

Bodyshop Blues

By Stephen D. Rogers

Every time I shut my car door, a small pile of debris was deposited on the ground.

“Rust.” My brother shook his head. “What you have here is your basic rust. Seems to be a pretty advanced condition.”

“I know it’s rust. I came to you to ask what I could do about it.” My brother was second-shift supervisor at Looking Good Auto Detailing. I’d never come to him for advice before. About anything.

He tapped my door with his index finger, a loose semi-circle around the hole. Then he did it again. “Rust.”

I resisted the urge to hit him. “So, if you were in my shoes, what would you do?”

He stood, wiping his hand on a rag that hung from his belt. “I wouldn’t get rust in the first place. You have to take care of a vehicle, wash it and wax. Touch up the dings and the scratches before rust has a chance to take hold.”

“Okay, I’m lazy and I don’t deserve to have a car that looks like new. How do I keep this one from continuing to fall apart?”

“Mom said you called last week.”

Apparently he wasn’t interested in making a long story short. “I try to keep in touch.”

He sniffed. “I must talk to her every other day.”

“Where do you find time to buff your car?”

My brother pointed his rust-finding finger at me. “Attitude. You need to lose the attitude.”

I tried to appear contrite. “What about the rust?”

“Let me tell you something. Rust is like cancer. Once the rot gets into the metal, it just spreads like wildfire.”

“So...what? Is there some chemotherapy carwash I can drive through once a week until the rust goes into remission?”

He stepped past me and started walking towards his tool chest. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Nice and simple.”

“Actually I’d prefer something I could spray on just once. Then maybe duct-tape the hole. I need to get the car inspected next month.”

My brother slid open the top drawer to retrieve something that he hid from my view. He probably had some chemical he could paint on the exposed metal to stop the process but not until he collected his pound of flesh.

He turned to face me. “Mom was right about you.”

“No shit.”

“Watch your mouth in my shop.”

“Sorry.” I’d never met anyone who could out-swear a mechanic but I guess detailers were different.

“Mom said you couldn’t be trusted to take care of anything.”

I slumped. “Please. Don’t mention the bike.”

“It was my bike too. You were responsible for putting it away. Instead you left it lying in the driveway.”

People could close their mouths, close their eyes. Why couldn’t we close our ears? Imagine

how much tragedy could be averted if we could pinch off that passage.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I may have been only six — it was too long ago for me to be sure — but I accept all the blame for the destruction of that most perfect of bikes. I’m an a—. I’m incorrigible. Please accept my humble apologies and help me.”

My brother stepped forward and held out his hand.

He was holding a religious tract: “Jesus Saves.”

I rejected the first thing that came to my mind and said, “Thanks.” The tract went into my left rear pocket. “Now, about the rust.”

My brother shook his head. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“What?”

He shrugged. “Once the metal begins to decay, the process can’t be stopped. Sure you could take the car to a bodyshop but they would only mask the problem, pretty up the exterior without touching the rot within. It’s too late for your car. Save yourself.”

I reached for my keys, getting out while I could. “Well, thanks for your help. It was good to see you again.”

“Likewise.”

I opened the car door and slid inside, picturing the small pile of debris I’d leave behind. “Tell Mom I said hi.”

“Tell her yourself.”

Closing my door, I started the engine. “Thanks again.”

My brother must have hit some button because the garage door in front of me began to rise.

I waited as long as I could but I still think I ticked the bottom panel in my rush to escape.

In the rearview mirror, I watched the door descend.

I turned left and hit the gas.

Dad was a professional bowler when he met Mom. She married him on a Sunday and destroyed his career on a Monday. She sapped his strength with her nagging and she kept at him until his bones turned brittle and she ground him to dust.

They had just us two kids. By the third year of my parent’s marriage, my father couldn’t make toast, never mind a baby.

Dear old Dad must have decided that cancer would take too long. He bought a gun and blew out his brains.

Mom still talks about the wallpaper he ruined.

I pulled onto the ramp to the interstate and promised myself I wouldn’t stop until I reached oblivion.

Joining the flow of traffic, I imagined a sign. “Oblivion, Next Exit.” Smaller signs with international symbols for food and gas and bed. A greeting from the local chapter, one of those mysterious organizations.

The car in front of me suddenly braked and I swerved into the breakdown lane to avoid an accident.

The teenage girl in the back seat flipped me the bird before the car drove away.

I killed the engine and sighed a hearty sigh.

My car rocked, buffeted by the cars and trucks that flew past at high speed. I opened the glove compartment and fished around until I found a map.

There was, of course, no place called Oblivion. There was an Oliveton but Oliveton was A-3 and I was Z-22 and I didn’t really have much interest in losing my weekend to a pun.

This wasn’t the map with the hotels marked. I went through the glove compartment again,

discovered a french fry which had petrified but not the map I remembered.

So I'd just drive for a while, take the first exit after my stomach growled, and then turn around for home.

I started the car, slowly rolled forward, picking up speed until I could merge back into traffic.

I worked my way to the high speed lane and then gave the name its due.

Once the radio was loud enough, I did reach a state that could be called oblivion, the insistent drum beats leaving no room for personal thoughts or troubled feelings. Bliss could actually be achieved in this lifetime. All that was needed was volume and a station that played the right kind of music, my kind of music, music that not only closed the ears but the brain.

Some hours later, a warning light on the dashboard brought me back to reality. I was running low on gas.

I examined the blur that was the countryside, tried to determine where I was. Somewhere. Somewhere between home and oblivion.

Traffic had thinned at some point and I was sharing the road with less than a dozen cars.

Sighting a highway sign, I cut across the lanes in time to read: "Narrows Rd, Exit 1 Mile."

Narrows Rd did not sound like a booming commercial strip but all I really needed was a gas station. I could take my time hunting down food once the tank was filled.

I wondered whether I was getting better mileage now that my car weighed less, shedding pounds one rusted molecule at a time. Or perhaps the hole actually caused drag, sabotaging the planned aerodynamic design.

Here was the exit.

The ramp was short and ended at a divide. Right or left? No signs were hung to help in the decision-making process. I inched out into the road in order to peek down the road both ways.

Nothing.

From this day forward, whenever I was stuck with a similar predicament, I would chose left.

I turned left and set out for gas. I wasn't guessing. I was following a standard operating procedure.

Narrows Rd was narrow, the two lanes combined barely wider than the usual single lane. Heaven help me if a tractor trailer came barreling this way. A truck pulling a wide load would simply brush me aside as if I didn't exist.

The road twisted and turned, each curve a promise of civilization just around the corner, a promise never fulfilled.

So how much farther did I drive before I went back?

Could I even reach the highway, reach and then pass it to search for gas in the opposite direction?

I continued forward as the warning light glowed red.

Let's say the worst happened: I ran out of gas before finding a gas station. All I needed to do was call for a taxi or tow. I could get the numbers from information after determining my location with the map. How many highway exits could be labelled Narrows Rd?

Everything was under control.

The engine sputtered and died, the steering wheel barely responding as I tried to pull off the road.

The car came to a stop on the shoulder.

That was that then.

I pulled out my phone to see that I had no service. So I'd wait until someone drove by. Just because I hadn't seen a single vehicle since I'd been on the road didn't mean a traffic jam wasn't

forthcoming.

The highway department didn't build exits off the highway to roads that no one traveled.

I reclined the seat, shifted until I was comfortable.

Worst case scenario? I'd spend the night here.

I did.

I realized I had when the sun came through the windshield and woke me.

"Damn." I scratched my head with one hand while rubbing my eyes with the other. I only wished I had a third hand so I could use my keys to scrape the layer of filth off my teeth.

Climbing out of the car, I glanced at my phone. Still no service. For this I was paying a monthly fee.

I stretched, looked both ways down the empty road.

If no one came by soon, I'd walk back towards the highway. I knew for certain that people used that road.

I went to scratch my stubble but froze. My fingertips were black. Just on the left hand. They were actually black.

What the heck was that about?

Perhaps my hand had fallen down between the seat and the door while I slept, picked up a coating of oil or something.

I sniffed my fingers but didn't smell anything unusual.

Thinking back to yesterday, I tried to remember if I could have stained them somehow. But even if I had, I would have noticed the black while my hands were on the steering wheel.

They must have become discolored by something on the floor. I didn't exactly vacuum every other weekend. Try once a year if I was lucky. And then I didn't do much more than the mats.

I rubbed my fingers with a towel from the trunk.

Whatever it was, it wasn't coming off.

Oh well, least of my problems.

Maybe I should walk a little ways. Perhaps I'm only in a small dead spot and fifty feet away the phone will work fine.

Then I could kick myself for not trying last night. Cars were not designed for sleeping. My muscles felt bruised and my bones ached. Camping was comfortable in comparison.

I started back towards the highway, one eye on my phone's display so I could see the instant I had service.

My blackened fingertips started to tingle. Psychosomatic reaction? Overactive imagination? Hunger?

How could a road stay so empty for so long?

If there was construction, a detour, there would have been a sign on the highway. The exit would have been blocked.

Look at this road. It was in perfect shape. Maybe if the surface was cracked and the roadway cratered by potholes I could believe it unused. No highway department was going to spend the money to keep up a road that wasn't traveled by taxpayers.

"What the—"

The fingers on my left hand, they were now black to the second knuckle. The fingertips themselves were starting to burn.

I rubbed my hand against my pant leg, searched in vain for a stream or pond, any place I could wash.

A sharp pain made me cry out. As I watched, cracks began to develop along my first knuckles.

The cracks widened. Then my fingertips dropped to the ground.

My fingertips just fell off.

I screamed.

Falling to my knees, I grabbed at the small black sausages but they rolled away and crumbled at my touch.

I held my left hand in front of me, horrified to see that the black had reached my palm and that cracks were starting to form on my second knuckles.

I tried to stand but felt the world spin and then I was down and out.

Keeping my eyes closed when I came to, I wondered if I'd dreamt the whole thing, wondered until I recognized the tingle that burned. Then I wished it could only have been a dream.

Make it a nightmare. Just give me back my life.

I rolled over and sat up, saw that my left sleeve was empty past the elbow. Half of my freaking arm was gone.

There was black grit where I'd been lying and I remembered the piles deposited under my car door. I caught the damn rust from my car.

The unstoppable cancer that threatened my ride was consuming me alive.

Why wasn't I bleeding out? Was the rust cauterizing the wound, closing off the blood vessels? How long did I have?

I staggered to my feet and began jogging towards the highway. At least the pain wasn't crippling.

Maybe someone knew something that could stop this.

Maybe a truck wouldn't be able to avoid me.

Once my left arm was completely gone, would the decay spread up my neck, down my side, straight towards my heart?

I ran awkwardly. It was more than a night spent sleeping in a car. My body was no longer balanced, the sleeve empty past the elbow.

Closing my eyes I shouted, I screamed, I wailed.

Why was this happening to me?

My foot twisted as I left the roadway and my eyes snapped open. I couldn't afford to fall, couldn't afford to lose a single second in this mad dash towards civilization.

I had to reach the highway. I had to believe that someone there could help me.

I ran and I ran, pounding one foot in front of the other, glad at least that the rot hadn't started with my toes. I would have been a goner in that case, dragging myself forward with my fingertips, rolling perhaps towards this illusion of safety.

I was going to die here on Narrows Rd.

That was the reality.

I was going to die.

I slowed enough to reach for the tract my brother gave me but of course my left hand was gone.

I stopped. My lungs heaving, I snaked my right hand behind my back and slipped my fingertips into my rear pocket.

What would my brother say if he could see me now? Would he shake his head, wonder if it wasn't too late to save my soul? Would he offer to pray for me?

"Please. Pray for me."

I felt my left upper arm shift, and then I watched it drop down the sleeve until it would go no further, swinging there like a pendulum. Fine black sand floated to the ground in a steady

stream, my time running out.

I fell to my knees and vomited, the soupy acid tinged with black. What good would the tract do me now? It wasn't as if I could just wander over to the nearest church to confess my sins and ask to be received.

After emptying my stomach of yesterday's lunch I coughed up thin liquids and finally air.

Was this my punishment for not waxing my car?

It didn't make sense. It wasn't fair.

Why should I, one man among millions, be forced to endure this strangest of curses?

I unbuttoned my shirt single-handedly, pushed the fabric aside to see how far the rot had spread which was about an inch into my torso.

The heart was on the left side of the body but where exactly? Where were the lungs located? I was sure the heart was more important than one lung but it bothered me that I couldn't place my own organs.

I pulled the shirt closed again.

Why couldn't the pain be worse so that my body lost consciousness to escape it? Then I wouldn't have to watch and wonder.

My left upper arm dropped out of the sleeve in small pieces which broke into smaller ones until the sleeve hung limp. I pushed at the debris with my right hand, waited for my fingers to turn black but they didn't.

It came as no relief.

I looked away, stared down the road.

I didn't know how far I'd come — though not far enough — but I still couldn't hear the highway. At least I was spared being “this close” to salvation.

What would the authorities think when they finally found my car?

When they found my clothes lying here in a wrinkled mess, the black sand dispersed by wind or divided into pieces too small to see?

Would the media ask concerned citizens to report any naked men on foot?

Would my car, impounded, be examined? Would someone touch whatever the hell I touched? Would fingers turn black and the horror begin again?

Or perhaps the rot, like a virus, had run its course.

Perhaps the power of prayer could claim another victory.

I slumped to the ground, faint, dizzy.

My lips were very dry.