



• "Yep, I tell you it's a fact. My cousin has a good friend works down at the foundry who knows the guy what it happened to. This guy goes out and buys a new Whoopeemobile, see, with the works—loaded—air and everything. Well, he's the kind of guy that babies a car, y'know, never a scratch on it. Keeps it in the garage and changes oil like every 800 miles. A real nut on keepin' his car up. Well, from the day he drives out of the showroom he notices he's got this rattle back around the left rear wheel . . . sort of in front of the wheel, y'know what I mean? It never did it steady. Just clunked every once in a while. Well, he takes her back on the warranty and they can't find nothin', but the car keeps clunking. So this goes on for maybe two years until finally the guy is almost out of his bird with the thumping. Finally he takes it to a body shop and they really tear it down. Take the side panels off and everything. And, by God, I'll bet you wouldn't guess what they find."

The bartender swabbed away at the mahogany as the litany droned on. The speaker, a short stumpy specimen in a bile-green bowling shirt with his name "Sparky" stitched in red over the pocket, paused dramatically while the gang at the bar continued to stare listlessly at the Roller Derby on the TV hung over the mirror behind the bottles.

"Nope, I bet you'll never guess what they found." Sparky nodded his head in wonder and appreciation at the evil that lurks in the hearts of men. Nobody rose to the bait. To a man, they had heard this story many times before, but then the battle between the Rockets and the Bombers was a fourth time rerun too, so what the hell?

"They found . . ." Sparky slugged down some Black Label for emphasis ". . . that some cluck at the factory had hung a Coke bottle with a string inside the door panel. How do you like that? Never would have found it if they hadn't of took it all apart." Sparky set his glass down and wiped at his

mouth with the back of his paw.

"Yep, damndest thing I ever heard . . ." his voice trailed off, and a couple of the heads nodded along the bar in mute appreciation of the oft-told tale. The story of the Coke bottle hung inside the body of the car at the factory is a beloved and familiar bit of traditional American folklore, and has been recounted millions of times over in small town bars.

It has some of the epic qualities of Casey Jones at the throttle and the endless ballad of John Henry. They are tales of the working man, constantly at odds against the Bosses. But the basic fairy tale remains. It is *always* a Coke bottle; never a beer bottle or a vinegar bottle, or even a beer can. The tellers of the tale believe profoundly in its truth. And so do their hearers. After all, that is what true folklore is about. It becomes the lore of the folk because the humble among us believe without question in the existence of the legendary Coke bottle and the unknown rebel of the assembly line. Like all true folk tales, this classic story contains a moral and celebrates simple virtue. It is always implied that somehow the workman's cause was just. Future historians in, say, the twenty-second or twenty-third centuries, will collect and record these legends of our time. As yet it is too soon, since most of us still believe them, just as certain residents of New Jersey will swear on a Bible to the actual existence of the Jersey Devil. I, personally, have heard the legend of the Coke bottle told and retold from Alaska to Tampa,

6  
Coke bottles hung  
in doors, guys refusing  
to sell rare old cars,  
recluses secreting  
Marmons in barns . . .  
these are the future  
Folklore of the U.S.  
9

and it is always the same.

This is one of the side effects of true folklore. It is reassuring. Its very timeless unchanging predictability comforts one late at night when ghosts tend to wander through the mind. We are all children, and want to hear the same tales told over and over. Every time they are told they have to be recounted as though for the first time. The teller always unfolds the outrage of the suspended Coke bottle in tones of wonder and awe at the audacity of the unknown star of the assembly line. And if the story is particularly well done, he will be rewarded with exclamations by his audience such as "Well, I'll be damned!" or "Hey, that's a hell of a trick!" This, in spite of the fact that the hearers have heard this story a hundred times before, in different bars, and with different cars playing the lead role.

There's another beloved myth that is hacked out of the same rough-hewn cloth. Again there is an air of mystery, and the tale carries a rich mother lode of morality. It generally begins to be told along about midnight at Frieda's Bar when the conversation turns to the Stupidity of Man, the Gullibility of the Boob, the Venality of the Clod. Naturally no one in the bar is guilty of any of the above, but it is understood and agreed upon that there is little hope for the world beyond the venetian-blinded door. It is then the following cherished old chestnut is brought out once again to be repolished and dusted off. Once again the teller is firmly convinced that what he is telling not only actually happened, but that he is telling the gang this story for their general education. They, in turn, play their role by nodding their heads at the right points and clucking appreciatively. They never, I repeat *never*, say, "If I hear that story again just once more, I'm liable to throw this beer right through that jukebox!" The reason is obvious. Live folklore is *believed* on all sides, and no one ever laughs. Sparky, the leader of the congregation, takes up the litany. The crowd has just been discussing how stupid everybody else outside of Frieda's Bar is when Sparky clears his throat meaningfully and launches into his cherished song.

"Did you guys ever hear about this guy—I guess he was a professor or something at Harvard or someplace—who decided to see how stupid people are and how they'll buy anything. So he went down to the paper and put this ad in that said: *Only five more days to send in your dollar. This is your last chance. Send now.* And then he put this address at the bottom, and the paper ran the ad. Well, the next day he puts: *Only four more days left* and he puts in, *Hurry, last chance to mail in one dollar.* Well, by the third day the dollars start comin' in, and by the end of the week the guy has over \$10,000. And the dollars just kept comin' in. And they couldn't do nothin' to him, because after all, he didn't promise nothin' in the ad. He just said they could send in a dollar. He must have got better than \$100,000, just sent in by these idiots who saw the ad and just hadda mail in a buck. Boy, that sure shows ya that people'll buy anything. They're just waiting to hand over their dough. Y'gotta hand it to the guy."

Sparky loves to tell this one, and his listeners love to hear it. It gives them a sense of superiority over the boobs who send in the buck and the "professor" emerges as yet another rebellious sardonic loner outwitting the knaves and wreaking vengeance upon society. He is a blood brother to the Coke bottle fiend. The story, in its basic outline, is, of course, unchanging. The ad never specifies ten dollars, a five dollar bill, or even a quarter. It is always one dollar, the basic unit of existence among the Folk, as homely and familiar as the Coke bottle.

I doubt whether there are more than a hundred people in the whole of the United

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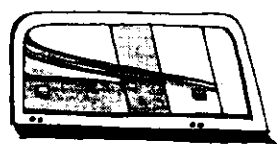
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JEAN SHEPHERD (CONTINUED)

States, over the age of ten, who have not heard this story at least once, and most of them believe it without question. Where it began, no one knows. It will be a prize item in the collection of the anthropologists of the twenty-third century.

There are hundreds of lesser legends that we all know and love. For example, who has not heard of the case of the guy with the second/tenth/hundredth Ford/Dodge/Buick ever made who has been offered a princely sum by the Ford/Dodge/Buick people for the relic, but he has stoutly refused? I have never met this guy, but throughout my life I have heard of him, and he remains one of my heroes. He is a close relative of the legendary Farmer/Recluse who preserves a fantastic Marmon/Stutz in his barn and never lets anyone even see it. He has been sought by thousands of believers in much the same way that the Loch Ness Monster has been pursued. He is occasionally photographed at a distance, but the picture is usually blurry and the light is bad. But most of us believe unshakably that he is real . . . and that we might even get to see him one day. There is a variation of this tale which allows a second figure who not only sees the Farmer/Recluse, but buys the Marmon/Stutz. He, of course, arranges a deal in which the car is handed over for a paltry sum, and then resold to a collector in the city for twice, three times or ten times that amount—depending upon the teller's estimation of his audience's previous response. Both buyer and seller are, of course, as much part of the American experience as Johnny Appleseed.

Not all of these folk tales, naturally, are about a car. Some are about the impenetrable mystery of life itself. Is there one among us who has not heard someone intone: "You never know. I heard about this guy who was just sitting there watching TV when he feels something in his throat. Like he's got a frog in his throat, or something. Well, he didn't think nothing about it. He just coughs, and . . . I'll bet you wouldn't guess what happened. Up comes this bullet! Just like that. Now, to his knowledge he had never been shot in his life. Wasn't never in the War or nothin' like that. Was just sitting watching TV and up comes this bullet. This guy had been shot and never knew it!"

That story has several variations. Sometimes the bullet emerges at the ankle; sometimes the wrist. Occasionally, it is not a bullet at all, but a needle. But it is a nice story, and makes good listening.

Some of these tales are so good that they should be set to music and sung in high nasal tones by dreamy-eyed female folk singers strumming guitars at Sarah Lawrence or Bennington. Maybe one day they will. And twenty-third century balladeers will wonder if the Coke bottle rebel really existed or the *Send In A Dollar Now* ad was actually run. We don't doubt it. But, the Irishmen believe in elves and Englishmen have ghosts. And don't ever stop looking for that Marmon in the barn.