

THE GOLD CHEV

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Excerpted from a longer story also titled The Gold Chev.

James Boone came by to look at my gold '55 Chev. I'd bought the car just before Shelagh and I got married, with the government savings bonds my grandmother had left me for college. Gold wasn't the original colour. This was a custom job, and if I'd known anything about cars I would've spotted the cheap work instantly. But I'd owned only one car, the old clunky dishwasher grey Buick I'd inherited when my father died. Shelagh wouldn't be caught dead in that tub, and it didn't help my self-image either, so I parted with my legacy and invested the two hundred and fifty in top-of-the-line paintbrushes and a thirty-foot ladder.

Shelagh wanted a sports car, an MG or Triumph, red with wire hubs. But the savings bonds were enough for tuition at the local university, not Stanford, so we set our sights lower. I'm still not sure why the sight of the solid gold Chev, as we walked from the bus stop the half-block to Sam's house, made me feel so special. Sure I like colour. Shelagh worked at the phone company near J.C. Penny's, and she'd come home every payday with a new shirt for me, burgundy, turquoise, emerald green. Classy colours. But nothing flashy, no glitz.

It was the same with houses. White was so boring and so were all those grays and bland pastels people in the better neighborhoods insisted on. That's where I started, with an outfit that painted only middle-class houses, wealthy people's houses, the suburbs. White with pale yellow trim, swimming pool blue, or Pepto-bismal pink. And they weren't paying me enough to put up with the tedium. I connected with a couple guys working the Central Area, where Shelagh and I lived, where the folks wanted rich and bright exteriors. "Nigger colours" was what the boss of my first outfit called them.

Relaxed, casual, and chummy, Sam greeted us like old friends. He lamented that the gold Chev had to go because his wife wanted something more respectable. This car was his best and true buddy, and now they had to go separate ways. The ticket booth at the ballpark, he said, didn't pay him enough to keep two cars. I liked Sam, I felt sorry for him. He flirted with Shelagh, and said the gold Chev was like an old

girlfriend he has to stop seeing. Usually Shelagh liked when men flirted with her, but not Sam. He gave her the creeps. But she fell in love with the solid gold Chev.

My father didn't teach me much, besides how to paint houses. He was ignorant about cars. And he thought he knew everything about salesmen and their techniques. Which meant he knew sweet fuckall. And when he bothered to share his near-sighted wisdom with me, I trusted his advice. One piece was never to buy a used car off a lot, from a dealer. Only buy a used car in a private deal. And listen for a believable story, such as a wife wanting the husband to get rid of car she doesn't like. So I studied Sam's body language and face and listened carefully. Since my father was a write-off in the pass-it-along department, I'd had to build my own bullshit detector from scratch, and I'd gotten pretty good at tuning it to the right frequencies. Sam seemed for real.

I even saw his wife in the window, there to remind him that he'd better do his level best to unload that car.

Just when we were telling Sam we needed to think about it overnight, this older kid came out of the house next door, walked by, and stopped to talk with Sam.

"Larry here's thinking about buying the car," Sam said.

"I can have most of the money together tomorrow after school," Larry said.

"Sure thing. But if these folks make an offer now, I'll have to take it."

Larry looked at us resentfully, nodded his head and moved on.

A week later, after I'd poured the fifth quart of oil in the engine, I took our gold Chev to my mechanic, who said the engine block was cracked.

"You bought a lemon, buddy."

A gold lemon. Sam was a used car salesman, I found out, who often worked out of his home. The neighbour kid probably got a cut, and Sam's wife posed in the window.

The new engine took half our savings, and the rest went for our wedding. It was a small affair, a few friends, immediate family, a church to satisfy her parents and my mother, and then we drove to Portland. That's not everyone's