

Mechanics

The first car I owned was a yellow Camaro that I bought from a St. Louis dealership during my college years. I was about twenty years old and heading out to the Bay Area to continue my undergraduate studies at Berkeley. In a less hazardous time, I posted a notice on a bulletin board outside the Washington University library near my home in Clayton, advertising for a ride to share my expenses and time at the wheel. It was safe to post a home telephone number back then, the mid-1970s, and a man slightly older than I promptly responded. My father and I visited a AAA office in Clayton, where we pretended to be planning a drive through the Southwest to California; we were given paper maps with the most direct route marked out with a blue Magic Marker. A few days later, my car mate and I left St. Louis, drove south through Missouri and Arkansas, over to Texas, on through the Sun Belt, and then to Southern California. We parted at Bakersfield. He took a bus to L.A. and we never saw one another again.

I share the story because I kept that canary-yellow Camaro for about fifteen years. Absurdly, in late 1990, I took the car to a body shop in Chicago, where I still live, and had the entire engine replaced. The project cost about \$1,000, and marked the preposterous length I would go to to hang on to a product that should have been sold for scrap. I picked up the car on a Thursday afternoon, edged it out onto a main boulevard on the North Side in rush-hour traffic, and returned home. On Friday evening I drove down south to pick up a woman I was then taking out, a nursing student who lived in the West Side Medical District. But I noticed while driving down that the car failed to accelerate promptly. (I had actually noticed this the day before but had

hoped the problem would go away.) There seemed to be a gap of a moment or two between pressing the accelerator and forward motion of the car. I was even stopped by the police when the Camaro lurched through an intersection after the light had turned red.

On Saturday morning, I took the car to a Sears body shop that used to be on Lawrence Avenue, not far from where I then lived, to have it checked. But it was minutes before noon, and the place was closing for the weekend. I asked an employee if he could recommend a shop that might be open; I really wanted the problem fixed. After thinking it over for a moment, he vaguely gestured to the south and gave me directions to a body shop. Off I went to Pressman Avenue, a few blocks to the north, and happened upon General Automotive, a body shop in a corner of an attractive neighborhood on the North Side of the city. And that's where I met Paul Wenners.

Paul was the owner. He was slight, almost forty, with light brown eyes and dull blond hair combed to the side. It was his eyes that attracted my attention first. They had that hint of vulnerability or uncertainty that reminded me of Elaine, a woman I had courted a few years before. It was not a look I expected from a mechanic. By now it was about 12:30 p.m., and Paul, the only person left in the shop, was closing for the weekend. But he agreed to check the car, and after lifting the hood and doing the mysterious things mechanics do, decided the problem was insufficient transmission fluid. The folks who installed the new engine failed to put enough in. So Paul brought the fluid to the proper level and charged me about \$6.00 for parts and labor. And the car drove fine.

That was the beginning of a twenty-seven-year friendship that is now ending. Paul is apparently entering retirement. And I'm fairly distressed about the matter. It took about five years for me to fully trust the man. It should not have, because he is as responsible and honest as anyone in business can be, but I am mistrustful by nature. It took a lot of competent work at reasonable prices to assure me that I need not enter his shop with that familiar mixture of suspicion and anxiety that normally attended my visits to mechanics. Did they know what they were doing? Was their work reliable? Was I going to be charged a reasonable fee, or an inflated one? What did I know about cars, and how would I know the difference? Years passed, and my anxieties abated. I not only began to trust the man, but liked him. I learned about his own past, his beginnings at a manufacturer of electronics parts on the Far North Side of the city, his wife, his children. Every time I entered his office I would see testimonials from politicians he knew and certifications that established his training was current. For many years, he employed a staff of about four or five mechanics, and I got to know those people as well—Joe, the Viet Nam vet; Harry, a friendly working class guy who later moved to the South; Glen, an older man; and an immense black man inevitably nicknamed Tiny. I can still picture them all.

But the owner of the shop was Paul. I would call him at home if the place was closed and I was having unexpected car trouble; I once called him from the Interstate connecting St. Louis to Chicago because I heard some unexpected knocking that disturbed me; Paul tried to identify the matter and told me not to worry; I got home without trouble. He once told me that he had dinner with his wife early in the evening and then went to bed. He slept for about five or six hours and dreamed of repair problems he was having at the shop with cars that people brought in.

And in his dreams he determined how to solve them. From anyone else, this would be affectation, but Paul is so plainspoken that I didn't doubt the story.

He moved his shop from that area near Lawrence Avenue to a location further north, near Howard Avenue, the border of Chicago and Evanston. And after a few years he fell on hard times. It was, and is, the dangerous edge of Rogers Park, which in the building boom of the 2000s seemed to be recovering. That was one of the reasons Paul moved his shop there. But instead of a recovery in property values the neighborhood became the site of a malignant drug war, and what had been a dull, Jewish, working-class neighborhood became. . .something else. Paul lives in the vicinity, and he once told me that a man had stumbled on to his property, bleeding heavily, probably a victim/participant in regional turf wars. Students from Loyola and Northwestern were said to keep the dealers in business. Gang members would drive their cars off the street and on to the pavement if they spotted an outsider intruding on their turf. That, according to Paul, was why street signs were bent nearly to the ground. There was a drug den directly across the street from his shop, and it was wise not to linger after bringing in your car or to engage the attention of the people living there. A helicopter roaring overhead announced one afternoon a spectacular federal drug bust. Paul once told me of a murder near the shop, and, an outdoorsman who spends his vacations hunting in Montana, I assume that he carried a gun.

But there was no defense against the decline of the neighborhood. It never enjoyed the rebound that encouraged him to relocate his shop there, and at times it may have affected Paul's work. He did a routine tune-up for me, but when I left the shop on a Friday afternoon, I noticed a loud knocking sound from under the hood. Paul assured me that it was minor and that I should

return the car on Monday to finish the job. The problem turned out to be a defective piston that by Sunday afternoon knocked through the crankcase and left the car minimally drivable. I nursed it back to my apartment lot and had it towed to Paul's shop that night. Another time, he lost my ignition key and the electronic piece to which it was attached. He lent me his Jeep for a day until a replacement key could be made. He looked for it everywhere in his office and even went into a dumpster, without results.

I think some of his customers were driven off by the violence. He replaced the staff he let go with a different set of mechanics. They rented the bays that his employees used to occupy. Sometimes they paid the rent and other times they didn't. Paul wanted the place to appear busy and profitable to potential buyers, so he let them all stay. But he was still losing money and wanted out, and now he's about to go. He expects to be gone by mid-April. He's leaving me in the hands of Andres, one of the mechanics who has been there for years, and has already done work on my car that Paul has farmed out to him. Andres seems friendly and competent, and I'll see him in a few days for a tune-up. I'll probably keep taking my car to that dangerous neighborhood, because I am extremely habitual, and unless Paul's replacement blows a routine job, I'll give him my business. But an important piece of my life is dropping out of it. I'll call Paul at his home to maintain contact, but I may never see him again, and that will certainly be true if he moves with his wife to Montana.

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