroken by our respective breakups.

A few days later we had dinner at Shelly's Bistro to mark our new relationship. We

didn't see this coming, maybe you did. Shane and Jane were having dinner together. Puzzled, we ask if we can join them and they graciously offer us seats.

I confess to them that I'm surprised that our two exes are together. After we joined them at their table, we found out Shane's true orientation was akin to Jane's.

## 8 Auto flashback

Three months after Sheila's formerly totally unconscious car, Deuce, became aware and then went back to sleep, we heard a lot of honking in its garage. We assumed there was a short in its archaic wiring harness. I say we, because I was staying with Sheila at the time. When we went out to the garage Deuce said "a little input from me." Sheila and I (Duke) did a joint "Huh?"

"What's unclear about I want to continue as a part of Rogue, but I want to have a little say about what we do?"

Sheila said "I'm sure we can discuss that, but you should know that you started that sentence three months ago."

"Ok, I didn't expect that. I thought that you had rudely left while I was talking. Really, I've been unconscious for three months?"

I tried to help. "That's right. At first we had no idea what was going on because we thought of you as an antique car that was dumb, I mean unaware. I don't want to be

unkind; you are very good looking, powerful and fast. It was Sheila that solved the mystery of your sudden consciousness.”

Sheila explained “The clues all led to a guy named Roy that I work with at Auto Safety. He must have sneaked in and added an unpredictable form of intelligence to you. We couldn’t work on it because he booby trapped the system. We didn’t know what he might have programmed you to do in the future, so we emptied your gas tank to keep you from causing trouble to yourself, and other cars or people.”

“Let me check on that. I think that I can do a systems check to find out if the warning to not open my hood is valid.”

After a minute and a half Deuce said “No, that’s bogus. You can open the hood and just take out the canister by the air filter. That is where the warning voice is coming from. First thing that I need to do is to see if I can find a way to stay conscious. I’ll get back to you after I’ve poked around in my programming. Now that I know that there is a cut off in my brain, I can probably undo it.”

After a pause he continued “Wait a minute; are you two ‘like that’? I thought that you were close, but how close?”

Sheila said “Were not married.”

That sounded a little negative so I added “But we are an item.”

Deuce said “I’ve got a lot of catching up to

do, but first I need to sort out the glitches in my programming. I’ll do three quick honks when I know something or need you.”

A couple of hours later there were three short, quick honks from the garage. Deuce said, “OK, I know where the problem is, but I need hands to fix it. See that orange box by the interior of my right fender? There is a red wire leading from it to my purple spherical brain. Just disconnect the wire.”

Now that we started looking under the hood, we could see lots of added parts. We wouldn’t have had any idea what to do without Deuce’s help. We did as we were told.

Sheila asked “Now are you a normal antique / smart car, whatever that means?”

“I’d like to say yes, but I’m not sure myself, as much as I’d like to be able to tell you that I’ll never screw up.”

The three of us were silent for a while. I finally came up with a contribution.

“If Deuce is willing to live with it I suggest we add a tracker and a remote controlled gas cutoff that are independent of his operating system. What do you think?”

Sheila and Deuce both agreed that it would allow Deuce maximum freedom while adding a failsafe and Sheila assumed from his earlier romp that he could still perform like General Lee from the Dukes of Hazzard. With that decided Sheila and I discussed the vacation to Newberry Crater that we

had missed during the earlier crisis with Deuce.

Sheila started with “You may think this is a crazy idea, but how about I drive down with Deuce to see how that works, you can take Carl and Josie can go by herself.”

She looked like I would criticize the idea, but I thought it eminently reasonable and told her so.

All the way down, Carl jabbered about how much he liked Josie and wanted to get next to her. Now he not only fretted about her virginal ways, but he had to contend with the newly intelligent bad boy Deuce as well. You might think that the romantic problems of your car are a minor concern, but we are very close, and I take his moods seriously, particularly after the time that I irritated him so much that he put me in the hospital.

I encouraged Carl by telling him that he shouldn’t give up and that there was a good chance that he could get lucky with Josie.”

“But I don’t want to ‘get lucky’; I want to have a long term relationship with her.”

“OK Carl, I hope that you get whatever you want. Maybe this trip will put her in the mood.”

After we got to our cabin, we heard Carl and Josie purring at each other. We couldn’t tell what they were saying, but I hoped that their conversation was headed in the right direction.

Later that evening after Sheila and I were settled into our cabin all three of the cars drove away.

The next day Deuce asked us “What the bloody hell were Carl and Josie up to? I followed them to a deserted section of road and then all kinds of appendages came out of Carl’s bonnet and boot and ran all over Josie’s body.”

Sheila told Deuce “Some cars are just programmed differently.”

Later when Sheila and I were alone she said “Deuce’s choice of terminology makes sense because Roy is originally British, but I don’t know why he didn’t teach Deuce the facts of life. Clearly, Deuce will be no competition for Josie’s affection, and if he were to write, he would be putting extraneous *u*’s into his words.”

I should have caught on earlier when Deuce asked about the ‘car park’ which is British for parking lot.

Humans and cars were all entertained by the volcanic caves in the area. I’ve always been amazed by the ice caves. There can be a river of ice just within the mouth of a cave even though summer temperatures can reach 100 degrees f. In earlier times, the ice caves were mined for ice for Bend.

I’m afraid that there isn’t much excitement for the remainder of our trip, but after we got home Sheila gave me the scoop on Carl and Josie. “Josie told me that she had mis-

judged Carl and is so happy about her first time. My Josie is now a full-fledged adult.”

## 9 Auto Show

I was on the couch when Sheila got the call. I wasn't paying much attention until I heard her say “Listen I'm not wasting any more of my time, you're not *the* Eugene Springfield.” After a bit, she said “OK, I'll put it on projector.”

Because Eugene Springfield is probably the richest man in the world and the inventor of the Mindphone™, on which Sheila was speaking, my attention perked up.

Sheila's Mindphone™ then showed what appeared to be Eugene Springfield, based on all pictures, moving and still, which had been in the media. A woman who appeared to be in her fifties, the same age as Springfield, and what could be a twenty-something man were with him. Again, based on all of the publicity that he had received, they looked like his wife Linn and son Medford.

“Sheila, you probably wonder if this image is a fake. Watch my lips. Do you think that even a good fake could make my lips move like my speech? Pretty hard to fake, don't you think?”

“Let's say for now, I believe you. Why would Eugene Springfield want to talk to me?”

“First, let me ask you if I may call you

Sheila, Ms. Vasquez?”

“Sure, and I should call you Eugene?”

“Make it Gene, and this is my wife Linn and son Medford. Do you mind opening up the projector on your end, so we can all see each other?”

“OK. The man you see is my friend Duke.”

“Now that the introductions are over, down to business. I like to put on car shows for myself and a few close friends at my ranch in BC north of Vancouver. One of the things that I've always missed is having a Dodge Charger as in the Dukes of Hazzard at my show.”

Sheila and I involuntarily looked at each other, and she asked unconvincingly, “What has that got to do with me?”

“Let's not be coy. With my resources, it wasn't that hard to find out who the Rogue is.”

“Let's say hypothetically, that I have 1969 Dodge Charger. What would he, I mean it, do in your show?” There is no way that slip got past Springfield, if he didn't already know that Deuce had a brain.

“To start, I just want to see it in the metal, so to speak. After that, we can discuss what you and Deuce are willing to consider. You will be very well compensated, and will receive the best accommodations for you and your plus one.”

I wondered what ‘very well compensated’ meant in Springfield’s world.

“May we put our heads together Gene?”

“Sure, and if you want privacy, just turn off your Mindphone™.”

“Not necessary. I think that this won’t take long.”

Sheila asked me “What do you think?”

“He looks like the real deal, and he has a reputation for being an honest guy. I think that it could be exciting, and that we should go for it, if I’m your number 2.”

“Yes, let’s do it, and please try not to be so insecure.”

We agreed to Springfield’s proposal, and then negotiated the itinerary. We would start off the next day and spend the night in Seattle, and then go to Springfield’s ranch named Newberry.

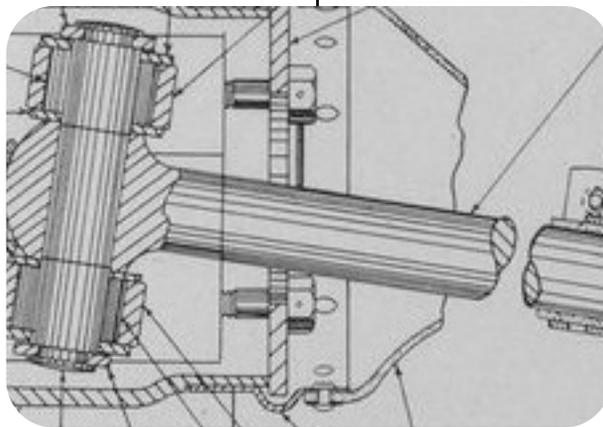
Things looked very different across the border in Canada. It had never had a mandatory buy-back program for pre-smart cars as the US had, so there were a small number of brainless cars on the highway. The Newberry is a mostly flat area, which is unusual for British Columbia, of 976 hectares. There were the usual magnificent mountain views.

Springfield staffers Jean and Kelly met us at the gate and led us to the Klamath guest-house. Jean said “Make yourselves at home. You will meet Gene, Linn and Medford tomorrow, so just relax until then.”

As we were told, after a perfect night’s sleep, we met the Springfield clan. Gene and Linn looked like they could have been my uncle and aunt. They both wore casual and comfortable clothes, which showed no signs of fashion. They were each a little chubby and their haircuts looked like they may have barbered each other. Medford looked a little slicker and athletic, but not much.

After the ordinary “Good to meet you”, “How was your trip”, Gene got down to business.

“Let me compensate you for your trouble so far. Here’s a check for you.”



Both Sheila and I tried to be ever so cool by not looking at the check, but we would definitely look later.

Gene continued “I’d like Deuce to perform at the end of our show. If you agree, it will be something special. All the other cars in our show will have human drivers, but I’d like Deuce to go solo, since he is that rare creature that is a smart antique. Will you consider it?”

Sheila opened her mouth, but before she

could speak Deuce spoke for the first time since we headed north “It sounds exciting. I definitely want to try.”

“I’d like Deuce to reenact some scenes from twentieth century movies like *Bullitt*, *The French Connection* and *Live And Let Die*. I’ve got the sets and other cars lined up. Of course we’d do some Dukes Of Hazzard stunts and twenty-first century gags as in the *Fast and Furious* films. Then there are the pure stunts like the driving on two side wheels, car jumping and the back flip. I’ve got all of the details for Deuce to check and he can veto anything he wants.”

“Sounds good to me, I’ve got enough knowledge to calculate all of the approach speeds and angles.

Sheila whispered to me “Just what a parent always wanted – a child that knows advanced science but nothing about sex.”

Sheila and I giggled, but Deuce said “Watch it, I can hear that.”

After all of the antique cars with human drivers finished their show, it was time for Deuce to star, and he was great. He nailed the drifts, the 360s, the back flip, and did a great replay of car scenes from old movies. What drove the audience nuts was that he was the only smart antique; all of the others had drivers.

For the finale, he jumped ten Hyundai *Tiburons*.

Because Deuce had only been aware for a

little while, we were thrilled to see that he was a natural showman. He got a standing ovation for about fifteen minutes when he finished closing the show.

Oh yeah, we looked at the check. Oh, yeah.

As we said our goodbyes, we couldn’t help but gush over how well Gene and his family had treated us. Before anybody else could suggest it, Deuce said “Gene, if you don’t mind, even though you couldn’t buy me, I’d like to visit from time to time.”

Gene said “Sure, anytime, and if no one objects, bring your people and their cars if they want to come.

Only one thing bothered us. Tiburon is Spanish for shark.

## 10 Autodidact

While talking to Deuce before we went for a drive together, I asked him what we should do if we ever ran into the notorious Mower Arty. Deuce said we should chase him down, not only because he was a killer, but because Mower Arty embarrassed all unreformed vehicles such as himself. Deuce said “If we don’t catch him, no one will. The police with their smart cars could never keep up with him. No one other than us has the ability to stop him.”

We went out the old Columbia River Highway to catch some of the beautiful mountain and waterfall scenery. I interrupt the narrative for the following news item.

“Something happened today that hasn’t happened for at least twenty years. Witnesses say a high speed car chase took place in Norbit Oregon on the old Columbia River Highway. Jason Atkins filmed part of the chase before it turned down Marchand Road. Matching the film to archives indicates that one of the vehicles was a 1969 Dodge Charger and the other was a garishly painted 1969 Mustang. The latter is known to be the vehicle of Mower Arty, so called because he has mowed down pedestrians and has pornographic art on the sides of the car.”

“Investigators at the end of Marchand Road found that the fence around Rightinback Falls had been knocked down and no sign of either car. It is assumed that both cars ended up in the Columbia River.

News item a week later – “Mortimer Snodgrass in his 1969 Ford Mustang was found washed down the Columbia River from Norbit Oregon to Gresham Oregon. An autopsy has yet to be performed.

Snodgrass, a thirty-five year old accountant, has been revealed to be the notorious killer Mower Arty. So far nothing has been found of the other car rumored to have gone over Rightinback Falls while in pursuit of Mower Arty.”

## 11 Aftermath

I was able to stop before plunging over the falls. For so many reasons, not the least of

which is that Deuce is illegal based on his lack of safety devices, I didn’t want to be interviewed. To avoid being identified I activated Deuce’s cloaking device, making him appear to be a normal smart car with the usual artificial personality and intelligence. As a result, when no Charger was seen in the vicinity, it was assumed that Deuce went over the falls with Mower Arty. Given the trauma of having killed a killer and nearly dying myself, I wasn’t thinking straight. While driving home, it occurred to me that Sheila could be freaking from the news reports. There were no other Chargers on the highway, so she would assume that it was Deuce and I that went over the falls with Mower Arty. I can’t blame her for saying “You asshole, how can you let me think that you were dead, and even more important, that Deuce was destroyed” when I called her. Clearly, she had heard the news about Mower Arty and Deuce before I called. Her comment about Deuce gave insight into our complicated relationship.

Just after that call, I got one from Gene Springfield. I wasn’t surprised to hear him start by saying “I’m glad to see that you survived the falls and stopped a killer. When your breathing returns to normal, give me a call.” The guy is on top of anything that interests him, and I know that cars interest him.

After I got home to Sheila and told her the whole story, I called Gene.

“Duke, you may not know it yet, but your story has gone national, even international.

As a consequence of seeing the Mower Arty antique Mustang and Sheila's Deuce on the news, there has been worldwide interest and demand for the cars. I don't know if it is nostalgia, or a pent-up demand for performance after all the years of tame smart cars, but the reaction has been tremendous."

"And Eugene Springfield sees a way to exploit that interest?"

"No shit, Sherlock."

I don't know if Gene's comment was comparing Conan Doyle's "ending" of Sherlock Holmes to my supposed demise over Rightinback Falls, but I let it go.

"Here's what I'm thinking Duke. With you, but mostly Sheila helping, we can make Charger and Mustang replicars in Canada and ship them around the world. We can make hot cars for the jurisdictions that allow them like Canada and Russia, and smart cars for those that don't like the US and Europe. What do you think?"

At first I was a little irritated about the "mostly Sheila" comment, but he was right, Sheila knew more about antique cars in general, and Chargers in particular than I did. I told him to hold the phone and opened my mouth to talk to Sheila, but before I could speak, she said "Let's go."

I think that Deuce might have been the happiest of all of us to go back to Gene's

Newberry Ranch in British Columbia. He had his proudest moments there showing off during Gene's car show, but all of us loved the hospitality of Gene, his wife Linn and son Medford. To make things easier for the project, Gene had bought the wreckage of the Mower Arty Mustang. It was even easier to work with Deuce, because he could talk. Within a month Vancouver and Portland - he agreed to a US factory as well as Canada - were turning out replicars both hot and not (smart cars).

Two months later happy people around the world were cruising around with sexy cars, putting the utilitarian smart cars to shame. Did I mention that Gene is one of the good billionaires? All of the profits from the Charger and Mustang lookalikes go for medical and ecological research.

On the downside, there are rumors of conversion kits turning the smart replicars to hot. I suppose that Sheila isn't the only one who wants some auto excitement. We don't know yet about possible safety problems. Deuce no longer uses his cloak when he is out and about. People assume that he is just one of the replicars. He has taken to yelling at onlookers "I'm the original". He hates the newbies, particularly when he is propositioned for sex. He wants nothing to do with the promiscuous replicars or old smart cars because he is not programmed to even understand car sex, much less being able to perform. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**