

Cold Comfort

Who knew that faulty heating controls could cause such a grave situation!

By Rick Cogbill
March 2005

The bell on the front door tinkled as someone entered the office. A shiver went down my spine, which was unusual given the warm spring weather we'd been having. I glanced up and discovered the reason for the climate change. Dethnor Pallor, the local mortician, was standing right in front of me.



“Mornin’, Slim,” he droned in his monotone voice. “I trust you and your staff are all...well?” The way he turned the last word into a question was a trifle unsettling.

I gulped involuntarily. “We’re all fine, Deth,” I replied. “I mean, except for Basil, who’s off with the flu...”

“Oh?” Deth’s eyebrows shot up in anticipation.

“But he’s expected to fully recover!” I quickly added.

“Oh.” The disappointment was obvious. “Well, I suppose it can’t be helped.” He sighed, and moved on to the reason for his visit. “I’m having trouble with our funeral coach, Slim. There is absolutely no heat coming out of the heater. Of course, it doesn’t bother my clients...” – we paused for a moment of silence out of respect – “...but my assistant and I get a tad chilly on rainy days.”

We went out to the gray ’96 Cadillac hearse that was parked in front of the door. “I’ll drive you back to the funeral parlor,” I offered. Then I noticed a bulky tarp in the back of the vehicle. “Say, you’re not...er...loaded right now, are you?”

“No,” replied Deth. “I’m dead empty today.” He raised a white-gloved hand to his mouth to suppress a smile at his own pun. “The tarp is there because I’d picked up some lumber at the building supply store. Business has been slow lately, so we’re doing a few renovations at the mortuary.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and took Deth back to his chapel. He was right, of course; no matter what I did with the heating controls, only cold air came out of the vents. But I also noticed that the temperature gauge on the dash was buried six feet under.

“What’s up?” asked Tooner, as I pulled the coach into the shop.

“No interior heat,” I said. “I suspect a thermostat problem.”

He grunted and opened the hood. “We’ll check ‘er out. Beanie! Put some exhaust hoses on this puppy and idle ‘er up for me.”

The Bean didn’t look too eager to climb inside the hearse, but he did as he was told. It’s a funny thing – a hearse is just a fancy station wagon, but there’s something about them that gives guys the creeps...

Tooner checked the engine temperature with his infrared thermometer. “Yep, she’s running cool. Time for a new t-stat.” Once removed, we could see that the thermostat wasn’t closing all the way, an obvious source of the no-heat problem. With the new part installed, the temperature came right up to spec and the interior was as warm and cheery as an Irish Wake.

To make sure we had full circulation, Tooner waited until the cooling fans came on. Then he closed the hood and grinned. “I always wanted to test-drive one of these puppies – ya get t’ stare death in the review mirror!”

But it wasn’t long before he returned, and this time he wasn’t smiling. There was steam coming out everywhere, and the car was overheating as well.

“What’s wrong?” asked Beanie.

Tooner opened the hood with a snarl. “Now the dang thing is overheatin’! As long as it just idles, it’s fine. But the moment ya raise the rpm...”

He checked for air locks, blown head gaskets, anything that would explain the problem. Finally he pulled out the new thermostat. “It’s the only thing I’ve changed since the car came in,” he muttered. “Maybe it’s got a problem.”

And sure enough, it did. Comparing it with the old one, Tooner found that the new thermostat opening was far smaller than the original, and was restricting coolant flow. We ordered up another thermostat, made sure it was of the proper design, and then installed it. After that we had no more problems.

As we sat in the front seat testing the heater for the last time, Toon finally began to relax. “Yep, I should get me one o’ these,” he said, patting the dashboard. “Luxurious, low mileage, only driven on weekends. Why, I’d be the envy of all...”

Just then we heard a rustling from under the tarp in the back, and a cold, pale hand reached out and grabbed the back of Tooner’s neck. He screeched like a banshee and leapt out of the car like a bat out of...well, you know where.

Behind me, Beanie collapsed in gales of laughter. “Whoa! Did you see the look on his face?!” He pulled the white latex work glove from his hand. “I’ve never seen Tooner run so fast in my life!”

I glanced across the shop at Tooner, who had just figured out who was behind the practical joke.

“Well, I hope you’re faster,” I said. “Once Toon gets down off his tool box, you’ll be running for your life.”