

THE RIDE



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THE DESOTO WAS A JUNKER — a candidate for cinder blocks. It appeared at Raymond's Garage on one of those sultry, east Texas dog-days of August 1962. The next day Monroe was washing it in one of the repair bays and referring to it as his Ride. A week passed before I realized that it didn't have an engine. When Monroe caught me peeking under the hood, he nearly took my head off.

"Darryl, what you lookin' for? You lose a motor?"

"No, Monroe. Just checkin' out your Ride."

"Well, check from outside on the service island. You're here to pump gas, not mechanic. Why Raymond hires you college boys for the summer beats hell outta me. Shit, don't one'a you know fat meat's greasy. You spend all summer learnin' to break down a tire and do a oil change, then it's

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September and you split. Just throwin' money away if you ask me. But it ain't my garage. Ain't Raymond's neither. The Man owns this place, like everything else. Raymond's just rentin'. What you still standin' there for, Darryl? Get your ass in gear and hit that ramp. You got three cars waitin'."

I glanced back at the motorless DeSoto. Monroe slammed down the hood, gave me one of his don't-screw-with-it-again looks and then disappeared into the garage.

Old man Wilford was waiting for me by the pumps, impatient as usual, chewing on one of his cigars.

"Fill her up, Youngblood, high-test, only the best. And check the tires, thirty-two pound, all around. Even 'em up for me. I have to drive over to Beaumont tomorrow, and I don't want the front end pullin' to one side. And, check that battery while you're at it." He flipped me his keys.

Wilford kept the hood of his New Yorker chained shut with what he claimed was the most secure padlock money could buy. He also had a burglar alarm under the hood. The chaining had started after one of the neighborhood thugs tried to steal his battery. Wilford had caught him in the act and held him captive by holding a crowbar to his head until the police arrived. Monroe always said one day Wilford's stupidity was going to catch up with him.

Wilford showed up at precisely 10 a.m. every day. His routine was always the same. He'd leave his car on the drive, where it blocked everyone else's, and head into the garage. First stop was the Coke machine, where he'd look for an audience and offer up his standard complaints: one, that the sodas were too warm, and two, that for a quarter Raymond

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should've been stocking the machine with twelve-ounce rather than ten-ounce cans.

His grumbling usually ignited some form of banter from the chorus of freeloaders who always seemed to be hanging out at Raymond's. Some of them were there to gamble and play the numbers; others were dodging their wives. Most were there just shooting the breeze. They'd do a fair amount of drinking, but for the most part Raymond kept that under control. He didn't seem to mind their loitering, since they accounted for a large measure of his business. But, if he caught them cursing in front of a female customer, or if one of their poker games turned sour and ended up in a fight, he'd send them all packing.

When I went back into the garage to return his keys, Wilford was bragging about winning a bet from some white man he worked with.

"It was a real sucker bet. The dumb redneck went for it. I took him for a easy hundred," laughed Wilford as I handed him the keys.

"I checked out everything you asked me to, and I took a look at your front suspension and fluid levels too. When I rocked the front end there was a little bit of rebound and play. You may need shocks. You were just over a pint low on transmission fluid, so I added some."

"Did you wash it, too, and wrap it in a bow?" asked Monroe from over in the third repair bay, where he was working on a car.

"Leave the youngblood alone, Monroe. Least he knows a car when he sees one. That's more'n I can say for you. Ever seen Monroe's Ride, Youngblood? Saw him comin', didn't they?"

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Damn thing doesn't have a engine. Half the body's plastic, the other half's rust. You'd think Monroe would have more sense, bein' a mechanic and all. Maybe his brain only works part time, like that spastic leg of his. Whadda *you* think?"

I'd learned the hard way not to respond to Wilford's comments. He had a way of twisting your words. When he repeated them, they always came out just a little different from the way they left your mouth. There was no point in giving Monroe a reason to have me clean the diesel stalls and grease-pits for two straight weekends, so I ignored Wilford and headed for the front office.

A narrow, ten-foot-long corridor connected the garage and office. The ceiling had one rusty light fixture with a bulb coated by insects and dust. The office was a cramped, grimy cell. A cash register, with years of greasy fingerprints, sat on a rickety plywood counter lining one side of the room. You had to squeeze between the wall and counter to operate the register, and each time you did, regardless of how careful the approach, you invariably touched the wall, and your shirt absorbed a new spot of grease from the film of oil that seemed to cover everything. A pinup calendar was nailed to the wall behind the cash register, and although it was August, the calendar still displayed an abundant Miss June.

I was making change for two neighborhood kids when Monroe came in from the garage.

"Finish with those kids and come out back and give me a hand with some parts for my Ride."

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“Sure thing. Maybe I can help you rebuild it. I’ve been boning up on the internal combustion and readin’ *Mechanics Digest*. Intake, combustion, power, exhaust, that’s what it’s all about. Right, Monroe?”

“What the fuck? Just come on, would ya?”

Wilford was still regaling his audience as we walked back through the garage. He started laying it on heavy the instant he caught sight of Monroe.

“All the parts in the world won’t help that wreck of yours, Monroe. That’s a no-tit cow you got. Ain’t no use milkin’ her.”

Monroe ignored him and just kept walking, straight through the garage and out the back where hundreds of car parts were sitting in the alley behind the garage. Some, like the windshield, were new, but most were retreads — parts salvaged from other junkers. Monroe had gathered the *entire infrastructure* of a car, down to a brand new cigarette lighter.

“Lookin’ won’t move ‘em, Darryl. It’s gonna take some muscle. You a college boy. Figure it out. I want ‘em all in the first bay next to my Ride. And, be *real* gentle. Handle ‘em like one of those sweet young things that comes in here lookin’ for you ‘round quittin’ time.”

I studied Monroe carefully as we traveled back and forth, lugging parts to the bay. He had a gimpy leg that made him list to the right when he walked, causing the opposite hip to always appear elevated. Wilford and some of the garage do-nothings called him ‘High Butt.’ But as we moved the parts, I noticed how good Monroe was at compensating for gravity and using his bad leg as a wedge. He could look at a part, calculate his

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mechanical advantage, lift a hundred-pound load, and make it look easy. After six trips his parts were stacked in organized piles. Mine were scattered all over the bay, my undershirt was pasted to me, and my lungs were aching for air. Monroe hadn't broken a sweat.

"Let's take a break," I said, breathless.

"Not yet. The engine block's comin' this evenin'. We need all the parts laid out before. Just keep humpin', Darryl. It'll do you good."

On our last trip we moved the transmission and four sets of springs, all precisely balanced on a mechanic's creeper. Only Monroe's ingenuity had enabled us to move them at all. When we'd finished Monroe surveyed our handiwork, smiled, and opened the Coke machine using a key only he possessed.

"Want a beer?" he asked, pulling out two Buds from the bottom shelf.

"Sure."

I took two huge swallows and frowned at the bitterness, knowing that what I really wanted was an ice-cold Coke. We sat there breathing hard for a while, not saying a word until Monroe finished his beer and I broke the silence.

"If you don't mind my askin', Monroe, why didn't you just buy a car?"

Monroe's disappointment at my question was clear as he shook his head from side to side. "Ain't you got no street sense?"

"Well, uh, I think..."

"Well, my ass. And don't *think*! Just *listen* for a change. You never buy nothin' when you can bargain for it, and you

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never bargain when you can scrounge. Summ'a these parts were owed t'me, like the tranny, for instance. The evenin' man over at B and K Auto pulled it off one of their junkers on account of me steerin' all Raymond's parts business their way. All the electrical come from Ben's Electrical Supply. Some sucker ordered 'em but never picked 'em up. I waited for six months until Teresa, that firm-butt little bookkeeper'a theirs — who loves her some Monroe — said the stuff was 'off their books.' Returned, but not returned, if you know what I mean. Then, she sent it all my way. The rest, 'cept for the engine, Willie B. and Sweet Roy got for me by way of Midnight Parts and Autobody."

"How about the engine?"

"I bought that cash, mainly 'cause'a the serial-number thing. The Man always keeps track of engines, taxes, and his women. Some things you just have to buy. But I got the whole package now, and come Labor Day, we'll be cruisin'. Just in time to send you back to that white college. Hell, you'll have plenty t'talk about up in Dallas. You can tell 'em how you watched your homeboys rebuild a car. I'll even let you study the whole thing, start to finish. Just don't touch nothin', unless I tell you to, and keep an eye on Sweet Roy for me. I don't want his drinkin' to spoil this job. If you see him drinkin', you tell me. And, one last thing: keep Wilford outta my hair. The next four weeks I don't want to catch one whiff'a that ole man's cigar."

"I'm your man, Monroe," I said, thrilled that I would be part of the team.

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Willie B. and Sweet Roy showed up about 7 p.m. with Monroe's engine stuffed in the trunk of a yellow cab. Sweet Roy's brother-in-law, Otis, drove for the company and they had talked him into letting them use his cab for the evening. The engine was strapped in with three or four belts, several sets of nylons tied together, and a ten-foot extension cord. The cab's rear bumper was only about eight inches off the ground and the weight of the motor had almost flattened the tires.

"You sprung Otis's trunk, Willie B. He's gonna have your ass," said Sweet Roy.

"Don't worry, I'll fix it. Darryl, get me a hammer."

"Fix the damn trunk later," shouted Monroe from across the repair bay. "Darryl, give them a hand unloadin' that motor and move that winch over here."

Unloading the engine was easy, since we had access to a winch as well as Willie B. He was six-foot-five, with an enormous head, no neck, and shoulders that made it look like he was always wearing football pads. Twice I had seen him lift the back of a pickup truck a foot off the ground. Monroe claimed to have seen him do a one-armed clean-and-jerk on the Coke machine just to get a quarter that had rolled underneath.

Sweet Roy had been a pimp until his drinking got to the point that he couldn't take care of himself, or his ladies. Now he lived up three dark flights of stairs above the Dixie Dairy and survived on a part-time job hosing down the dairy's milk tankers. He was also a journeyman electrician, but no one would hire him because his drinking had made him mistake-prone and undependable. The name Sweet Roy, short for James Roy Williams Jensen, had been acquired because of his

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good looks and persuasive ways with women. Monroe called him ‘the snake charmer’ and claimed that he would never kick his drinking habit until he got deep-down-inside-comfortable with himself. For some people the penalty for being born pretty was worse than the penalty for being born black, according to Monroe.

Monroe handed each of us a sheet of paper from the legal pad he had been writing on while we were moving the engine.

“That piece of paper spells out your job. Everybody has to do theirs just right for this thing to work.”

“Why’d Darryl get one? He ain’t in on The Ride.”

“Darryl gets one so he knows his job, Sweet Roy. And part of his job is keepin’ you sober.”

“I don’t need nobody to keep me sober, ‘specially some college kid. I’m on the wagon anyway.”

“You want your fifty bucks back, fine. Come September, Willie B. and I’ll do all the cruisin’. And when we see you footin’ it down the street, we’ll hail you a cab. Now, you in or out? Make up your mind. We ain’t got all night.”

“OK, I’m still in as long as Darryl ain’t got a piece of The Ride. And so long as he stays out of my way when I’m working. Only thing he does is watch.”

“You hear that, Darryl? You get to observe the master *elec-trician* at work,” Monroe said with a smirk. Then, eyeing me intently, he added, “Like I said, your job is watchin’ Sweet Roy.

“Here’s our schedule. We rebuild this sucker in three weeks, got it?” We all nodded. “I’ll do the motor, startin’ with regrindin’ the valves. While I’m doin’ that, Sweet Roy and Willie B. finish out the suspension. By the end of the week we should

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be able to drop the motor in without it falling through to the floor. That is, if Willie B. don't screw up the motor mounts and struts. If you have any questions, Willie B., ask Darryl. He knows all about physics and how to distribute weight," said Monroe, glancing in my direction and smiling.

"Okay," said Willie B.

"Okay? Is that the only word you know, you dumb-ass Bama? Bring your problems to *me!* Darryl don't know nothin', 'cept what I tell him — just like you.

Monroe took a deep breath. "The second week we work on the fuel and exhaust systems. I'll do the carburetor, the fuel pump, and all the fuel-line splices. Willie B., you and Sweet Roy take care'a the muffler, pipes, gas tank, and manifold hookups. Darryl, you make sure there ain't no gas in that tank before they strap it on the underbelly. I got a little spot-weldin' to do on the body before we finish, and I don't wanna end up scattered all over the garage.

"The last week we do the electrical," said Monroe, looking directly at Sweet Roy. "Most of the wirin's routine, but this Ride's got rich man's conveniences that'll take us a little extra time. In case you haven't noticed, she's full power." He patted the DeSoto's hood. "The windows, seats, even the door locks are power, so don't rush your wirin', Sweet Roy. She's a lady, not one of your streetwalkers, and you gotta take time with a lady.

"Remember, Darryl, I don't want to even imagine I smell a cigar the whole three weeks. So, keep Wilford outta here. We'll meet here every night, 7 p.m. sharp."

"I can take care of Wilford. He's light action. Will I get a chance to work on The Ride?"

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“Seven p.m., sharp,” repeated Monroe, ignoring my question.

The first week went without a hitch, and so did the first three days of the second. It was about 8:30 Thursday night when I smelled the cigar. I looked up from helping Willie B. bolt on the muffler, and there was Wilford standing just behind the lift, tapping his ashes on the floor.

“You boys’uv been real low profile around here, Monroe. Like you don’t want me t’know what you’re up to. But I got ears.” He strolled around the car, giving it the once-over, while I tried to figure out how he had gotten in.

“Not bad for amateurs. But it’s still a junker,” said Wilford.

Monroe shot me a full-faced scowl.

“Don’t stare down the youngblood, Monroe. I come in with Raymond. The youngblood’s been doin’ his job. Tell you what, Monroe. I wager that when you’re done, this heap won’t ever make it ‘round the block.” Glancing at Willie B. and Sweet Roy, he added, “You and these two losers’ll never get it to budge.”

Willie B. took a step toward the old man. I grabbed the back of his belt, knowing that if he really intended to go after Wilford, no amount of belt holding was going to matter.

I let go of Willie B.’s belt when Monroe stepped in and said, “You got money to stand behind your mouth, old man?”

“I’ll do better than that for stakes. You get this thing to run, and I’ll pay for fillin’ the tank with gas, for a year, *and* foot the bill for a year’s worth of oil changes and lubes to boot. It has t’be running by next Thursday, though, and I have t’be here to

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verify it. I'll even settle for three complete trips around both the service islands as proof."

"Suppose it ain't runnin' by then?" asked Sweet Roy.

"That's the interestin' part. If it's *not* runnin' by 7:30 p.m., we haul it over to Drucker's Salvage Yard and dump it in the crusher. I'm sure we'll have plenty'a people on hand who'll want t'bear witness."

"The deal ain't square. I stand to lose my Ride," said Monroe. "Besides, I don't have to pay for lubes and oil. You ain't offerin' me much I don't already have. How 'bout you try this for size. You give me the cost of my engine, you pick up the tab for a paint job and the gas, *and* you give us three more days to finish, Sunday instead'a Thursday. Then, it's a deal."

Wilford chewed on his cigar for a moment, stroking his chin. "I'll give you everything but the three days. Take the deal or leave it," he said, grinning. "Or maybe you don't have confidence in your team."

"Take him up on it, Monroe," said Willie B. "We're almost there now."

"Gimme a minute to think it over."

"Don't go bettin' everything on the come-again, Monroe," said Sweet Roy. "Remember what your gamblin' has cost you before."

Even I knew that Monroe's betting had caused him to lose his half-interest in the garage, and most people said his gambling had ended up costing him his wife. It was hard to understand why a man who was so methodical when it came to repairing automobiles seemed to enjoy leaving everything else in life to chance.

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“Not one of those Earl Scheib paint jobs; it has to be lacquer, two coats, and I choose the color,” said Monroe.

The long moment of silence was broken when Wilford and Monroe said, “Deal,” at the same time. Then they shook on it.

That handshake brought me eight full days of grief. I continued working the day shift at Raymond’s, while Monroe had me baby-sitting Sweet Roy and serving as a lookout for Wilford at night.

The next three times I went to pick up Sweet Roy, he was drunk. I brought him around each time by filling him full of coffee and walking him up and down the three flights of stairs above the Dixie Dairy. The fourth night he had the DTs, and I didn’t know what to do until Vivian, one of Sweet Roy’s former hookers, showed up at his place looking for her color television.

“What has this man done to hisself now? Such a waste. He still pretty, though, even lyin’ in a pile and shakin’ like a leaf. Ain’t he a sweet picture, Darryl?” said Vivian, giving me a wink. “It’s a shame to see a body do this to hisself, a natural pity.” She stepped back, looked at Sweet Roy for a moment, and then started barking orders.

“Gimme some blankets outta that chest over there, and get over to Billton’s and buy a bottle’a lemon juice, some Karo syrup, and a bottle’a aspirin. Hurry up!”

When I came back, Sweet Roy was wrapped in the blankets and Vivian was heating a pot of water on the stove. She added half of the bottle of lemon juice and a full cup of syrup to the boiling water, stirred the concoction for a couple

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of minutes, and forced Sweet Roy to swallow two full glasses of it along with six of the aspirin. Then she sat and rocked him gently until I said I had to get back to the garage.

"I heard about the bet," she said just as I reached the door. "Ole man Wilford's spread it all over town. When you get back to that garage you tell Monroe he's got Sweet Roy under too much pressure. He don't perform well under pressure. You can't wind Sweet Roy too tight. He's like a fine watch. Wind him too tight and he breaks. You can see that can't you, Darryl?"

"Sure."

'Well, you tell Monroe to lighten up on Sweet Roy or he'll be doin' more'n giving ole man Wilford free gas. Wilford says Monroe ain't made a alimony payment in eight months. I know he don't want that out — 'specially to one of those 'hard-time' Beaumont judges. And he don't want Raymond findin' out neither. You know how Raymond is about playin' it straight with women." She went back to rocking Sweet Roy and told me to turn on the radio as I left. "Turn to that soft kinda music," she said, giving Sweet Roy a gentle kiss.

When I came to get Sweet Roy the next night he was ready to go. Even had a thermos filled with coffee tucked under his arm.

"I'm back on the wagon," Sweet Roy said with a wink. "What did Monroe say about last night?"

"Not much. Just that it was a minor setback and reminded us that we still had plenty of time. Actually, he was okay."

"I'll get The Ride wired, I promise," said Sweet Roy, adjusting the thermos.

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That night we stayed at Raymond's until 3 a.m. Sweet Roy teased out the upholstery in the door panels and the ceiling. He even removed all the carpet until the car's interior became a maze of red and white wires. He had wires running everywhere. I could see wires going from the power seats to the glove box and from there to the light in the ceiling. Sweet Roy completely rewired the electric windows and the power door locks. He even had a wire running to the little bulb that illuminated the rear license plate.

"Just pretend they're nerves, Darryl, runnin' all around inside you. We all got wires like these, y'know. They just ain't color-coded. Cut one, like this one here, and your eye don't work. Let me show you. Check that right headlamp. I guarantee it won't come on." He pulled the headlamp switch to demonstrate.

"Splice it, like this, and your eye works again. Now you try it." I connected the wires the way Sweet Roy had shown me and the headlight flashed on. "Slick, ain't it?" he said with a grin. "I tell you, I could've been a brain surgeon with these hands, sweet talkin' all those nurses every day and takin' home a pocket full'a money every night."

We finished up the next night. I made sure the gas tank was empty. Willie B. strapped it on the DeSoto. Monroe completed his spot welding, and Sweet Roy put every stitch of carpet and upholstery back in place. The DeSoto was no longer a junker. Now, it was a car.

Monroe spent all of Thursday morning detailing the car, getting it ready for that night's showdown with Wilford. When he finished, he called me over for some last minute instructions.

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"I told Willie B. and Sweet Roy to meet me here at seven. The three of us are going for the first Ride. You can catch the next one," he said.

"No way! I deserve to go on the first Ride, too. In the past three weeks I've been your sentry. I've been Sweet Roy's chaperon. I've been an engineer for Willie B. I held up my part of the deal the whole damn time. Now all I get to do is watch? Hell, no!"

"Sorry, Darryl," he said matter-of-factly. "This one's for home boys; you get the second Ride."

Under my breath I mumbled something about his high butt and stormed out of the garage, knocking over a display of oil cans on the way.

I was moping outside by the high-test pumps when Wilford drove up at 5 p.m. "Can I fill 'er up?" I asked, trying not to look dejected.

"No, Youngblood. Just set me up a chair right in front of the garage doors. I need a good seat for the show."

I found a dusty folding chair in the garage and gave it to Wilford. He wiped the chair off with a handkerchief and set it up on the drive, directly in front of the door to the diesel bay. Then he sat down and lit a cigar.

Sweet Roy arrived at six wearing a three-piece sharkskin suit, a gangster hat, and a pair of Stacy Adams pointed-toe shoes that were spit-shined to a mirror-gloss finish. He was carrying a brown shopping bag that contained a set of fuzzy dice and two bottles of Old Granddad. He placed the liquor on the back seat of the DeSoto and was attaching the dice to the rearview mirror when Willie B. strolled in.

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I'd never seen Willie B. in a suit before. It was funeral-black and heavy worsted wool. His bulk caused the coat to gather at the shoulders so that the sleeves inched up his arms. The coat's back vents were spread wide open and Willie B. kept tugging at them trying to adjust the jacket's fit.

Monroe had changed in the bathroom. He came into the garage immaculately groomed, wearing a seersucker suit topped off by a panama hat. He carried a case of Budweiser under one arm and a six-pack of Coke under the other. A black-and-gold streamer dangled from his front coat pocket.

He put the drinks on the back seat and attached the streamer to the car's antenna. Then, as he slowly completed a final visual inspection of the DeSoto, Wilford walked into the garage, looking at his watch.

"It's 7 p.m. You boys ready?" he said.

"Ready to stomp *your* ass, old man," said Monroe.

"Crank it up, then," said Wilford. He walked out of the garage and took his ringside seat on the drive.

"Willie B., you ride in the back to balance the load. Sweet Roy, you ride shotgun. Darryl, watch our smoke," said Monroe.

They took their positions, and Monroe turned the key. A backfire exploded from the tailpipe, and I thought that the whole thing was going to end in failure right then. But, in a few seconds, the engine began to run smoothly like the big eight-cylinder it was, and they were all slapping hands and shouting.

Monroe backed the car out of the bay into the approaching twilight and looked out at me standing dejectedly by the door

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to the diesel bay. As the power window on the driver's side descended smoothly, he stuck his head out and said, "I'll go around the pumps three times, then we're outta here to party. Vivian's got us some girls." He winked and gave me a thumbs-up sign. Then he turned, looked over at Wilford and added, "I'll settle up with you t'morrow."

Monroe made a wide, slow figure eight the first time around the pumps, testing the engine. On the second pass I could see that Willie B. had popped the tops on a couple of cans of beer and was handing them around.

The trouble began at the top of the third loop over by the high-test pumps. I saw Sweet Roy's window start down and just before it disappeared, sparks flew up from inside the door. Willie B. and me were the only ones who seemed to notice. The DeSoto passed directly in front of me as Willie B. reached over the seat back and poured beer down the window track. I saw Sweet Roy turn his head and look back, but by then the damage was already done. The whole electrical system must have shorted out, and that started the fire. There were no flames at first, just the smell of burning rubber and smoke rising from under the hood. The car was still moving when Sweet Roy jumped out. His door sheared off cleanly when it met one of the gas pumps, seconds after his exit.

Wilford was laughing uncontrollably when the DeSoto's door snapped off. His laughter died down considerably when the door took two bounces between the high-test pumps, jumped to the other side of the service island, and clipped the chain wrapped around the hood of his New Yorker. A few links dropped to the ground, and the broken chain whiplashed, lock

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and all, into the car's windshield. The windshield shattered, the hood popped up, and Wilford's alarm went off, all at the same time. "What the shit have you S.O.B.s done?" shouted Wilford, running toward his car.

Monroe finally brought the DeSoto to a halt no more than fifteen feet in front of me. By then smoke was pouring from the front and rear. He leaped out with Willie B. right on his heels. Monroe ran to the front of the DeSoto and attempted to open the hood, but when he touched the metal he jumped back.

"Shit, this son of a bitch's red hot! Get a hose," yelled Monroe.

"No, not on an electrical fire," screamed Sweet Roy. "Get the fire extinguisher from the diesel bay."

I ran to get the extinguisher and came back to see flames leaping from every part of the car.

"Too late," said Willie B.

Monroe grabbed the extinguisher and covered the car in foam, but Willie B. was right. The DeSoto was finished. The car continued to smolder as the pungent smell of burning rubber and plastic filled the humid summer air. For what seemed like forever no one uttered a word. The only sound I heard was the high-pitched whine of Wilford's alarm.

"Hell, it's not a funeral," said Monroe, breaking the silence. "You gotta learn t'go with the flow." He was looking in my direction as he walked over to The Ride, opened the rear door, and grabbed a can of beer from the back seat. "The beer's a little warm, but it's still wet."

Monroe tossed the can to me, picked up two others and tossed them to Willie B. and Sweet Roy. Sweet Roy took a

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long pull on his. "Damn sure is, Monroe, and it ain't changed from alcohol neither."

"Help me get this stuff off the back seat and don't touch the metal. It's still hot," said Monroe.

A steady stream of water was flowing from the DeSoto's radiator, and a large pool of oil was spreading out on the driveway beneath the transmission. They finished unloading the back seat, and suddenly all three of them were laughing, accusing one another and assessing the blame.

"You dumb-ass Bama, your half-assed wirin' could've killed me," said Monroe to Sweet Roy.

"Both of us," said Willie B. "He could've killed both of us."

"Bullshit! Anyway, you're the one that caused it, pourin' beer down the window like that," Sweet Roy said in self-defense.

"Don't matter. It wasn't our time. Just like it wasn't our time to have wheels," said Monroe.

"Ain't no lie," said Willie B. "Surely, ain't no lie."

"Let's go, we still got plenty'a time to party," said Sweet Roy.

Wilford was standing beside his car, looking at the windshield. The alarm was still screeching. Every few seconds he'd look down, pick up a small piece of broken glass, then look back up at his car. He never stopped shaking his head.

"You assholes are gonna pay for this," he finally said. "I'm tellin' you, you're all gonna pay." He shook his fist at the DeSoto.

I looked at the DeSoto sympathetically. "You're not just going to leave her here like this?" I said to Monroe.

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“That’s t’morrow’s problem, Darryl. You the college boy. Figure it out.”

I watched them head up the street, then glanced back at the still smoldering DeSoto. For a few moments, as I stood there looking at The Ride, I could still hear their voices. When I looked around again Monroe, Willie B. and Sweet Roy were gone.

“The Ride” was first published in *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 23, #2, Summer, 1989.