

# In Real Life

FIRST-PERSON AMERICA

## ONLY IN A SMALL TOWN

By Hendrik Mills

I work in a Norman Rockwell painting. It's a tire and auto repair garage in rural Montana, where I'm a mechanic. We don't have a pot-bellied stove to heat us through our long winters, but aside from that detail it's more or less a *Saturday Evening Post* cover come to life whenever, say, Bill Stuart comes in the door.

Bill is almost 70, and rarely has anything fixed by us. He doesn't have to, as he has his own well-outfitted workshop at home. Like a lot of men around here he long ago mastered the arts of welding, tinkering, driving semis, and other useful rural skills. An ex-farmer and a school-bus driver, Bill makes a daily or twice-daily visit to our garage, lasting anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour. He first helps himself to our coffee, then, paying no attention to the "liability and insurance issues" that keep customers out of the back rooms of big city repair garages, walks into the work area to see what we're up to.

Bill may offer updates on the high-water situation around Thirty-Mile Creek, which has been flooding near where he lives. His comments are added to the reports and speculations on local creeks and dams already being tossed about by patrons standing around watching their pickups or tractor tires get worked on. Like many customers, Bill feels free to rest his elbows on the fender of whatever vehicle I'm currently toiling over, and to stick his head under the hood. He asks me what I'm up to, and offers advice about the vehicle, perhaps even information about the vehicle's owner. Then he'll ask me something like, "Is that big black thing over there the computer?" Or something about the car will recall a story,

perhaps about the days when he had a whole crew of men driving grain trucks for him. He doesn't repeat his stories.

If there's one thing an auto mechanic likes, other than being paid, it's being admired for competence in fixing broken cars which others can't. A mechanic likes to preserve some mystery about "how he does it," to guard his arcane knowledge and back room procedures,

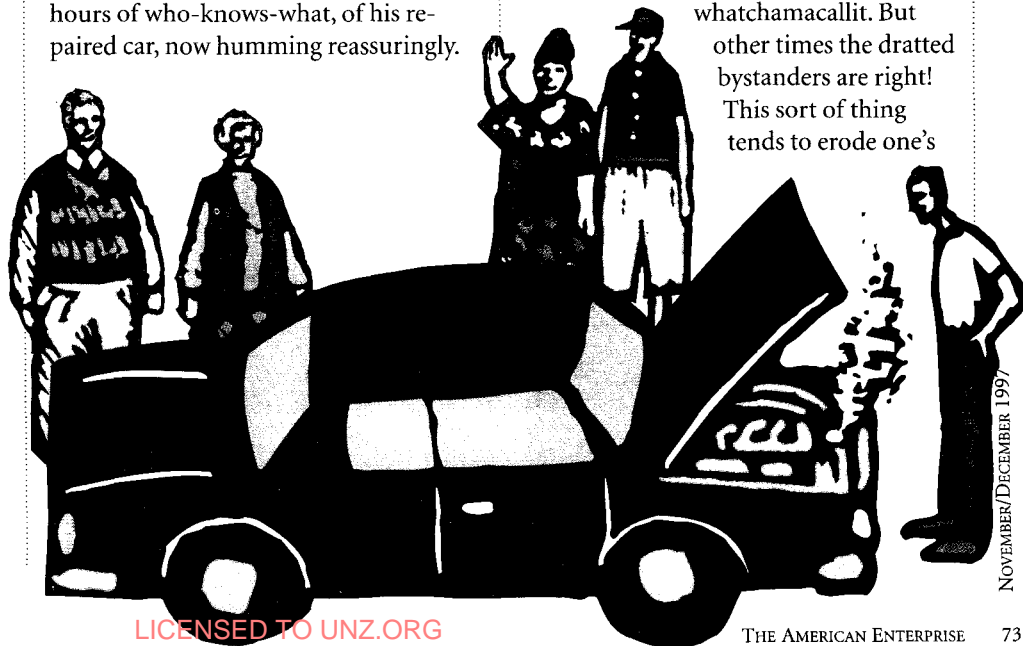
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so that all the customer sees is the miraculous appearance, after several hours of who-knows-what, of his repaired car, now humming reassuringly.

In our shop we charge \$30 an hour, and in many cases the customer just has to trust that we're really working steadily and skillfully to fix the short in their wiring, or the glitch in their fuel injection system. If there's a \$120 labor charge on a work order, we all want to feel that all of that time was spent productively on the problem.

That's why, when I first came to this rural outpost to live and ply my trade, I didn't much like having the customer, his wife and two children, Bill Stuart, Skrud Brekke, and the rancher waiting to have his truck tire repaired, all watching me scratch my head over the customer's wiring problem—and even offering pointers on how to do it! It tended to irritate and annoy me considerably when, as I studied the wiring diagram for the car in question, and poked my voltmeter leads here and there, Bill would casually point to a connector and ask me, "Why don't you try plugging that red wire back together?" and then pull deeply on his cigarette while watching my response. Sometimes I get to explain to the ignorant bystanders that the whosiwhatsit has nothing to do with the

whatchamacallit. But other times the dratted bystanders are right! This sort of thing tends to erode one's



treasured image as an expert who knows things that the layman couldn't possibly understand. Most city mechanics would find this sort of daily interference maddening, even intolerable, as I once did.

But can city mechanics leave their own cars parked outside all day unlocked with the keys in them? If a customer can't get there before closing time can urban tradesmen leave a minivan on the lot and be able to count on the customer coming in later and paying the bill? When it's bitter cold can you go to the local grocery store and see a row of cars idling unlocked at the curb while their owners shop inside, not a bit worried? In anonymous cities, if your car is stuck in the snow can you hail the first passerby, by name, and get pulled out? If you want a word with your state representative do you just wait a few weeks until he comes in with a flat in the back of his pickup, boots smeared with cow manure, and free to hang around for a chat? All of these things happen, and are thought normal, in our small ranching community.

I first came to accept observation and intervention on the part of village bystanders as a necessary evil, the price I was willing to pay to live here. But then I began to notice that even when they've seen him stumped and confused, our shop customers and drop-in visitors don't judge the mechanic harshly as long as he persists and eventually fixes the car. Customers don't watch you maliciously with lawsuits on their mind. They, especially the male ones, would just rather stand watching the mechanics struggle with their pickups, amidst the loud racket and questionable chemicals, than sit reading old magazines in the waiting room. You can look at it as community participation, not interference.

These kibitzers can even be useful. A few days ago Bill helped me force the air out of a customer's brakes, by sitting in the cab and pumping the brake pedal while I opened the bleeder screws. Later that afternoon he showed up with his power bleeder, a device which permits one man alone to do the job. He's going to let me use it, he said, because his leg had gotten sore from all that pedal stomping in the morning.

My wife and I hope to buy this repair garage from Paul, the 78-year-old founder and owner. We won't make many changes. And we won't put up a sign that says "No Customers Allowed in Work Area."

*Hendrik Mills lives with his children and wife in Harlem, Montana.*

## A CHILD'S EYE VIEW

By Suzy Ryan

Some time ago, I was eating lunch with my five-year-old son Keegan when the phone rang. A friend was calling to report exuberantly that a mutual acquaintance who had mulled over having an abortion had finally decided against

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it. After changing her mind many times, she and her husband chose to add the new baby to their family.

Overcome with joy, I dropped to my knees in thanksgiving. Momentarily, I forgot my son, who questioned, "Who are you praying for Mom?" After a quick petition for discernment I said, "A woman who did not get rid of the baby in her tummy."

As Keegan silently kept eating, I breathed a sigh of relief that I had skirted such an emotional issue with honesty. But about five minutes later my son asked, with a puzzled look, "Mom, how would she get rid of the baby?" Immediately I stopped cleaning-up and I looked straight into his innocent eyes. Mentally formulating an appropriate response, I waited for the words, but they evaded me. Tears spilled over my cheeks, as

Keegan asked, "Would she put the baby in the trash?" With the silence finally broken, I gently replied, "Yes, Keegan."

Totally indignant, Keegan opined, "Mom, she should give the baby to someone who wants one, like Janie." (Janie is a friend who has tried without success to conceive a child.) "Honey," I stumbled, "pregnancy is hard on a woman's body. You're sick and tired all the time, and remember how big my tummy was with your brother and sister?" Keegan pondered my words and answered, "Yes, you did get really fat, but Mom, it is still wrong to throw your baby in the trash."

Out of the mouths of babes! With those simple words, the abortion issue took on new clarity. As I contemplated my past fence-riding days my heart ached over my own timidity. I sorrowfully remembered how I had failed a close friend who confided her own desire for an abortion years earlier. When she called for my opinion I tried not to appear judgmental, advising "I wouldn't do it, but I understand that you believe this is your only alternative." Continuing the pregnancy and placing her baby up for adoption would delay her college career. Under the banner of compassion, I absolved myself from any responsibility for her problem. Yet I had the means to provide her another alternative. She could have lived with me and gathered support until finding a suitable couple for her baby. But she was naive and anxious, and I gave her zero options. My response was born of convenience. Obviously, the ultimate decision was hers, but today I would handle my end of that situation very differently. And, today, my friend regrets her impetuous decision to carry out her abortion.

It's strange how often children instinctively know the truth. My son immediately grasped the transgression in "throwing your baby in the trash." So how do so many college freshmen manage to overlook that? What are we teaching our children between five and eighteen?

*Suzy Ryan is a writer in southern California.*

