

“U R What U Drive”

by Stephen A. Schrum

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I'm back in what I sometimes grudgingly admit is my hometown, visiting my mother who had recently broken a hip. After a quick trip into surgery, she is now resting uncomfortably in the Rehabilitation hospital, waiting to go home. Taking a break from my hospital visitation (an occupation much more beneficial to the patient than the visitor) I decide to visit a nearby chain bookstore. My plan is to browse some new releases, then have a cappuccino, sit down and relax.

For a moment, I have a mental slip, and I make a wrong turn for this particular time on a Friday night. It's 9:00pm. Suddenly, the cacophonous roar of engines and the temblor-inducing bass thumping of car stereos remind me where I am. I am driving on The Circuit, a.k.a. The Loop.

Here, as in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as if time has not passed, cars nightly circle around again and again, as if caught in a slow motion auto race. The ritual, and even the attitudes, have not changed. Young men drive around to be seen in their hot street rods. Young women drive around to meet guys with hot cars. They ogle each other, and they yell to each other from car to car. Sometimes they park and chat and watch other cars (and perhaps, life) go by. And, occasionally, they make drive-by fun of a grandpa in a slow-moving Cadillac—although these days, God forbid, senior citizens, striving for their own personal safety, have begun encasing themselves in SUVs and Hummers.

As for me, I am now committed to this route, and have to stick it out a few more city blocks before *they* all reach the turnaround spot and double back, to again circumnavigate the downtown area. Unfortunately, the light up ahead changes to red, and the car ahead of me roars through, leaving a cloud of oily smoke in its wake. I stop at the intersection and wait, marinating in a blue fog.

A car pulls up next to me, and—even with my windows closed and the A/C on full for this hot and humid August evening—I can feel my car vibrating with the power output of its onboard stereo system. I've always wondered why you don't need an FCC license to broadcast your music that loud. I decide to glance over, casually, and see what kind of car is there. It is, of course, of the TransAm/Firebird/Camaro variety. I turn my head a bit more to see the driver and

passenger, two frighteningly skinny and scarily pale boys, each with an attempted mustache barely darkening their upper lips. These kids are a collective retro fashion faux pas. One's got *Star Trek* (The Original Series) sideburns and both are wearing ball caps that hide what little hair they have with their easy-to-maintain skinhead buzzcuts. They are also both sporting heavy metal t-shirts that honor 80's hair bands who were declining in popularity before these two were born.

The passenger, with his cap on backward, slowly turns to look at me, contemptuously. Yes, it's me. An old (or let's say, middle aged) bald guy with a ponytail and greying beard. Then he looks at my car, and frowns. Short front end. Kind of sleek and aerodynamic-looking. A dark conservative, trust-worthy blue, that looks black in the dimly lit streets of the town. The shape isn't at all familiar; like air raid wardens, they have studied the silhouettes, but only know the friendlies from DEetroit. The passenger turns and says something to the driver, who now leans forward and turns with *his* scornful expression to look at my car. Clearly, they have no clue what it is I am driving. They look at my vehicle from back to front and back again, then look again at me, now with a hint of puzzlement altering their disdainful expressions.

To squelch any rising feelings of self-doubt, the driver decides to taunt me by revving his engine, and to show me the power under his hood. They both turn again to me, with superior grins, knowing they command the power to launch themselves into orbit, and daring the old guy to drag race them when the light changes.

I return their looks with a mild Cheshire grin of my own, and a gentle shake of my head. The brief phrase "As if," comes to mind. Just then, as if on cue, my engine gives a slight rattle, and shuts off. They, of course, in their muscle car, are devoting full power to the stereo and the period glasspack mufflers (to echo the heavy metal thunder of their lifestyle) that makes the car sound like a Soyuz spacecraft reaching escape velocity. As a result, they have no air conditioning, except for their wide-open windows (which, incidentally, lets them flex their barely discernible biceps and triceps by pressing their arms against the window frame). However, just then, equally synchronistic with my head shake and my car's shut-off, the driver pauses his revving between tracks on his Anthrax CD and they hear what appears to be my car stalling.

"Dude! You stalled out!" the passenger says loudly, hiccuping an odd laugh. He hiccups at the driver who joins in.

Just then, as they continue to gasp-laugh in mocking hilarity, gloating over the power of their eight powerful cylinders, the light turns green. They don't notice it, and with a delayed realization a second later, like a cartoon character going over a cliff, they see me driving off in my "stalled" car.

They rabbit-start off, roaring after me, and pull alongside. If the passenger let his tongue hang out, he would even more closely resemble a dog, intently watching my car. I am not exceeding the in-town speed limit, and so am still moving in silent stealth mode. He cocks his head, canine-like, confused.

The light ahead is turning yellow, and following the old adage, "Red means stop, amber means hurry up," I accelerate to get through. Suddenly, my gas engine kicks in to life and I pull a bit ahead. My onlookers follow, catching up. They are now totally baffled.

I push the button, and my window glides smoothly down. Keeping an eye ahead of me, I yell over, "It's a hybrid. Gas *and* electric engines. The gas engine turns off when I don't need it, like at red lights."

One of the reasons I bought the hybrid is to save on gas, but another strong reason is that it is a "green" car: a "super-ultra-low emission vehicle." I thought I should do my part in lowering auto emissions, and *do* something about the environment instead of just talking about it. Plus, I get a kick out of driving the car—I feel as if I am driving in the 21st Century. Now that's *true* driving excitement.

It's also part of the irony of this scene. Here I am, running on electric, and emitting few greenhouse gases from my car, in the midst of many not-quite-antique eight cylinder automobiles, driven for the plain goals of driving and wasting gas, since the occupants of these cars are not really going anywhere.

The passenger relays what I said to his friend. Then they both turn and look at me as if I have just driven off the assembly line at Area 51, having reverse-engineered alien technology from the Roswell crash. I jerk a thumb to my rear end, and then pull a little ahead to confirm their suspicions, so they can read the metal "Hybrid" designation attached to the trunk lid. They match course and speed again, still staring dumbfounded. In fact, I am now such a figure of amazement and curiosity, that they miss the turn-off and, almost driving the wrong way down a one-way street, pull in behind and follow me to the bookstore. I crank up the CD player—Kansas, "Carry On My Wayward Son"—to act as a Pied Piper lure.

As I continue to drive, I reflect on the car's technology. I never have to plug the battery in to recharge it, since the gas engine and the car's regenerative braking system does that for me. At low enough speeds, I run on the electric engine alone. I begin to consider developing an Einstein-like theory of relativity, that suggests someone driving a hybrid can cruise indefinitely, while those in the eight-cylinder cars must constantly stop for gas. It is likely that, if those kids tried to challenge me, they would run out of gas and be left sitting somewhere, while I continue to drive on.

I pull into a space at the parking lot, after noticing a number of young intellectual, artistic types, dressed in the requisite black (as I am), hanging around outside, some smoking, before going back in and checking out cool books or cups of hot coffee. I am gratified to see that members of another generation may be following in my footsteps, leaving their home town, going on to college and real jobs and real lives elsewhere, far from the stifling, anti-creative and non-artistic environs that drove me away even before their parents met.

Now if we can just get them to quit smoking.

My muscle car acquaintances pull up behind me. They are *still* staring at my car, witnesses to unfamiliar technology. They can not comprehend what they see.

I get out and close my door. A push of the external lock button, and my taillights blink once, on and off. The two boys blink once, together, in response, but are still not seeing.

In a way, they have a good life. They live in the moment, and they are completely happy and carefree. Nothing bothers them, and nothing can shake them from their complacency, not even an alien invasion. Each has a girlfriend who pretends that she enjoys sex with him. And they ride around in a car with a sound system that others of their social class envy.

I glance from them to the black-clad chatters on the sidewalk, who have extinguished their cigarettes and who are now going back into the bookstore. The same way The Circuit has not changed in decades, since before I was old enough to drive, the attitudes of the youth in this town have also remained unchanged.

The intellectuals and artists, seeking a better life, will likely leave these two cruisers behind. These, and the others like them who nightly drive The Loop, may never change. They will soon graduate from high school, after being told at commencement that they have lives full of promise. But they may not go to college, or even leave the family home. As so many have before them, they'll settle for some menial job. This will be good enough until they hit the age of 40,

and get laid off, and find themselves in middle-age, with a mid-life crisis they never saw coming. With no other prospects, they will have spent their entire lives going in circles, not believing they weren't going anywhere, and not even caring that they weren't.

I enter the bookstore, and walk to the café area where an enthusiastic young woman, with a tattooed thumb ring and hair a red not found in nature, makes me a cappuccino. Receiving it in the paper cup wrapped with the recycled paper heat sleeve, I sprinkle cinnamon on top of the foam, and find a seat at the window. It appears the muscle car has driven off, to return to its own homeworld. I sip my coffee, and hear snippets of discussions of books and cultural events around me.

There may be hope for the world yet.