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## The night before Christmas – (or a couple of days beforehand)

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**‘Twas a dark and stormy night, and bitterly cold as well.** The memory of that night and the next three days was seared into my memory – even though it was just 59 years ago I remember it like yesterday....

Not a ghost story, but definitely one for sitting in front of a crackling fire, roasting chestnuts and peeling tangerines.

### A young and impoverished graduate scientist

Let me paint the picture for you. It was 1965. I had graduated from university some five months earlier with a good honours degree in Electronics, Physics and Maths. I had been working as a research scientist for Associated Semiconductor Manufactures, at GEC’s North Wembley Research labs, but living in a bitterly cold, unheated bedsit, with a single gas ring, backing on to Parliament Hill Fields. So travel across North West London in the rush hour was always a challenge – especially if you are the owner of a 1939 vintage black Austin 8 – (Reg JBH817), which you bought for the princely sum of £10 from a kindly old headmaster who had had to give up driving. And a car which would never start if the outside temperature dropped below about 4°C. No heater – and lethal rod brakes as well.



**I was engaged to Judith**, who was in her last year at Queen Mary, and was looking forward to spending Christmas with her family down in the depths of northeast Essex – a really charming rural area, despite what preconceived ideas one may have about Essex. I had been suffering from ‘flu – the real thing - and I felt dreadful. My health had been quite dodgy since starting work: after only a few weeks I fell ill with glandular fever – and there was worse to come in the following year if I had known.

### Nursing the ‘flu

I had spent the previous week or so at home in Luton, being cosseted by my mother, but was determined to go back to the Hampstead bedsit, to pick up my worldly wealth, consisting largely of a handful of clothes, my lovely record player and my growing collection of LPs. I was still pretty poorly – It was bitterly cold and the car had no heating of course. But my troubles had scarcely started.

#### Wot – no power?

As I drove on to the M1 I realised that the car was not accelerating properly when I stood on the gas. It seemed to be sort of hesitating, and the more I tried to urge it on the worse it behaved. Never mind the unrestricted speed limit – I had trouble getting to 30mph.

I finally limped into London and was only too happy to park the car in Tanza Road and wanted to drag myself off to my cold bed with Ibuprofen and a hot water bottle. But first I decided to load my chattels into the vehicle. Exhausted, I undressed and went to bed. But wait! What if someone breaks into the car overnight?

## **Back home to Luton again**

So I crept out of bed, dressed again and decided to drive the car back to Luton there and then. From memory it was now about half past seven in the evening. Perhaps the car would have sorted out it's hiccups by now?

No such luck – it was even worse: it was as well that I could coast downhill to start.

Now for the uphill bit, and the car could manage no more than second gear. Luton was many miles away and at a maximum of 15-20 MPH I was in for a horrible drive. And remember – it had no heater

## **Rescued by a saint with a yellow van**

After some time I had to motor across the North Circular road. As the car limped across the lights, I had a glimmer of hope: an AA repair man was tending to a broken-down motorist in a pub car park! I had no AA membership – but could I join there and then? The answer was a resounding YES!

## **A free service by the roadside**

I had to wait for a few minutes whilst the other vehicle was sorted out, and the dear wonderful AA man gave me his full attention. Having signed me up for membership, he removed, cleaned and checked all the spark plugs; cleaned the distributor, and adjusted the make/break gap. Not satisfied with that he gave me a knowing look and said “Now - we'll deal with that petrol pump and the SU carb!” Both got the full Rolls Royce treatment. Satisfied with his work he asked me to go off on a short test trip up the dual carriageway to show how much better he was convinced that it would run.

Buoyed up, I leapt into the driving seat and set off - first gear; second gear – chug splutter and cough.

Sadly, his careful free of charge service had made no difference whatsoever. When I returned to the car park and gave him the bad news, he was very disappointed and gave me a considered judgement that it was clearly valve trouble after all, and would be very expensive to sort out.

## **A limp back to Luton**

I was horrified, and Luton was still hours away. I coughed and spluttered northwest (the Austin, not me), choosing a chug through the A6 rather than venturing onto the M1. At nearly midnight I was finally back in a warm house and fell into bed, exhausted – but at least the bed was warm!.

## **Salvation by Krypton magic!**

The next day I had intended to abandon the car to go and do a bit of seasonal shopping. But after breakfast a good neighbour came around and invited me to attend a pre-Christmas drinks party next door but one, with friends before lunch. Feeling truly in the need of a drink, I was very thankful for the invitation. Over a small sherry she then introduced me to her very own tame garage mechanic and I was able to open my heart - very nearly in tears over the dratted Austin. He listened sagely and said “Hmm - well if you are shopping this morning, why not leave the car on my garage forecourt and I will see just how bad it is.” I thanked him but had little hope – valves – lifting the head – yuck - money. Oh dear!

I parked the car as requested, and did my few bits of shopping. An hour later I walked back to the garage only to see my car parked exactly where I had left it, so he clearly hadn't even looked at it.

I was in despair: Christmas looked doomed. But the Christmas spirit suddenly took over! The mechanic emerged from his office with a broad grin on his face and announced that the problem was fixed but was going to cost me ten shillings if I could afford it. I was truly amazed. "Ha!" he said, "I put her on the Krypton tester and spotted the problem right away." Apparently, there was an intermittent break in the low-tension lead to the distributor, which only appeared when I used the throttle, causing the engine to move on its mountings and shake open the break, cutting out the sparks each time. A new piece of wire had been fitted – and the car ran like a dream. Christmas was saved and even my flu was disappearing fast.

**John Wells. December 2024**

## **Christmas is saved!**

I made it to Great Totham, in Essex very shortly afterwards, and had a wonderful Christmas after all, with my prospective in-laws. Judith and I were married at Great Totham seven months later!

But there are a few more anecdotes to be recounted about cars. Watch this space.....!

**John Wells**

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