

Clean Shorts



A Collection of Short Stories by

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BOLTS OF THE SCREAMIN' GRAPE

Really... a 1965 Datsun, and me, a high school senior, and it's 1968. In 1968 the muscle cars... the GTOs, the Shelby Cobra 427 Super Snakes, Road Runners, Camaro ZL1's and the Mustang 428 Cobras were all the rage... not '65 Datsuns. To make matters worse, my Datsun was a "Bluebird", and the cool guys drove those snake cars. Don't snakes eat birds? Yes, I had a 1965 Datsun Bluebird and it was like wearing a tutu when every other guy was decked out in football armor; pads, helmets and iron jock straps. The muscle car crowd ruled. They were the jocks and the studs and the concussion victims and the ones who got laid in their GTOs and snake cars. It is a well-known fact that no one ever got laid in a Datsun. If anyone had, they never would have admitted it. I never did, nor did I ever have a chance to lie about it, though I probably would have.

The day after I took possession of my Datsun, I pried off the "Bluebird" emblem and smudged some bondo into the holes. Within a month my vanilla colored Datsun had been painted a deep purple; a paint job I could have



had for \$29.95 but went all the way instead by paying \$49.95. And now, the "Bluebird" had become the "Screamin' Grape." It is a well-known fact that purple cars are faster than white ones. My 1965 Grape could churn out 67 horses after all... about 20% of the muscle cars named after snakes.

Now, not every guy who played football or ran track had a cool car. But every kid that had a cool car was a jock! Some jocks, like Skipper Washington, high-jumper, and one of three African Americans guys at my school, did NOT have a cool car! No, Skipper drove a disreputable, dented and rusty 1953 Ford. On Halloween, when every kid turned into a juvenile delinquent, we went on egg raids in Skip's car, the 1953 Ford, also known as the "Soul Bucket." As we were out to "egg the snakes" as we put it, the jocks who drove the muscle cars were on guard. They all had better throwing arms than the rest of us, though, and by the end of Halloween night, the Soul Bucket looked like a giant rusty omelet.

Skipper still had the Soul Bucket 20 years later. He drove it to our 20-year reunion and I got to sit in it again.



“Sweet!” I said. The Soul Bucket, now completely restored, had become a classic; as cool as any restored snake car and worth a small fortune too!

The Screamin’ Grape, however, had not fared as well as the Soul Bucket. Instead of restoration, the Grape had been drowned, dissected, flipped and rolled and was probably in its fourth or fifth iteration as something metallic... maybe another car; maybe even a snake, a Mustang or... god forbid... a Gremlin.

In regard to the drowning of the Screamin’ Grape, it all happened in the L.A. River, just like in the movie *Grease*. No, a 67 horsepower Datsun Bluebird was never a contender in any riverbed drag race! But just because the Grape was never a contender didn’t mean that we didn’t have some fun! After all, the Grape was a used car and at \$1200 was about 10% the cost of the snake cars. No one ever saw a GTO, Shelby Cobra 427 Super Snake, Road Runner, Camaro ZL1 or Mustang 428 in the L.A. Riverbed! But, the Screamin’ Grape and the Soul Bucket were there often, along with other cars... wrecks and jalopies with names like *Streaker*, *Repo* and *Hooter*.



We all knew a guy who had a father or uncle who worked for the city. One of these guys, carelessly, left his keys to the L.A. River maintenance gates on his dining room table. Our friend and fellow river cruiser, Hank, seized the chance, grabbed the keys and made six copies. He sold them to us for \$15 each; righteous bucks in 1968!

And so, the Grape, the Soul Bucket, a couple of Ramblers and a Studebaker Lark entered the L.A. River and took on the current and surge of the dirty water until they wheezed and choked and died. Usually, automotive death was from a soaked distributor. We would remove the distributor cap, whip out our Zippo Lighters, and dry the whole thing out. In the late 60's, Zippos were standard equipment whether one smoked or not. Zippos were just super cool... the sound they made when they were flipped open; the scratching of the flint and steel, and the flash of the orange and blue flame as the whole thing exploded into life.

We all knew how to hold this hand-held bonfire to dry out the cap and points without setting the whole car on fire. When the engine again sputtered and caught, we would let it idle a while and come back up to temperature.



Then, we ascended the embankment and went home like good kids, in time for curfew.

Being doused like this in river water probably never did any car any good. As it turned out, the Grape had a variety of problems with water, even radiator water. Twice I replaced water pumps in the Grape and never got a good explanation as to why the pumps failed so often. Later on, I was to learn that it wasn't the parts so much as it was the parts dealer. He was able to sell a water pump at half the retail price due to a business model that filled orders within 24 hours while avoiding the burden of inventory. The third water pump, acquired when its predecessor failed, was purchased from a store rather than from a guy, but not until the Grape was dealt a crushing blow.

When a water pump stops pumping the car starts to heat up. When one doesn't notice this happening, really bad things can happen. Now, Skipper had borrowed the Grape one evening for what he thought to be a promising date. He was still scraping rotten eggs off of the Soul Bucket which had started to smell like a sulphur factory soon after Halloween. Skipper was a real car guy and even worked as a mechanic's assistant during the summer and



on weekends. And, when he returned the Grape to me after his disappointing date, he had commented that it was "running a little warm." The next day, as I was on the freeway driving to the beach, the temperature gauge shot up dramatically and steam poured from the grill. Not being able to stop, I moved to the right lane in order to exit at the first opportunity... which proved to be too late. The Grape was towed to my Dad's mechanic, Woody, who diagnosed a cracked head... not mine, the Grape's. Pops let me have it for loaning out my car too! Not one of my better days!

"So, what's it gonna cost to get the Grape back on the road?" I asked.

"You got a job kid, or a line of credit?"

I didn't know what a line of credit was, but I did have a job bagging groceries, mopping floors and washing out Coke bottles at the Safeway.

"Yeah, I have a job, so how much?"

"Well, I gotta pull of the carb, yank all the wires and hoses, get the plugs outta there and get new ones. Then, I gotta unbolt that cracked



head and send it off to the foundry to get re-cast, get new gaskets and then put the whole thing back together again, adjust the valves and see if she fires up.”

“Uh, just how sure are you that all that’s necessary?” I asked.

With this, Woody grabbed a gizmo that looked like a radiator cap with a pump on it. He screwed it down tight on the radiator and started pumping and then pointed to a stream of water oozing out of the side of the iron head.

“See that kid? How would you explain that? You think that’s the way it oughta be?”

“No.” I said with resignation. “How much and how long?”

“Out the door... about five hundred dollars and at least 10 days.”

Not good news... I sure didn’t have 500 bucks; it would take four weeks at the Safeway to earn it and no car for 10 days was equally distressing!

But the next day I caught a break; a break named Skipper. “Five hundred bucks?”



Man, that's a wad alright, but you ain't getting ripped off. There's a lot to do, but I figure we could do it ourselves, 'cept for the re-casting. But I happen to know that's about sixty bucks. Everything else, gotta be careful, but we take things out in order an' lay 'em out on the floor in order, then we puts 'em back in reverse. Ya see? You gets your Pop to let us use his garage an' some tools and I borrow whatever tools from the shop that's still needed. We get it apart in a couple of evenin's, get it to the foundry the third day; get it back the fifth and you back on the road in a week. An' you out only sixty bucks 'cuz maybe I shoulda made more of a deal about it runnin' warm."

"Damn, Skip, you think we can do it?"

"We don't stop 'til it's back on the road. Check with your Pop, then we gets it towed back over here."

My Dad went for it, gave up the garage and even offered to help. By this time, though, this thing had turned into a challenge and we didn't want any help. Besides, we were both 17 and 17-year olds can ask for food, money and clean laundry, but never for help!



After school the next day the Grape was backed into the garage. Skipper had poured over the manual as I had done, but I suspect he got more out of it than I did; I certainly hoped so!

Skip went to work with surgical precision. First, newspapers were laid out on the floor and notepads and pencils were laid out to record every step in the process. Skip was like a scrubbed and experienced surgeon and I was like a candy striper and errand boy by comparison.

Skip dissected the heart and soul of the Grape, peeling away the chest and ribs of the thing to get to the heart of the problem... the fractured and oozing head. When Skip had the head loosened, he peeled away the gasket and lifted the head triumphantly, just like a surgeon might hold the beating but defective heart of a transplant patient.

And there it lay in a cardboard box, a little wet and a little oily and very much inert, cracked and lifeless. On the floor of the garage the parts and bits and pieces of this metallic surgery were aligned with notes and with order and precision. There seemed to be no chance of failure in restoring the Grape to its



screamin' glory and Skip and I were elated. Even my Dad got in on the jubilation and sprung for dinner at a local pizza joint and even snuck us each a couple of beers. He was proud of us when he had first been skeptical. And, there can be hardly anything better than a Dad's pride made evident when you are 17 and already know everything.

When Skip and I picked up the re-cast head from the foundry two days later it was like picking up a loaf of fresh hot bread from the best Italian bakery in town. The head was warm, like a new loaf, but instead of yeasty and herbaceous aromas, the head gave off the scent of hot iron, earthy and magnetic, and redolent of oxides, oils and grit. For someone intent on fresh bread, these sensations would have been repulsive. But, for a 17-year-old kid intent on having a car again, the aromatics of this newly forged head made fresh baked bread seem like a bag of moldy and putrid crumbs. Skip and I doted over this fresh loaf of a head and waited an extra day for it to cool so that it would shrink to the same temperature and size of the engine block to which it would soon be reattached. I was impatient, but Skip held firm.



"The block and the head... ya know, the head was recast to fit the block once they both the same temperature! We rush this thing and the bolts don't fit right and we gonna be doin' this again! We give it another day or we be havin' this conversation again sooner... rather 'an later!"

"OK, OK Skip one more day.... No more though! Gotta have some wheels again! But we'll just do it right like you say."

Pops was starting to get involved in this whole thing too and he agreed with Skip 100%. "Gotta do it right or not at all," he said. "Don't be rushing anything... just get her done right."

My Pop... he never ceased to amaze me and was rarely predictable. We gave the head another day. Then, when we put down the gasket and lifted the head into place, the bolts dropped through the holes with precision and ease. Skip borrowed a torque wrench from his boss and things were looking pretty good.

Two hours later we were done or thought that we were. Instead, we discovered two bolts on the floor where the parts had been laid out with so much precision and purpose. Where the hell were these bolts supposed to be? How



the hell did we miss them? And most of all... How's the Grape gonna ever scream again with two missing bolts... from where?

Skip and I sat on the floor of the garage in puddles of oil and grime and squeezed our brains and hands for an explanation and for a plan.

“We gotta take it down again,” Skip said. Those two missin’ bolts gotta be needed and we missed it... I missed it... and the Grape ain’t gonna be right without ‘em. Yup... gotta take it down again.”

“Aw jeez... I can’t believe it! Look, we get it runnin’ and maybe it’s years before those missin’ bolts cause any trouble! Look... I’ll just sell the Grape before anything happens, OK?”

“Yeah, that’s a plan alright. But maybe them bolts are really important, and some guy buys the Grape and gets in a wreck and how you feelin’ about it then? No... gotta take it down and figure where we messed up.”

I sat with my greasy hands on my greasy head and, reluctantly, nodded my agreement with Skip. We got up from the garage floor and for the second time laid out fresh newspapers



upon which to place the parts. And, after removing the carburetor for the second time, my Dad appeared.

"Hey boys, looks like you're taking apart everything again! How come? What's wrong?"

"Well, Mr. D," said Skip, "we was careful and we took the whole thing apart and we put it back together again and then we see that we got two bolts left over and that just ain't no good! So, we gotta shake it down again and figure where we messed up and where them bolts go."

With this, Skipper started to crank away with the torque wrench while Mr. D. took a step back, squatted on the garage floor with his head in his hands and wailed with laughter. Skip and I were bent over the patient, the poor old Grape, dissecting it for the second time. We straightened up and looked quizzically at my dad.

"Like, what's so goddamn funny?" I said to my Pop, in a tone redolent with sarcasm and frustration. "You gettin' some sort of cheap thrill outta all this? You like seein' us fuck up? Sorry Pop, I'm grateful for the garage and all, but me and Skip are kinda bummed



right now and you're busting a gut laughing at us? So wassup?"

"Oh my god boys... I am sorry!" Pops said. "You see you did nothing wrong... never thought you would! But I got this little devil sitting on my shoulder here and he says to me, 'what if someone slipped in a couple of extra bolts? What would those boys do? Let it slide and make it the next guy's problem or make it right?'"

"You mean we didn't miss anything... that YOU placed those bolts, so we'd think we screwed up?"

"That's right Skipper. Good thing I came along when I did or the whole thing would be all over the floor again!"

"OK, OK, Pops, you can stop laughing now!" I said.

"No boys... I can't!"

And then Skipper and I started laughing too. We had been had; ROYALLY had, and even years later the story still makes me laugh; and the lesson still makes me think.



Of course, I realized that I was the one who strayed from the moral responsibility of the situation. I was OK at the time letting the leftover bolts become the next guy's problem! The Grape's problems were my problems and neither Skip's nor my Dad's, and they should never have become anyone else's problem either.

But here's the thing. Was my Dad just being a wise guy or did he intend to see how I would react? I did wind up learning something about responsibility from the cracked and broken head of the Screamin' Grape. I also learned something about Skip, who assumed responsibility for fixing the Grape when he didn't have to; doing things the way they should be done and making it right for everyone.

I have since decided that my dad saw the potential in this scenario for both laughing and learning, and probably in that order too.

A couple of years later I sold the Grape to a friend for \$300. Within a couple of months, the Grape was totaled on the freeway when it flipped and slid on its roof for about 150 feet. My friend walked away from it, but I wondered what I would have thought if the two extra



bolts had been for real and I had just let it become the next guy's problem. As it was, a big rig didn't see the Grape and changed lanes on it. The Grape was squeezed between the truck and the center divider for a few seconds before flipping and sliding down the fast lane on its roof.

When I saw Dr. Skipper Washington, now a thoracic surgeon, at the 20-year reunion and got to sit again in the restored Soul Bucket, he inquired about the Screamin' Grape; he hadn't heard about the accident, and I filled him in on what had happened.

"Got to hand it to your Pop," Dr. Skip said. "He sure tested me with those extra bolts alright! I think we made the right call back then, don't you? Sure glad we fixed that ol' Grape right! Nowadays, every time I have a patient opened up in the O.R. I remember... How about you?"