



JEAN SHEPHERD

MADNESS AFOOT, or THE GREAT STUDEBAKER MANIA

• I was sitting in my favorite Manhattan Chock Full O'Nuts with my friend Ockie, who drives a cab in town, and was reading to him selected passages from the *New York Times*. Ockie is a student of the world whose research, were it not for these occasional encounters with the *Times*, would stop abruptly at the Hudson. I had worked my way down near the end of my second cup of coffee and the middle of the back section when I came across the saga of Robert C. Reynolds. I carefully set my cup down on its saucer and began to read carefully. It was a significant straw in the wind, this epic of Robert Reynolds and I sensed it. "Would you listen to this, Ockie. Just listen to this!"

Ockie, who was lost in a serious study of the OTB form sheets for the morrow, glanced up with obvious irritation. I clutched Ockie's elbow. "Ockie, have you ever owned a Studebaker?"

"Have I ever owned a Studebaker! Have I ever owned a Studebaker, you ask. What the hell brought that up? Listen, my first wife left me over a Champ. A '41 Champ, which I picked up third-hand and . . . have I ever owned a Studebaker!"

"Well, listen to this, Ockie." I peered closely at the printed page and began to read aloud: "*Robert C. Reynolds thinks the Studebaker, which hasn't been made since 1966, was the best car ever manufactured, so he has collected 28 slightly rusted vintage model Studebakers in the backyard of his \$100,000 home in McLean, Virginia. . .*" Ockie choked loudly, gasping and wheezing, upon realizing the full import of the item.

"Twenty-eight Studies in the backyard? One would be too much. Twenty-eight!"

"That ain't all, Ockie." I read on: "*Four years ago Reynolds discovered that his rare collection was illegal when officials sought his arrest for allegedly operating a junkyard in a community zoned for residential usage.*"

Since then he has been engaged in a battle with officials, complaining neighbors and his wife Consuela."

"Listen to what he says, Ockie." I attempted to change my voice to sound the way I thought a man who kept 28 Studebakers in the backyard should sound: "*Why can't people understand that this is just a hobby like any hobby? Some people collect butterflies or beer bottle caps, but I collect Studebakers.*"

Ockie blew a cloud of White Owl smoke at the ceiling. "Beer bottle caps. That's a hot one. Every Studebaker I ever owned sounded like it was made out of 'em."

"Wait, Ockie. You ain't heard the best of it. Listen to what Consuela says." I pitched my voice into my famous imitation of Dear Abby. "*In the seven years I've known Bob and in the four years I've been married to him, he has never restored one single car. He just buys them, usually from a junkyard, and drags them up to the house where they just sit and rust.*"

Ockie was gagging with laughter. Since I was in good voice, I went right on, this time imitating Reynolds, quoting him from the newspaper: "*This country is just out to get me. Lady Bird started this, with her damn 'Beautify America' business. Now every time somebody sees an old car he wants to take it to the junkyard.*"

Ockie suddenly became serious.

"Ockie," I asked, "have you ever owned a Studebaker?"
 "What the hell brought that up? My first wife left me over a Champion . . . a '41 Champ."

"So this guy has got a thing that Lady Bird is after him, not to mention Consuela. He reminds me of my Uncle Marvin who used to wake up nights in a sweat, hollerin' that Eleanor Roosevelt was gonna get him. They hadda pour cold water on him before he'd come outa it."

"What did he have against Eleanor Roosevelt?" I asked innocently.

"Well, he thought that she was the cause of the Dodgers losing all them pennants."

"Eleanor Roosevelt?" He caught me off guard and my voice cracked a little. "What did she have to do with the Dodgers?"

"Search me," Ockie chuckled, "but for that matter, what does Lady Bird have to do with some guy parking Studies in his back yard? I guess he figures if it weren't for Lady Bird nobody would gripe about all that junk out in the back. Some guys just have trouble with women."

For a couple of minutes the two of us sat, lost in our own thoughts, me trying to pic-

ture Consuela and the look on her face when Robert comes home with another sagging '63 Studebaker 4-door, while Ockie seemed to be reliving golden moments with his Uncle Marvin when the Dodgers' infield couldn't hold on to pop flies because of Eleanor. Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned, figuring it was just another customer getting tired of waiting.

"Did I hear you mention Studebakers?"

My first instinct was to play it cool and deny everything, but his harmless, mild insurance man's face with its rimless glasses and his black preacher's suit threw me off.

"Why yes, I did. Yes, I happened to mention Studebakers." His trembling hand clutched my shoulder.

"Sir, are you interested in Studebakers? There are so few of us! I couldn't help myself when I heard you mention the name. I would like to tender an invitation to you, sir. I have a modest collection, only 14 but . . ."

"JEEZUS!" Ockie's raucous Bronx voice cut into his reverie. "You got 14 Studebakers? You kiddin'?"

"Well, sir, I admit my collection is modest, but you have to begin somewhere, and I . . ."

"Y' mean you're lookin' for more?" Ockie obviously could scarcely believe his senses.

"Oh yes indeed! There are hundreds of models that I need to complete my collection. If you would care to come out and see them I would be delighted to have you as my guest." He handed me an engraved card that said with simple modesty that he was a Senior Vice President of a Wall Street brokerage house and that his address was in an elegant suburb in one of the horrier communities over in New Jersey.

"Thank you," I said. "Me and Ockie may come out one Sunday."

"I'd be delighted to have you gentlemen as my guests. We who appreciate Studebakers must stick together. If only my wife . . ." he paused significantly. . . . "But then you can't have everything, gentlemen."

He left. I knew then that I was on to something. Quiet embittered men all over the country are loading up their back yards with these sad orphans of the storm. Studebakers are more appreciated now that they are gone than when they were around.

"Boy, you sure get a lot out of reading that paper, don't you, buddy boy?" Ockie laid a couple of dollar bills on the counter.

"Yes Ockie, indeed I do. See you sometime." And when I see Ockie again, I will have something more to read to him . . . the following article that I clipped from another *Times* edition a few weeks after this episode. "*While Mr. Reynolds was at work yesterday, his wife arranged to have nine tow trucks back up to a lot next to the Reynolds's \$100,000 home . . . and haul away 16 of the mostly rusting and inoperable cars.*"

I'll have to give Ockie some credit, too, all those Eleanors, Lady Birds and Consuelas who exist for him only on the pages of the *Times* keep one from being parochial in his study of humanity.