



## **A Housefly, a Gas Pump, and Mrs. Robinson**

By Daniel Baitch

In the summer of 1976, I nearly blew up a BP gas station in Baltimore.

It was back in the days of full service, so in addition to pumping gas and taking cash, my co-gas monkey Philip and I had to check every dipstick, fill oil, and wipe every car window. Looking back, it's a no-brainer that two 17 year-olds trying to keep up with up to 12 cars at a time was an accident waiting to happen.

I liked the job; what I didn't like was that stained green winter-weight BP jumpsuit, several sizes too large for my bony frame. In the mid-day sun it felt like burlap. I inherited it from a previous gas monkey who apparently dribbled his coffee, rubbed his grimy hands on his thighs and wiped his nose on his sleeves.

But Philip -- his jumpsuit was pristine and fit perfectly. While I looked barely 15, Philip was tall, blond, and ripped -- a star on our school wrestling team. No matter how hot the sun baked the blacktop, he always looked cool and powder-dry. In comparison to my sweaty mop-head and teenage complexion, Philip had perfect skin and flowing, blown-out rock-star hair that always looked like he was facing into a stiff wind, like one of those torn-shirt guys on the covers of romance novels. Carloads of girls would drive into the station and giggle while he wiped their windshields.

Philip had charisma and charm, at least until he opened his mouth and said things like "*You, you, gonna eat dat?*" He was a nice guy; he just wasn't the brightest bulb on the lamp. Trying to convince him that daylight savings time didn't give farm crops an hour more light was like banging my head against a wall. But we got along well,

mostly due to our mutual disdain for Hal, the station manager. Hal showed up twice a day, scooped up cash from the safe, told us not to screw up, and disappeared.

Philip and I also had a mutual hatred of Oldmobile Cutlasses, Dodge Darts and Plymouth Valiants. Let me explain...

The Olds Cutlass was the most popular car at the time. Under its hood, the Cutlass had two support bars that crossed over the engine like a V; they held up the oversized front end. One of the bars blocked the dipstick, so that checking oil was tedious, insanely hot, and nearly impossible without scalding an arm.

1975 Plymouth Valiants and their twin Dodge Darts were driven by the oldest, nit-pickiest customers, who were frequently old men. Nearly every grandfather that I knew, including mine, drove one. The old guys reliably got out of their cars, and while chewing on cigars with their hiked-up Bermuda shorts and black socks, watched us suspiciously as we pumped gas. They seemed compelled to watch carefully, making sure we didn't short them, over-pump them past the \$3.65 worth of gas they asked for, or scratch their precious paint. Meanwhile, their wives sat in the air conditioning and supervised our windshield cleaning, pointing out every smashed window bug.

I could understand why the old Dart/Valiant drivers were so grumpy. That was the summer that gas hit a dollar a gallon for the first time, and they hadn't counted on spending their retirement funds on gas. And they must have been embarrassed to drive those cars, which were so comedically ugly. They were as aerodynamic as a barn door. Chick magnets they were not; they were more like testosterone-reduction machines. Which is why it seemed that so many older women, including my grandfather's second wife, picked Darts and Valiants for their husbands. If any wife wanted to keep their husbands from behaving badly when they left the house alone, a Valiant or a Dart would do it. No doubt the old guys would have loved to race around in convertible Mustangs or Firebirds with the tops down, their comb-overs flapping in the breeze. But as my grandfather would say, 'If your wife is happy, your life is happy.'

Anyway, the old Dart/Valiant drivers often put anti-siphoning coils in their gas tanks when gas hit that one-dollar mark. So pumping up those gas-guzzlers often meant fighting to get the gas nozzle in, and then fighting again to jiggle it out.

Hey, stay with me, I'm getting to the point.

As a result, when a Dart, Valiant or Cutlass pulled into the station, Philip and I looked at each other with a 'this is gonna suck' glance.

And so it went that summer, until that fateful day in July. It was a humid afternoon, and a fly was buzzing around a pizza box in the attendant booth. Philip was busy on the far end of the station, talking with one of the frequent flier customers, Mrs.

Robinson. At least, that's what I called her; she was a 35-ish, reflector-tanned, bottle-blonde with a cherry red Cutlass. She had long matching cherry red nails and lipstick and wore skimpy white tennis dresses and white stilettos (who plays tennis in heels?), which matched her car's white Landau roof.

Mrs. Robinson constantly flirted with Philip. She always got out of her car to watch Philip as he filled-her up, a finger hooked in her lips. She would ask innocent questions like *"What's the difference between leaded and unleaded gas?"* (His answer: *"Unleaded got no lead."*) and *"Is there lipstick on that dipstick?"* Her convenient habit of buying gas a few gallons at a time kept her returning frequently.

So Philip while the fly was navigating the pizza box, Philip was servicing Mrs. Robinson. That's when a yellow Dodge 'Dart Swinger' pulled in. It was like any other Dart, only it said "Swinger" on the fender. The expressionless old couple in the car looked like that "American Gothic" painting of the farmer with his wife and a pitchfork. Mr. Pitchfork got out, ordered gas according to his pocket change, and got into his *scrutinizing-me* position, chewing on his saliva-soaked cigar.

To my chagrin, there was an anti-siphoning coil in the tank. I shoved the gas nozzle in, checked the oil and wiped Mr. Pitchfork's cigar smoke-fogged windshield while Mrs. Pitchfork pointed out smashed mosquitoes.

When I tried to pull out the gas nozzle, it snagged on the coil. After fighting with it for a few seconds, another customer honked for attention. I shouted to Philip that the gas hose was stuck and asked if he would give it a try. He looked at me and nodded. But Mrs. Robinson wasn't about to lose his attention.

Mr. Pitchfork paid and asked for a receipt. I thought he had seen that the hose was still stuck in the far side of his car and heard me banging on the hose and shouting to Philip. Assumption wrong. Maybe he was hard of hearing. I should have told him the hose was stuck.

I got another pump going and stepped into the attendant booth for a receipt pad. But after seeing that fly again, I set at trying to smash it and totally forgot about Mr. Pitchfork's receipt. So somewhere between the pizza Fly distracting me and Mrs. Robinson distracting Philip, we both forgot about poor Mr. Pitchfork, and he gave up on waiting for his receipt. Out of the corner of my eye I saw his car begin to pull out.

"OH GOD...THE HOSE!"

If this scene were a movie, it would be in slow motion:

- Shot of Mrs. Robinson leaning seductively on her car, chewing on her sunglasses and watching Philip check her oil. Doom-like cello music begins.

- Mr. Pitchfork loses his patience, flicks his cigar on the ground, gets into his Dart Swinger, starts the engine and begins pulling away.
- Shot of jammed gas nozzle, followed by extreme close-up of a fly jumping out of the way of my arm smashing down with a receipt pad.
- Cut to long shot of attendant booth; I turn toward the Dart with a panicked expression.
- Shot of the gas hose beginning to lose slack.
- I run out of attendant booth door yelling  
“SSSSSSSTTTTTTTTTTOPPPPPPPPPPP!!!”
- Philip turns to camera and sees impending disaster, his eyes widening. He leaps into action, hurtling over a gas hose, his gleaming golden locks bouncing poetically.
- Shot of Philip’s sneaker landing awkwardly on pump island curb. He falls awkwardly and rolls through a puddle of radiator fluid.
- Close up of chewed, saliva-soaked cigar smoldering at base of gas pump.
- Wide shot of Dart ripping gas pump off its base, gasoline spurting upward from a broken pipe, geyser-like. Cigar butt ignites pool of gasoline; a line of flame approaches the pump.
- I pull a woman and her baby from a green Pinto and drag them safely out of danger, as the gas station ignites into a massive fireball.
- Overhead shot of mushroom cloud over gas station as Dart drives off with its gas cap on the roof and a hose dragging from gas tank.
- Doom music ends.

Okay, that’s the movie version. The actual incident wasn’t exactly dramatic. Philip didn’t really fall into an oily puddle. But one day he did dribble meatball sub sauce onto his jumpsuit. It never came out. That made me happy.

There was no explosion, no baby, and no heroic rescue. But there was a loud bang as the Dart pulled the gas pump off its base and the hose did tear off. To this day I don’t know why Mr. Pitchfork didn’t stop.

When Hal came in on his cash run, he just stood there, openmouthed, staring at the pump, which was leaning precariously with its hose missing. To his credit, he was forgiving about the whole thing, and he didn't fire me.

Of course I was sorry for the mistake I made. But I was sorrier that I missed Mrs. Pitchfork's expression when she opened the passenger door and saw a gas hose hanging from the car.

That was 34 years ago. Recently I was thinking about Philip, so I searched for him on Facebook. No longer the football hunk with the rock and roll mullet; his profile shot showed him bald with a thick grey beard, sitting on a Harley. Based on the girth of his beer belly, he hadn't hurtled over anything in long time.

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