

IT TAKES A THIEF

By Rick Cogbill

*(Author's note: This is the very first Car Side column ever written, as it appeared in **Automotive Parts & Technology (AP&T)** magazine in April, 1998)*

Automotive repair shops are like people; each one has its own unique personality. And here at Slim Shambles Auto Repair, we've got personality by the buckets.



Illustration by Ben Crane

Take my staff, for example. You can tell a lot about a mechanic by the vehicle he drives.

First, there's Tooner (our electronics specialist), who drives an old Chevy pickup truck. A wizard with hi-tech automotive gadgetry, he won't own anything that doesn't have a carburetor and points.

Next is Beanie our apprentice, sometimes referred to as 'The Bean.' He drives a low-rider S-10 truck with beefed-up computer chips and fat tires. Off duty, you'll find him either watching Star Trek reruns with his girlfriend, or hanging around the computer store with his buddies reading Computer Geek magazine.

Then there is Basil, the philosophical one of the crew. Don't let the Lamborghini he drives fool you – he's an avid reader of ancient literature (including Motor Manuals), and also studies the meditative arts. His calm nature comes in handy when a really tough problem hits the shop.

As for me, well, what can I say? I like to pull into work in my SUV, yakking on my cell phone, while checking my electronic day-timer for appointments. But hey, I *am* the boss.

What amazes me most is that a sleepy little town like Slumberland can produce such an interesting collection of characters. And that's not to mention my customers. Take last Tuesday, for example...

It was 8:30 in the morning when the office phone demanded my attention. But when I picked up the receiver, I had to hold it at arms length until the verbal assault on the Canadian language subsided.

"Buck?" I finally ventured. "Buck? Is that you?"

"Someone stole it, Slim!" exclaimed my old pal Buck Pincher, one of the stingiest and most cantankerous customers you'll ever meet.

"Stole what?" Frankly, I couldn't think of anything Buck owned worth stealing.

"My confidence! My peace of mind! My reason to believe in the basic decency of humankind...!"

"Slow down, Buck," I said. "What's this all about?"

Buck took a deep breath. "My car won't start, Slim. I took your obviously suspect advice and traded my old Topaz in for a fancy '91 Chrysler Dynasty. I figured my transportation worries were over. But now this!"

"Well, phone the auto club and get it towed in," I said. "It may be something simple."

"Is this gonna cost me money?" Buck asked suspiciously.

"You bet. Now quit grumbling and I'll call you when we know what's wrong."

An hour later it was Tooner who was grumbling. "If I didn't know better, I'd say yer buddy Pincher poured some of his apple wine into the gas tank! That guy'll do anythin' to save a buck."

I sighed. "What have you discovered so far?"

Tooner fumbled through his pockets for a cigarette, forgetting that it was the beginning of the month and that he'd quit again. "Well, it's got spark, it's got fuel, it's got compression, and it fires up every time. But after a second or two it just quits."

I frowned. "Found any service bulletins?"

"Not yet." He turned to our apprentice who was parked in front of the shop computer. "Hey, Beanie, quit playing them stupid computer games and look for them service bulletins like I told ya to!"

Beanie muttered as he went back to the TSBs. "Man! And I was almost up to 75,000 points!"

I looked the engine over. Tooner had a fuel gauge hooked up to monitor fuel pressure, and a spark tester to watch for spark. "So you're saying the spark and fuel keep coming, even after it begins to quit?" Tooner nodded.

"Yeah. Everythin' looks good, but she just dies out."

Just then Basil ambled by. He stopped beside the front fender and folded his arms across his chest. "A wise man once said, 'He who climbs over the wall, and uses not the gate, seeks only to steal.' "

"What's that s'pposed to mean?" Tooner scratched his head. "Have you been sniffin' around the solvent tank again?"

Basil smiled thinly. "It seems to me that this has all the symptoms of somebody having tripped the security system," he said. "My Lamborghini acts the same way if the alarm's on. Check the injector pulse signal and see for yourself."

"But this car doesn't have a security system," objected Tooner.

"Basil has spoken," Basil said cryptically, and glided away to finish up a busted water pump on a '92 Protégé.

Tooner had no choice but to get out the noid lights and put one into the injector harness. Sure enough, after firing a few times, the injector signal quit, causing the engine to stall.

Suddenly Beanie hollered out excitedly, "I got something!" He came running over to the car, waving a printout in his hand. "There's a Chrysler bulletin concerning computers and alarm systems! Apparently the early computers all had the security system built in, whether the car came with that option or not. If something like a voltage surge sets off the security system, the injector pulse signal is cut off and the engine won't start."

I took the printout and scanned it quickly. "Can you reset it with the key?"

"Nope," said Beanie. "You have to install a new computer, part #R4686442."

"You were right," I said to Buck later, when he came to pick up his Dynasty. "You were robbed... to the tune of about \$350 worth of built-in obsolescence."

"So much for your bad advice," muttered Buck. "I should have kept my Topaz – at least it didn't have an alarm system that could go south on me."

I grinned. "Yeah, but that's because no one would ever bother to steal it."

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