

Classic Car

By Jacob Duarte Spiel

Hmmm... your battery seems fine. I'll have to take a closer look.

You're lucky I was driving by. Don't want to be stranded on a night like this without a working heater.

<sound of a wrench tapping on iron>

Ah, there it is. The fuel injector is a mess in these newer cars. All this digital stuff, it just gums up the works. Give me something I can see, something I can get my fingers into, and I can fix it no problem. None of this circuit board crap.

Hah, I can tell what you're thinking. All these missing fingers might make me seem a bit clumsy, a bit amateurish. Go ahead, you can laugh, it's been years and the pain is long gone. Besides, these chrome ones are better than the old flesh and blood model.

So what's your story? You're from out of town, right? Either you're visiting or just passing through. Ah, yup, just passing through. I coulda guessed.

Like I said, you're lucky I was driving by. Not many people out this way. I'm sure you noticed most of the houses on this street are dark on the inside. Abandoned. City council offers benefits and subsidies and what have you to entice young folks into moving here. No dice. Only thing these old homes are still good for is scrap aluminum and copper.

Why do I stay? Let's just say every man has his loyalties and my loyalties are to the good old days.

Used to be this was a real happening part of the province. Dozens of folks moving in by the day. Everytime you turned your head there was a new movie theatre, malt shop, even one of them hair salons with the new machines from Italy. And everyone - everyone - was driving a Blaylock.

Haven't heard of Blaylock, have ya? Well you just rode in one. A 1956 Blaylock Chimera, best car they ever made, in this man's opinion. Course, I admit I'm a little biased.

Blaylock had the run of this town for decades. Remember that abandoned factory we passed? The one with the windows all shattered to hell? You wouldn't know it, but for years that factory was the throbbing heart of Ontario's auto industry. Assembly lines winding through it like veins, pumping out the steel and iron machines that powered the whole Christian world.

As a boy I sat outside and watched the factory exhale thousands of men every night, exhausted from the 12 hour day. But I could tell they were grateful to be making such beautiful automobiles. And why wouldn't they be? It was their contribution to the greatest era in human history.

And right in the middle of it was my father, working the line. I only saw the inside of the factory a few times but there's an image of him burned into my mind. He stands over a nearly-complete Blaylock like a surgeon, pulling on a wrench as long as my arm. A thick line of sweat is imprinted on the back of his shirt. All at once he releases the wrench and rubs his aching hands together. He turns to retrieve a rag but when he sees me watching him he stops. His mustache sags into a half-frown. He's annoyed, almost like I've interrupted him in a moment of prayer.

But that was my pops! Took his job seriously, as every man should. He was the biggest guy I ever knew, could heft the axle of a goddamn semi-truck without breaking a sweat. Smart too, if it ran on gasoline he could fix it. He woulda had you back on the road in five minutes instead of needing to tow you back to a garage, like I did. A great man. Blaylock loved him almost as much as I did. For 20 years he tightened lug nuts on the pride and joy of the factory. Same car you rode here in: The Blaylock Chimera.

You see why I'm biased now?

He would do it bare-handed, refusing to use the electric fastener. It was slower going, but my old man took pride in his work and he had more torque in one arm than three of those pneumatic contraptions. The way the line was set up, my pops always worked the left wheels. Sometimes we'd spend a Saturday tooling around at the town's autoshops, checking on the Blaylock Chimeras that had come in for maintenance. My dad would grin and ask the mechanic to tighten the lug nuts right in front of us. The right ones would be loose by a rotation or so, but the left ones were as firm as the day my old man tightened them. He'd leave the autoshop walking so tall he could step over the moon.

Hey, you know what? Lemme check your oil while I'm at it. You go grab a drink from the fridge. Get me one too.

It wasn't just the lugnuts, by the way. He made it his business to know that car inside and out. He took pride in knowing that whenever the managers or engineers needed to know a detail, no matter how minor, they'd come right to him and he'd tell em lickety-split. He even had a measurement shorthand. He'd matched every part of the Chimera with a part of his body. The headlight radius was exactly the length of his hand. The main bolts for the crankshaft were exactly as long as his fingers. It went on like that, from the bumper to the sparkplugs. "The Human Ruler" they called him. It was no wonder he bought himself a Chimera just as soon as he could.

And he passed that love down to me, sitting me down on the oil-stained floor of this very garage so I could watch while he worked all evening on his car. Mom never liked it but soon as I could walk I was bringing him the tools and soon as I could bring him tools I was getting cuffed for bringing him the wrong one. It sounds harsh but you gotta understand that he had high expectations for me. Wanted me to take his place on the Blaylock assembly line once he'd outlived his usefulness. If you wanna learn fast, there's no better teacher than an open hand.

<sound of a beer opening>

Ahhhh...

Of course those plans changed when Blaylock got swallowed up by GM. Then the factory shut down and GM went after those cheaper workers down south and overseas. That would have been sometime before you were born. That's what unions get you.

My dad, he'd fought against those pinkos for years. Even helped management sneak temporary workers into the factory when the union tried to strike. Lost him a lot of friends. And then when the factory left it was like he'd lost a part of himself as well.

Could you hand me that flathead over there? The missing leg makes walking to the tool bench a real pain.

I had just turned 18 by then and I'd gotten some bad ideas from school and TV so I told him how mad I was at Blaylock for abandoning him and all the other line workers and how they should have been loyal after he gave them 20 years.

He didn't say a word, but I can still hear the snap of his belt being pulled off.

Worst beating of my life.

Afterward he extended one massive finger and pointed in turn to the refrigerator, the couch and every other appliance and piece of furniture in the house. "Blaylock gave us all of this," he was saying. "Everything you have. You want to talk about loyalty? It's time you showed some."

And he grabbed me by the collar and took me to the garage, where he kept the 1956 Chimera. This very car. Made me work on it all night, oil change, sparkplugs, waxing, standing over me watching my fingers bleed as I tried and failed to tighten the lugnuts. All night long I serviced that car til I passed out in the backseat.

It was my mom that woke me up. I couldn't see the sky through the garage roof, but I could feel the crisp darkness in the air. She was stroking my face lightly. I tried to sit up, but my entire body was on fire. She helped me up gently and put a finger to her mouth. "Let's go," she whispered.

“He won’t be up for hours.” And she gestured to two pieces of luggage, one filled with her stuff and the other filled with mine.

She’d waited until I was 18 to leave, she said, so that I could come with her and my dad wouldn’t be able to use the courts to force us to come back. If we left now, together, it would be a clean break.

And I remember when she was done I stared at her for the longest time, not believing what I was hearing. There was so much I wanted to say. But only one word passed my parched lips: “Loyalty”.

She looked at me, tears in her eyes. Her plan had one hitch, one thing she’d forgotten: I was 18 now, and I could do whatever I wanted. I rolled over in the backseat of the Chimera and fell dead asleep. When I woke up again, she was gone. She’d left behind my luggage, still sitting on the garage floor. I hurried upstairs to unpack my clothes before my pops woke up and realized what had happened.

I’m sorry, I’m rambling a bit. Let me take a closer look at that fuel injector.

Yeah, I don’t think there’s anything for it right now. There’s an auto part surplus store that opens early tomorrow. You’ll just have to stay the night.

See, what you oughta do is get yourself an older vehicle. Take the Chimera for example. It’s not just a pretty face. That engine has been running smooth and clean for over 60 years, with a few replacement parts of course. They just don’t make cars like this anymore.

Once mom was gone, pops and I were able to really focus on taking care of our Chimera. And the beautiful thing about taking care of a machine like this is that it also takes care of you. My dad was never happier than when he was tinkering with the Chimera and for me, well, it was my education. I learned her ins and outs and, as I did, I learned about the kind of world that could produce something so beautiful and perfect.

Yup. Car like this, you get in it and you almost feel like you’re back in the good old days. Cruising down mainstreet. After mom left, pops and I spent a lot of nights doing just that. Back then mainstreet was a place you wanted to be, it wasn’t filled with bums and drug addicts yet. There were movies and dancehalls and ice cream shops. You’d be stopped at a stoplight and see a cute little bird out with her friends. Good evening ma’am, you’d say and tip your hat, and she’d say “Good evening” right back. Not scared or angry like the women today.

Sometimes we’d drive to one of the big cities and I’d always thank God pops and I stayed in our hometown. The cities were always a mess. Filthy and crime-ridden. I could feel the rage radiating off my pops as saw single women out working instead of raising kids or when he had to look at those weirdos crowding up the sidewalks, the apartment buildings. You understand

what I mean, right? Folks *not from around here*. People who didn't know the first thing about this nation, with names you could break your jaw trying to say. Dressing the wrong way. Speaking wrong too. We'd lock the doors and roll up the windows the whole time we were there, safe in the Chimera.

And then we'd drive home, way faster than was allowed, because we knew only there we'd be safe.

Ha.

The years passed and our nightly drives to main street became more like a quiet visit to a graveyard. One by one our usual haunts had packed up and disappeared, to be replaced by block after block of decaying buildings filled with unsavoury businesses and loan sharks.

Now when we drove through it was just like when we used to drive through the cities, with the Chimera's doors locked and windows rolled up. My dad would point at the boarded up storefronts. "Loyalty," he'd growl. "Faith".

But everything was okay as long as me and dad had paradise in the garage.

As our town and way of life died out, we kept working the Chimera. My dad and I took repair jobs wherever we could get em, fixing other people's cars so we could afford to keep on going. Months turned to years, years turned to decades though you'd never know it looking at the car.

Pops on the other hand... his temper used to be big and explosive like fireworks, I should know, I got the worst of it, but as the years passed it withered into these... croaks of frustration. You know, I'd hand him the wrong tool and he'd stare at me, angry as all hell, but only a few vulgarities would force their way out.

And then one day he couldn't speak at all.

My dad bloodied the doctor's nose when he told him the throat cancer was likely caused by two decades working in an auto factory. He would have done worse if I hadn't grabbed and lifted him against my chest, for the first time feeling how light he'd become.

We drove home in silence. On our way back I stopped in at an auto part shop and splurged on a new carburetor. My dad was staring at it, sticking his fingers through the choke point and then absent-mindedly running his fingers down his face. I could have sworn I saw him smile.

The next month was a flurry of work. My dad barely left the garage. With his death sentence hanging over his head he wanted to focus on what was important. The Chimera never looked better than the day we parked it out front of the hospice.

He spent the last weeks of his life drawing plans. Spent all his time on it. Hardly talked to me at all, except to send me out for more paper, pens, and a few times for anatomy textbooks. After he finished he gave me a sealed envelope. By the time I came back from the mailbox, he was gone.

The car was so important to him, to us, that I couldn't be surprised by what was in his will.

The executor said there was no way I could be expected to carry it out. Last wishes or not. Sick, he called it, immoral and unchristian. But he didn't understand loyalty or what the Chimera, what Blaylock, meant to my dad.

All his money had gone to political causes, organizations that promised to bring back auto manufacturing by fighting organized labour, charities promoting abstinence and Godliness.

Me? My inheritance was a single bankers box. A heavy one. Lifting it woulda given you a hernia. Inside it was filled with hundreds of blueprints. When I got home I knocked everything off the kitchen table and spread the sheets out. Only then did I understand what I was looking at.

His designs were brilliant. Couldn't even tell he was on his deathbed when he drew them, that's how straight and perfect his lines were. There was no question that a skilled mechanic could carry it out. I was that mechanic, he'd trained me to be that mechanic.

See, Dad didn't want to go into the ground where he'd waste away and be no good to anybody.

So, the next night I drove to the graveyard and started digging.

Come here, lemme show you.

<pause>

C'mere.

<pause>

I SAID COME HERE

Look at the gearstick. See how white it is? How perfectly it fits the car? That's my pops. Part of him anyway.

My dad, "The Human Ruler". He'd paired each part of the car to a part of his body, I only needed to follow the instructions. I hung his body on a steel hook and hoisted him into the middle of the garage, like he was just another engine block. It took days to strip all the old man's parts, but I did it, scooping him out from top to bottom. Once he was empty, I began the process of

modification: filing down the bones, treating his guts with potassium hydroxide, mixing resin and water into buckets filled with his thick, red blood.

That gearstick? That was the first part I replaced, 15 years ago. It's his tibia, the shinbone. Put your hand on it. See how it fits? As if it was always meant to be there. Lasted longer than any of the aluminum gearsticks, lemme tell ya.

Come, look, this fan belt: human intestine, processed into thin strands like catgut and woven together. Strong and elastic. Feel it.

This paint is enriched with his blood, the blood that pumped through his veins on the Blaylock assembly line. See how it shines under the wax?

And here, the carburetor, where the car inhales oxygen to mix with the fuel. My dad's skull. Reinforced slightly and with a few extra holes added. Look at it. Perfect.

With each part of him I stitched, soldered, and screwed into the Chimera I could feel his legacy being cemented. I was building a - whaddya call it - a monument. A monument to the beautiful era that produced a car like that and a man like him. Something to stand against the degradation of society.

But then... Look I'm not proud of this. A few years back I was waiting at a green light and this lady in front of me, she just wouldn't move. Her hair was cut short and dyed an unnatural pink and she was talking on one of those hands free smartphones. I could see her big white teeth in her rearview mirror. She was laughing about something, carelessly, and smoking a cigarette. It was disgusting.

I didn't mean to give it so much gas. Just a little love tap is all. To remind her to get moving.

After the collision I peeled out and I guess the damage to the her car wasn't so bad because the cops never showed up here. But the Chimera... The headlights had been pushed back and shattered. The lens and projector would be easy enough to fix but the damage extended to the casing, where I'd placed my pop's knee joints. Both were cracked right in two.

Fixing one would be easy. That's why I've got this here chrome leg.

<taps his leg with a screwdriver making a dinging noise>

But I couldn't give up both if I was going to keep this car running. If I'd had a child of my own I would have had another two knees to work with, but no.

It hit me then, as I thought of the woman with the obscene haircut. My dad didn't want me to maintain the Chimera for him. He wanted me to maintain it for *you*. For young people

everywhere, people who grew up aimless and immoral because no one ever taught them about tradition.

And if the Chimera is meant to be a part of you, you should be a part of it. That's loyalty. That's respect.

And so I began... incorporating parts. Younger men and women. The ungrateful grandchildren of my fathers friends, people who had long ago abandoned this town to the dust but who returned to visit their relatives, sneering the whole time. They were traitors, but their bones and sinew were strong and they made the Chimera strong. All thanks to my father's detailed designs.

So you understand why I had to pick you up. Do you see it now? There's no sense in struggling, the garage is locked. With these missing fingers of mine some repairs are, heh, more art than science. I'm sure you saw the mess all over the backseat. Motor oil. I was nearly in tears, never thought I'd be able to get a suitable replacement.

But you, your skin, even when you were standing by the side of the road I could see it was the exact same shade as the Chimera's leather interior. I mean, what are the odds? You were made for it.

Now stop that. Try to be reasonable. This is more important than you being comfortable, it's about ideas, principles. You're going to be a part of something much bigger than yourself, just like all the others, just like pops.

Don't fight. You'll see: it's a privilege. After all, they don't make cars like this anymore.