

The fan-belt on the Elco had been aggravating me for the past few days. Luckily, I didn't have to drive to SIUE for a day or two. I finally got in touch with Bernie, my mechanic, and he'd told me that he would take a look at it and make sure everything was fine. I loved having a mechanic right up the street from the house. To me, that was one of the benefits of living in the city compared to the suburbs. I couldn't imagine a house in the suburbs worth living in that was right down the street from a mechanic's shop. Commercial zoning laws and homeowners' associations tend to prevent such things. But *J & B Auto and Body* was right up the street from me. Bernie, the son-in-law of the co-owner, was *my* mechanic; Rasaad, his assistant, was *my* assistant. They weren't the best mechanics in the world, but I always dreamed of owning classic cars and having a mechanic with, not only an intimate knowledge of the cars' makes and models, but an intimate knowledge of my cars. And Bernie had been working on my cars since the '54 Chevy. When I first came home from school, I bought a 1954 Chevy Bel-Air two door with the straight six and three on the tree. Loved that car. The restoration process was going slow at the time (and is all but halted these days), but it was going. By the time I got the '84 Chevy El Camino, Bernie and I were good friends and he was well acquainted with taking care of my cars. So, when I told him of the problems that I was having with the new fly wheel on the alternator – we'd recently taken out the small block 250 engine and replaced it with a 350 and as a result we had to change the flywheels on some of the component parts – I expected that the fix would be quick and easy. And for all intents and purposes it was. I took the car (truck, yes the El Camino is recognized as a truck by states' motor vehicle departments) up to Bernie, he tightened whatever needed tightening and that was that. The next morning, I was to teach two classes, one at eleven and the other at one in the afternoon. About three miles from the exit that leads to the university campus, I noticed the car's temperature gauge racing towards the redline. I pulled over immediately. I popped the hood and wouldn't you know it: the belts that connect to the waterpump, the alternator and the fan were all disconnected from the flywheels to which they were supposed to be attached. I still had about forty-five minutes before I had to be in class, so if I could just get the belts back on the proper flywheels, then I could still make it to work on time; it is nothing worse than when the instructor is late for class. Like most responsible motorists, I kept a set of what I thought were the necessary tools in any situation: a flashlight, vice-grip pliers, a multitude of screwdrivers, a set of ratchets and wrenches in various sizes and a hammer. Now, in order to manipulate the positioning of the various belts, one has to manipulate a number of engine components, like the alternator; however, very few of those components have the same sized bolts and nuts and screws used to connect them to the motor. As fate would have it, I had every tool one could imagine except the ones needed for the job at hand. I was forced to call roadside assistance and I borrowed the necessary tools from the tow-truck driver who arrived. Needless to say, I was late for class and, I was out of sixty-five dollars (the minimum fee for the tow-truck driver to come to my aid. While I had insurance on my car and roadside assistance is a complimentary service, my car only had liability insurance; my wife's car on the other hand – a 2007 Toyota Solara - was fully covered and if a driver was in need of assistance while driving her car, then there would be no charge). By the time I finally made it to campus, it was

lunchtime. So, I went to lunch. I then taught my afternoon class, performed my duties as a writing consultant and began my pilgrimage back across that bridge. I needed to make a stop in North County before heading south, and so highway 270 it would be. Just as I was approaching the sign that lets you know you are nearing the Alton exit, I began to notice the signs of the car overheating and I knew the cause: the belts were disconnected from the proper flywheels. I also knew that I didn't have the proper tools. And, at the rate things were going, I would need to keep the tools – for who knew when the problem would arise again before I made it back to Bernie's.

America is a great country. And it is filled with millions of people who are more than willing to help their neighbors. The difficulty sometimes lies in getting the opportunity to actually ask for help or assistance. I was in a section of Illinois that is not greatly populated and there is some distance between residences – farms and ranches and homes with neighbors miles apart – and businesses – grain distributors, businesses that support farming and lots of storage facilities. Just walking up to the nearest home or business would be at least a two to three mile hike from the highway. I would have to walk through brush and undergrowth and through thickets and areas of water drainage before I even arrived in an area that might offer the opportunity of salvation. Now, I am in teacher's garb: nice, black Kenneth Cole boots, black Armani slacks, black Express sweater with purple dress-shirt underneath, complimented by a smoky grey, black and purple tie. On my exterior, I was covered by a full-length wool black overcoat and my favorite black hat – I don't know what kind, but it looked good.

Having once been a hunter in my youth, I understood the dangers inherent when trespassing on another's property in rural areas. I almost wished that I had one of my handguns with me; but, Illinois, at the time, did not have a concealed carry law and did not participate in the Peaceful Journey law to the extent of most states. And, although I carried a concealed carry permit from another state, Illinois (along with Florida I believe) were the two states in the union which did not recognize the right to carry concealed firearms licensed by other states. I never carried a firearm in my vehicle or on my person when in Illinois for those reasons. After about forty minutes, I finally reach what appeared to be some semblance of civilization. I walked in the direction of a run-down farm-repair shop sort of entity. As I passed rusted-out tractors and the shells of 1940s era automobiles, I thought to myself: "What kind of *Deliverence* shit have I gotten myself into?" I really wished I had some kind of protection; faith and faith in humanity always worked. I approached the first door I could find. I opened the outer door. I call it an outer door, but it was really the screendoor. It just didn't have a screen. I knocked. I knocked. I knocked. No one answered. I left *Deliverence* and headed towards what appeared a main road and walked. I will admit that as I walked with my hands in my overcoat's pocket and with my hat on my head and my scarf – I did not mention my scarf did I? – I had the silouhetted appearance of a mobster. If you were to consider the fact that *The Godfather* presented a portrait of mobsters to mobsters that mobster would eventually embrace, then I looked like an extra who had just stepped from some Mafioso themed feature film. I walked on. I passed some buildings

because the buildings looked empty or did not appear to house the friendliest of people. I noticed a guy paving a parking lot to a business as I continued my sojourn.

I approached him. There was a truck nearby that looked as if it had to have tools inside and I figured that the truck belonged to the guy repaving the parking lot. I told him my dilemma: I was an instructor from SIUE. My car broke down on 270. I knew what the problem was. If I could only get the proper tools I could be on my way. If he had the tools and would allow me to borrow them, then I would promptly return them when I got the car running again. The guy was a rather nice fellow. He told me that he did indeed possess the tools that I needed. They were in his truck. He would lend the tools to me. I would have to wait about ten minutes until he completed his task. Great! I stood at the edge of the parking lot, almost on the main road. He worked. We talked.

“What kind of car ya’ have?”

“’84 Elco.”

“Small bloc?”

“Just upgraded to a 350.”

“That’s about as powerful as a fella could go in a small bl-.”

Before the guy could get the rest of the word out of his mouth, he immediately stopped talking. We noticed not one police car, not two, not three, not four – I began to feel like the Miami Heat, cause the heat was on – but six police cars. Each from a different neighboring jurisdiction, in addition to the Edwardsville police department. The guy paving the parking lot said, “What the hell?” Before I could respond, an officer seemed to almost be ejected from his car, gun drawn and pointed at me.

“FREEZE. GET YOUR HANDS UP!”

“Me..what’s the problem officer?”

“SHUT UP! GET YOUR HANDS UP. I. AM. NOT. GOING. TO. TELL. YOU. AGAIN.”

My hands went up. I stopped asking questions. By this time I was surrounded by no less than ten officers, all with their guns drawn.

“TURN AROUND. SLOWLY WALK IN THE DIRECTION OF MY VOICE. PLACE YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD AND INTERLOCK THEM. GET ON YOUR KNEES.”

At this command I bulked. I was too dandy to be getting on the ground. I protested, “Officer, what is...”

“SHUT UP AND GET DOWN ON YOUR DAMN KNEES AND I AM NOT GOING TO TELL YOU AGAIN.”

“Sir, do as he says,” came from another officer.

I complied with the officer-in-charge’s direction. No man likes getting on his knees. Knee, maybe. But knees? *Rather die on my feet, than live on my knees...* After cuffing me, the officer allowed me to my feet and patted me down, in search of weapons and contraband I supposed. As he was searching my person, I noticed the other officers searching on the ground and in the bushes along the path that I had taken to get to the guy repaving the parking lot. The officer-in-charge yelled out, as if to someone but to no one at the same time, “He’s clean.” I asked, “What is this all about?” Before the officer-in-charge would even acknowledge my question, he joined the other officers. They gathered together like patriarchy in the townsquare congregating for the making of an important decision. The officer-in-charge eventually returned to my side. He inquired of my pedigree. I told him and also alerted him to the fact that my identifying cards were in my overcoat pocket. He opened my overcoat, reached across my chest and removed my property from my inner pocket. He gave my Illinois state driver’s license to one of his comrades. He then began to tell me why I was so accosted by an interdepartmental regiment of police cruisers.

“We got a call that a man, dressed in all black, was in the area armed. A motorist, who passed the suspect while he sat in a white Chevy El Camino on highway 270 westbound, saw the man with a gun as he exited the vehicle and began to walk off of the highway.”

“Are you serious,” I inquired.

“Very. We responded. We saw the car and began to search for you. By the time we encountered you, here, multiple jurisdictions had joined the search. So, where’s the gun?”

“I don’t have a gun!”

I went on to tell him my story. How I taught English composition at SIUE. How my vehicle was giving me trouble. How my car began to overheat on the highway. How I walked from my vehicle to the present location and asked the paver to borrow tools. After about twenty minutes, the officer-in-charge finally took the cuffs off. They – all of the police officers - apologized profusely and made it a point to let me know that they were just doing their job. They even offered to give me a ride to my car, which, considering how far a trek it was back to my car, I gladly accepted. After all of that, I still needed another tool, for the paver only had two of the three tools that I needed. I could only think of *F_ My Life*, a book of anecdotes about trivialities in people’s lives. Just at that point, an Illinois state maintenance crew parked on the highway, across lanes of traffic on the island in the middle of the highway. They looked as though they were about to work on something. I managed the highway traffic and went over to the crew’s

truck. I asked the first crewmember who I encountered if I could please borrow a 9/16th inch wrench. The worker obliged. I finally got the vehicle operable again and returned the tool to the worker. The paving guy would have to wait. Once I got my car running properly again, there was no way in hell I was going to drive to the paver, give him his tools and then risk the problem happening all over again. I didn't believe that the 9/16th inch bolt would need to be tightened anymore for me to make it home, but the others would. I jumped in the Elco, put on Jay-Z's "Hard Knock Life" and sped towards home.