

The Tune-up

I had time to stop for gas and groceries before starting an evening shift as a bellman at the iconic yet threadbare hotel downtown—an unexpected return to the service industry after twenty-five years in tech and a recent layoff.

Having sworn I'd resist starting a conversation with the old Black man parked on the other side of the pump, I partially caved and rhetorically acknowledged the cost per gallon aloud. Sometimes, I like to gamble on what might unfold if I poke a stranger, and my incantation proved sufficient to invoke a response.

The old man asked if I'd mind looking underneath his vehicle to see whether his power steering cap had fallen through to the ground below. At the spry age of 52, I proudly lept into a push-up position in the self-congratulatory service of this elderly gentleman. I confirmed the cap must have lodged in the engine and strapped on a headlamp. Peering into the darkness of twisting tubes, I spotted the cap, distinctly identifiable by its iconic white marking. I pressed my chin against the side of the car, straining and twisting my arm to retrieve it, but made just enough contact to tap it even further beyond my reach.

Eager to prove my hospitality, I told the old man I'd be back soon with a replacement cap from a parts store up the street. He asked if I thought twenty dollars would be enough and handed me a bill. Driving to the store, I remembered the proverb that good works won't get you to Heaven, and though I'm not pious, I was damned-determined to see this scenario unfurl right-side-up. I promptly returned with a generic power steering cap that the clerk had assured me would fit a 2003 Buick Regal, and handed the old man his change.

He greeted me with glowing praise and religious overtures, remarking how some people might have run off with the money and that he knew he could trust me. He shoved a ten-dollar bill into my pocket, and when I refused the money, he asked if there was food or a drink I might like, then finally, he proposed he'd say a prayer for me. I readily accepted, declaring, "That's what I need." After all, there are no atheists in a foxhole.

I took a moment to indulge my original curiosity and learned the man was 81 years old, still happily married, and that he'd been a farmer in Statesboro, where I was born. He was quick to latch onto the coincidence, praising God and expressing his certainty that it was a sign.

He finally insisted he'd feel better if I accepted the money, so I agreed, and we returned to discover whether the generic cap would resolve our holdup. Once again, I leaned in to twist the replacement cap into place, but it wouldn't thread. I tried to snag the original cap again, but it was too far out of reach.

Right then, a seventies-model Ford F-150 with wood paneling pulled up to the pump beside us, and the driver stepped out looking like a character out of Green Acres. "Need some help?" he asked. "I'm a mechanic." He was appropriately outfitted, a small, slightly built but wiry man. The old man and I looked at each other in disbelief, but I was thinking to myself, "What difference does it make if he's a mechanic? We just need a better contortionist." By this point, he was clearly our relief pitcher and I wasn't going to let my relentless skepticism spoil the party.

When I explained about the power steering cap, he exclaimed, "My neighbor's got this same car, a 2003 Buick Regal." He grinned, and I could've sworn he was pranking us with those gag teeth you buy from a gumball machine, all broken and stained syrup-brown. He leaned down to reach into the engine and, in a moment, turned to us and said, "Here's your original cap." He held it up, and upon seeing the white icon emblazoned across the plastic, the old man and I exchanged wide-eyed glances again. Then, like a stage magician taking a polite bow after pulling a rabbit out of his hat, the mechanic turned and twisted the cap back into its port.

By now, the old man was beside himself, gushing with gratitude about the miracle we'd witnessed. He asked the mechanic what he owed, and the tradesman replied modestly, "Five dollars will be fine."

I reached into my pocket and handed over the old man's ten-dollar bill, and in an instant, we all resumed our lives.