

That Guy Down The Street

by Dan Canaan

"Back many a year ago I lived in a neighborhood that was your typical middle class one. All nicely trimmed hedges, green lawns, tidy houses, stereotypical America. All was right in the world according to the standards at that time. As a kid in that neighborhood, I was bored silly. There was nothing to do.

But then there was the guy down the street. The one the neighbors all talked about, the one you overheard dinner conversation about with your parents. He wasn't like all the others. His house didn't look like the rest of the block. This guy worked on cars. To an 11 year old, he was fascinating.

Sure, the house he was in was just like the others, but his driveway wasn't filled with an everyday car or station wagon. Nothing boring like that. He had Camaros, Firebirds, Mustangs, and other muscle cars there in different states of repair. You could hear the chug of the air compressor on weekends. The air wrenches flew, the weak signal of an AM radio tainted the air with 50's tunes on the 'oldies' station. An engine hoist held a beastly motor, 400 CID and dangling interesting pipes, hoses, wires and parts of the exhaust. A banged up pickup would be nearby for towing cars to and from the place.

Every couple of weeks there would be a different set of cars there. Some came in looking horrible and sounding even worse, but later they would leave freshly painted and thundering down the street. It was a great place to hang out at.

Of course my parents thought the exact opposite, calling the place an eyesore.

Now it's 20 years later. I've lived in my own share of places that fit the stereotype where people didn't work on their cars in the driveway. In my high school days I did a lot of work on Chevy Vega's (26 of 'em to be exact, hence my handle). But times changed and I finally got a reliable car. My automotive skills went by the wayside.

Then I got a Triumph. I should have known better. I really should. I had heard about Lucas. I knew about MG's. But then when you see a boat tail Spitfire for the first time and it has the FOR SALE sign on it, your mind does start to wonder. It's a tiny little sportscar. Surely it wouldn't be hard to get it running. There isn't much there. It would be much easier than a musclecar. You talk yourself into it.

The online communities turned out to be a fantastic resource and I think this sort of support for an orphaned brand just couldn't be possible without the Internet. The ability to post a message here and get several replies from people who have already gone through the same problem you have and have advice how to proceed is priceless. A Haynes manual is wonderful, but it won't tell you things like "You can use a GM/Chevy alternator to replace the original Lucas one for more reliability and easy replacement." You just don't get that sort of information except from friends and clubs.

So I've got a Spitfire. It's in the garage. The driveway is still clean.

Then I bought another one in better shape. This relegates the first one as a donor car and the second one goes into the garage. Well, now we have the donor car around behind the house. The driveway still looks okay. Nobody knows there are Triumphs lurking.

Now I have a spare chassis and bonnet that came with the second car. I'm running out of room. That one is in the driveway with a silver tarp bundled around it. It actually doesn't look bad. It's packaged up nicely. But it's out there. One auto chassis and bonnet in the driveway.

A friend wanted a Spitfire after seeing mine. I tried to convince him not to get it. I really did. But eventually he picked up a 1980 brown 1500. It ran well, but needs brake work. This weekend he brought it over and we put it up on jackstands and bled the brakes. Did the clutch hydraulics too. Turns out the brake master cylinder needs replacement or a rebuild. Okay, that won't be hard but I didn't have the parts handy. We also messed with the O/D wiring that was all buggered up. Put it all back together and....nothing. It is stuck in gear. This may require removing the transmission to just inspect it since we can't get into the case far enough to determine if the shifting fork is damaged. What it does mean is that we pushed it out into the driveway so he can get it towed back home. It might be a few days though.

I now have another Triumph in the driveway. This makes a total of four Spitfire chassis and bodies on the property. The neighbors all know I have one. I run the air compressor and use air tools to pull tires off, work on the engine and chassis, etc. I have a radio playing on the AM side weakly through the air. I have my pickup truck support vehicle for towing cars. The neighborhood kids poke their heads in the garage looking at the really old "Miata's".

I have become that guy down the street.

I love it!!"