

## A Practical Joke at the Trout

by Frank Green

Sam Watson was the kind of man who loved his car. That's why it was always so painful for him to decide when to get rid of an old car and buy a new one. That and the well known fact that if Sam was not cheap, he was, well... very, very thrifty. For example, he was generally recognized as the undisputed master at the neighbourhood pub for ducking out to the washroom or going home at the exact time when it was his turn to buy a round of drinks.

His reputation for frugality was cemented when he bragged about corralling a bouquet of plastic flowers blowing around in the graveyard to place at his wife's grave for Mother's Day. "Don't say another word, Sam," said his neighbor, Doc Cole, "I've got a tear in my eye."

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For months Sam had been dickering with Tim Flynn about buying a used 89 Pontiac. Tim, a big rugged ironworker, was the sometime used car salesman at the Thirsty Trout, a friendly working class pub and the scene of many a deal in the flourishing underground economy of Centerville, Ontario.

Sam's "old" car was a 1976 Black Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. "Dammit Tim," said Sam one day, "I hate to get rid of her. She's never given me any trouble in 17 years, she's only got 60 thousand miles on her and I've had her painted twice. I wash her every Saturday in the summer and once a month in the winter, and the wife used to love those nice big bucket seats that swing around so easy. On the other hand, she's hard on gas and I don't know how safe she is out on the 401 any more."

Tim, who had listened to similar versions of this story many times before, nodded sympathetically. “I hear you Sam, I know what you’re saying. It’s a tough decision, but I can’t hold that little red Pontiac for you much longer. Old Paddy O’Reilly is after me for it every time I run into him.”

“What kind of engine did you say it has?” asked Sam, taking the hook unawares.

“It’s a Quad 4 – the kind General Motors puts in racing cars,” said Tim, warming to his sales pitch. “It’s super-efficient on gas and that little car will really fly on the highway. It’s a hell of a unit. Why not take it out for a test drive?”

The long and short of it was that Sam took the Pontiac for a drive, liked it and a deal was struck. Both Sam and Tim being, as they were, somewhat closed-mouthed about money matters, the exact price was never public knowledge at the Trout.

But the boys at the Trout knew that Tim took back the Olds as part of the deal. They also suspected that Tim came down in price significantly just to get the endless dickering over with at last. As Tim said, “That was the longest running car deal in the history of the Western world. I feel like George Foreman after his rope-a-dope fight with Mohammad Ali.”

In any case, Sam was in a proud, expansive mood the next Friday evening when he made his way down into the lower level of the Trout, after carefully parking the shiny little red Pontiac near the door. He was a little louder than usual, happy and relieved that the months of procrastination were over, pleased with his new car and the good deal he had made for it.

“Geez, she’s sure got zip,” he said, revving up to full bragging gear, “ Tim and I took her out on the 401 and she passed everything on the road. It’s that Quad 4 engine, eh? GM puts it in all their fancy racing cars. There was a Quad 4 in the winning car at Indianapolis a few years ago,” said Sam to anyone who would listen.

Whether listening or not, everyone certainly heard him. A bit deaf at the best of times and given to speaking loudly, the celebratory nature of the occasion had led Sam to switch from his usual Coors Light to “high test” rye and ginger with its higher per-ounce decibel quotient.

In retrospect, I suppose, Sam’s exuberance, well-known gullibility and cheapness made what happened later inevitable, even though it was totally unplanned and uncoordinated. What happened was generally judged to be the best and most elaborate practical joke ever played at the Trout.

About an hour after arriving at the Trout Sam came up to the bar for a refill. Never a big tipper, Sam’s popularity with all the bartenders was well contained. I suppose that’s what led Eddie, the English bartender, to say, “Is that little red Pontiac out there yours, Sam?”

“Damn right,” said Sam, “just bought her off of Tim.”

“Well,” said Eddie, “one of the Three M guys who just came in said it was leaking oil.”

“BS! You’re not going to fool me,” said Sam, his lower lip curling out in what Tim Flynn had dubbed “an Irish hard on.”

“Just telling you what he said, just trying to be helpful. Geez, you try to give a guy a hand. No need to get sore,” said Eddie.

“Thanks, Eddie, but he’s just trying to pull my leg,” said Sam and went back to his game of cards with his cronies Carson Smith, Sid Moore, and Paddy O’Reilly.

About fifteen minutes later, at Eddie the bartender’s prompting, Doc Cole, a teacher from the local community college, said, “Sam, I think your car’s leaking oil.”

“G’way,” said Sam, “Eddie put you up to saying that. There’s nothing wrong with my new car. Everyone’s just jealous of the deal I made. Some of us know how to find a real bargain.”

A few minutes later Doc ran into Tim Flynn coming up from his pool game for a beer. When he told him how Sam wouldn’t buy the leaked oil story, Tim said, “Dammit, Doc, I wish I had some spare oil in my car, I’d put it under the little red unit just to turn Sam’s crank.”

“No problem,” said Doc, “come with me around the block to my garage. I have some of that cheap oil from Canadian Tire.”

“Let’s go.”

When they came back Tim carefully poured half a litre of oil under the engine of the little red Pontiac... enough so that you couldn’t miss it from either the front or the driver’s side. Then they went back down to the Trout, Tim to his pool game, Doc to his Nevada tickets.

Soon word of the scheme had quietly spread to about 20 of the regulars sitting at the two long tables near the bar. To all these developments, of course, Sam remained oblivious, his mind fully occupied - what with the concentration needed for the card game, the timing of runs to the washroom, the potency of the high test and the swelling pride of new car ownership.

During a break in the card game, Nat Hickey, a retired transport truck driver, approached Sam, and in his usual slow, deliberate way, said, "Hear you got a new car, Sam!"

"Damn right, got a hell of a deal from Tim too!"

"I'm kinda in the market for a new car myself, Sam," said Nat, "mind if I take a look at your car?"

Since Sam and Nat didn't usually get along very well, each convinced of the other's cheapness, Sam was pleased with Nat's uncharacteristic friendliness and interest and was only too happy to oblige. So the two of them went up to the parking lot. As soon as they got near the red Pontiac on the driver's side, Sam saw the oil. "What the hell is that?" he cried.

"Gee, I don't know for sure Sam," said Nat, "but it sure looks like oil to me."

"It's coming out at the front too," said Sam, panic palpable in his voice.

"By golly, you're right Sam," said Nat.

"Holy crap!" said Sam as he raced back and forth around the car. "When you go back down tell Tim to get the hell out here right away!"

“Okay,” said Nat as he turned to go, “but you know Sam, aside from the oil, that’s a real nice looking little car you’ve got there.”

Sam continued to circle the car, alternately peering underneath it and wringing his hands in desperation. Just then Mike the mechanic, better known as Carburetor Fluid for the lingering aroma of his trade which followed him everywhere, came loping along from the back of the parking lot eager to cure his thirst after a long hot day at the shop. Since he hadn’t spoken to anyone yet, he was not in on the joke.

“Look at my new car. Where’s the oil coming from?” asked Sam. “ You’re a mechanic Carburetor, what do you think?”

“I think you’re screwed Sam!” said Carburetor. “Tee hee hee!”

“Tell Tim to come up,” pleaded Sam.

After another ten minutes went by with no sign of Tim, a severely agitated Sam went down to the pool table. Waving his hands frantically, he tried to get Tim’s attention, but Tim was concentrating very hard on his pool game.

“Didn’t Nat and Carburetor tell you I wanted to see you?” demanded Sam.

“Sure, but I’m busy playing pool,” said Tim.

“That damn car you sold me is leaking oil,” yelled Sam.

“Well I told you the warranty was good for ten minutes or ten feet, whichever came first,” said Tim over his shoulder as he leaned over for a tough bank shot.

Hopping mad, almost in tears, Sam retreated in frustration back to the parking lot. By now about 45 minutes had gone by since he first spotted the offending oil.

Down in the Trout, Disco Dot, the Nevada ticket saleslady, took pity on Sam. She said to the regulars at the two long tables who were enjoying Sam’s consternation, “A joke’s a joke guys, we all know he’s cheaper than dog dirt, but we’d better tell him. After all he might have a heart attack.”

“So?” said little Wally Wilson, “Witty Wally,” as he was known, blue eyes twinkling above his white Poppa Smurf beard.

But Disco’s compassion prevailed (after a fashion). She led the 20 regulars, including Nat, Carburetor, Doc, Tim and the card players out to Sam’s car. She also led the chorus of “Da, da, da, DA! We gotcha, Sam! ”

Sam, to his credit, did not get mad, and was so vastly relieved to know that his car was alright that he acknowledged he’d been had, that it was a good one, and graciously accepted the double shot of high test that Tim bought him. “I’m glad to get it for you, Sam,” said Tim, “I haven’t had this much fun with my pants on since my grandfather fell out of the hearse.”

Persistent efforts to have Sam buy a round, however, fell on predictably deaf ears. His relief, although heartfelt, did not extend beyond the bounds of frugality.

“I’m not surprised he didn’t buy a round,” said Nat Hickey after Sam had gone home. “Sam always was tighter than a frog’s asshole and that’s waterproof.”