

Black Malibu

by John Olson

We needed cat litter. We needed Gatorade and light bulbs and chocolates and coffee and cheese. We needed paper towels and *Love's Labour's Lost* and the power of prayer. We needed Walter Benjamin. We needed autonomy and socialism and soap. We needed a combination smoke and carbon monoxide alarm. We needed guns and lawyers. We needed conviction and cashews and a CD player for Eric Burdon. Some of that stuff was heavy, some was not. But there was also a house and a townhouse we wanted to look at. So we rented a car: a black Chevy Malibu.

We caught a number 3 bus to Virginia Street. My Orca card registered "out of funds" and so I slipped two dollars into the pay machine and plunged my left hand into my left pocket for a quarter and came up with a bunch of change and a nickel, at least I think it was a nickel, fell to the floor and rolled somewhere in the vicinity of the bus driver's feet. He was a large black man with large thick work boots. He looked momentarily puzzled by the dilemma but I joked "consider it a gratuity" and he laughed and I went to join Ronnie who found a seat midway into the bus.

We got off the bus at First and Virginia and walked the rest of the way in chill March air to the car rental office on Westlake. The staff was made up of young men, all with short bristly haircuts and eager beaver personalities. I wondered if they were that way naturally. I don't remember a single time in my twenties when I beamed such zest and cordiality. If this was an act, I was impressed. If not, if these guys were truly that full of vim and vinegar, I was equally impressed. How had the heartbreak and sorrows of young Werther not yet stricken them down and made them appear at least a tinge forlorn? Did they not know these were post-Apocalyptic times and Obama was a fraud and Wall Street banks had corrupted what was left of western civilization? That they were working hard for wages that had been frozen since 1970? Was their innocence to be

trusted? There was, I had to admit, something very appealing about their zest, however surreal it appeared to me on the surface.

I filled out the necessary forms (there are always forms) which never fail to confuse me, I do not do well with forms, but I got the pertinent information down however illegibly and signed my name and promised to give them my first born child in case I lose the car, or fail to return, because I don't know, I've driven it underwater to Siberia via the Aleutian Chains.

There was also the matter of insurance, which I hadn't really thought about. It was expensive, the same price as the rental per day. But I could easily see myself at an intersection amid broken glass and looks of stupefaction wondering why the fuck didn't I buy insurance when I had the chance? Now I am in fealty to the car rental company for the rest of my adult life.

So we paid for insurance.

A chipper young man in a suit and tie disappeared into an underground garage and reappeared with the black Chevy Malibu. He got out a disk of cardboard about the size of a silver dollar for measuring scratches. Any scratch that exceeded the circumference of his disk merited attention and registration on his form. That way, we would not assume blame for the scratch. We all went around the car looking for scratches, dents, contusions, cuts, graffiti, and signs of early man. The scrutiny went deep and felt archaeological. We completed our journey around the car, and the young man handed over a set of keys. The keys were attached to lumps of plastic on which little icons represented their function as lock openers and secrets to the wind and grave.

I got into the driver's seat and Ronnie clambered into the passenger seat. It felt strange. I'm used to our old Subaru, now defunct and in possession of the Humane Society. The Subaru was a stick shift, small, and easy to look out the windows. It had a great turning ratio. The Malibu felt intimidatingly large and cumbersome and I could not see out the back. I had to rely on the sideview mirror to the right rather than look out the back window as I was used to doing. The Malibu was an automatic, which is good, but once you've

gotten accustomed to shifting gears, it feels funny to slide the shift knob into drive. My left foot felt idle. It feels natural to me to step on a clutch at the same time I shift into gear.

I had a difficult time getting my seat adjusted. I found the button that made the seat go up and down or lean back but nothing for releasing the seat so that I could shift it forward, closer to the dash. I don't like sitting far back from the dash. Ronnie got the manual out of the glove box and said that there was a bar under the seat that could be raised for moving the seat back and forward. I reached under the seat and felt the bar, but it wouldn't budge. I was stuck with the seat as it was. I would have to get used to the additional space between me and the dashboard. It felt like I was piloting planet earth from a balcony in Naples, Italy. I don't know what made me think of Naples, Italy. Whenever I get confused or disconcerted I think of Naples, Italy. I've never been to Naples, Italy. It just looks like a confusing place.

Now for the emergency brake. The boys back in the rental office must be wondering why we haven't left yet. Maybe they thought we just wanted to sit in the car and listen to music. Ronnie checked the manual again. You put your right foot on the regular brake, then press down on the emergency brake with your left foot. I did so, and voila! The emergency brake released.

I entered the traffic on Westlake. Here I was again, back in the saddle, part of the automotive world. It felt good. Good to be in control of something this big. And scary. It felt simultaneously exhilarating and intimidating and dynamic and daunting. That's what makes driving so addictive. It gets all those emotions going. And then we slid the new Eric Burdon CD in and the sound came out like gangbusters: "This world is not for me, I'll make a new one, wait and see..."

