

Honorable Mention – Short Story

John Heaston

The First Car

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John strolled down Greenwood Avenue on a brisk sunny early September morning, over the Frisco tracks to First Street, and turned right, catching eyes from suspicious onlookers hovering around a Buick which had smoke spewing from under the hood. He continued seven more blocks to South Boulder and turned left for two more blocks to the New State Auto and Supply Company, proudly displaying several Buick automobiles on the dirt lot. A man in a dark suit, bowtie, and a Homburg hat emerged from a small building, and announced with a deep gruff voice, "You lost?"

John smiled. "No sir. I know where I am. I am looking to purchase a car."

The man chuckled to himself. "You need money to buy a car and we don't loan money to your type here."

"The money I have is as green as yours." John kneeled down and looked behind the front wheel of a Buick. He grabbed the tire and shook it.

"Hey. Don't do that. That car is..."

"... an unequipped Buick Model 29 Touring."

The salesman was surprised John knew about the car. "That's right. It is one of the most popular cars in the world. But I doubt you can afford it." Two other men in similar suits walked from a food cart near the far corner of the lot.

"Hey Joe! Is that Colored bothering you?" Mike was a tall bulky-looking man, with several recently wiped blobs of mustard stains on his lapel.

"Not any more. I expect he'll be on his way."

John wasn't ready to leave just yet. "The problem with the Buick is going to be the attached wood frame. The seats aren't very comfortable. Weak stitching. The motor is fair, although I just passed one broken down not five blocks from here. My guess ..."

Mike interrupted John. "I think it is time for you to leave, if you know what is good for you."

"Perhaps you are right." John nodded, smiled, and tipped his black Stetson to the three men and began walking off the lot. "I'll be on my way." He had no intention of buying a Buick. He just wanted to confirm in his mind what he really wanted.

John continued south six more blocks on Boulder without looking backward then turned east on Eighth Street to the Tulsa Motor Car Company. Salesmen, all wearing ties, were showing three Chalmers models to different customers. A similarly attired salesman approached John.

"These cars were built for the elite. Rockefeller himself has one."

"So I have read," John responded. "What does it take to purchase one of these fine automobiles?"

The salesman reacted surprised. "Purchase? What?" He continued, "You want to buy a car?"

"I do. I want this one," John said pointing to the open hood. "This automobile." John took a deep breath. "The Thirty Pony Tonneau! Named for its 30 horsepower, inline four-cylinder engine."

"This car has one of the finest engines made today," the salesman stated gliding his fingers over the front grill and pausing on the Chalmers emblem. "The Chalmers Thirty won the 1910 Glidden Tour, just a few months ago. It is a grueling 2,851-mile event. It was the first car

priced under \$4,000 to win. Quite frankly, we should charge more for these models. But the race did put Chalmers in the top ten of all automobiles this year!”

“Tell me more about *this* car!” John said with enthusiasm.

“This Chalmers Thirty has many outstanding features. The highlights are the three-speed manual transmission, comfortable custom leather seats, and a top speed of 50 miles an hour. This blue is a popular color.” A man in a three-piece suit strutted toward them. “Here comes my boss. His name is Mr. Bellamy.”

“Introduce me, Mr. Jacobson,” Bellamy barked.

“Of course sir. This is...”

“Hello,” John blurted. “Mr. Williams. John Williams.” John extended his hand, but Bellamy ignored it.

“Mr. Jacobson. One of our distinguished citizens and valued customers inquired of me why Mr. Williams was looking at one of our Chalmers?”

“I am interested in purchasing this car, Mr. Bellamy,” John interjected.

“You don’t say,” Mr. Bellamy responded glancing at John with an expression of disbelief, then back to Mr. Jacobson. “Has he been financially qualified?” Before he could answer, Bellamy faced John, and proclaimed, “Chalmers sell for at least \$1500. This model is more. Cash! The banks won’t allow us to loan money to your Race. Do you have that money on you right now?”

“On me? Now? No sir. But...”

“Mr. Jacobson, kindly escort this man off our lot until such time he can prove he has the ability to make a purchase.” Bellamy turned back to John. “We run a business here Mr. Williams. We can’t afford to spend time with you if you are not prepared to make a purchase.”

"I understand," John said in a firm voice. "Thank you sir. I will return before Friday this week, with cash."

"We'll see," Bellamy muttered. He made his way toward the office stopping to greet other patrons.

"Sorry about that, Mr. Williams. I was just recently hired. I should have known. But I haven't sold a car yet. Unfortunately it is true that Mr. Bellamy won't accept any other payment, including a bank check, from anyone who is... Anyway, I don't agree with that policy, but you know how it can be sometimes."

"Of course. It's business. However, when I do bring you the cash, will you sell me this car?"

"Yes. I will."

John extended his hand. "I will be back before the end of the week." Jacobson shook John's hand, and turned and walked away.

John opened the door to the Williams Confectionery on Greenwood Avenue with a bouquet of flowers in his hand as Augusta Stradford and Ollie Smitherman exited, each carrying a purse overflowing with bags of treats. "Here comes trouble."

"It is trouble every time I walk into Loula's candy store," Augusta smirked. Both women laughed.

"Hello John," Ollie said with a suspicious grin.

"Good afternoon Mrs. Smitherman. How are the newlyweds doing?" John said with a smile.

"Andrew and I are just fine. Absolutely just fine."

“What brings you up here from Muskogee?” John asked.

“Andrew had some work in Tulsa for the paper. Some advertising or something like that,” Ollie replied.

“We were just telling Loula that I’m hosting a birthday party this Saturday evening for J.B.,” Augusta said. “He’s going to be forty-nine this year.”

“And Andrew claimed he’d go if you went, John,” Ollie added. “Oh, and Mr. Stradford wants to hear all about the car you are going to buy.”

“How did you know about...?” John peered in the store at Loula.

“Loula might have mentioned it,” Ollie interjected. “Andrew wants to hear about it too.”

“You can count on us being there. Ladies.” John nodded to the women and entered the Confectionery. “Daddy!” Willie, almost six, sprinted from behind the candy counter and wrapped his arms around John’s legs.

“There’s my little man. Are you helping your mother, Willie?”

“Momma said she would give me a candy if I helped her clean the floor.”

“She did, huh. That’s known as a bribe.”

“A bribe?” Willie said with an inquisitive look.

“It’s when you do something for someone to get something you want in return.” Willie’s expression didn’t change. “Never you mind. Better get busy so you can get your treat. But first, give your momma these.” John handed Willie the bouquet of mixed flowers.

“Why did you get momma flowers?”

“No particular reason. She will like them.” John patted Willie on the butt. “Good boy.”

Loula wiped her hands on her plaid apron. Willie handed her the flowers. “Why thank you. What are these for?”

“I don’t know. Daddy said to give them to you. It’s a bribe.”

“A bribe! I see. I think he wants something from me.” Willie shrugged his shoulders.

Loula laughed. “Here is the broom. Start by sweeping over there,” she said pointing to an area in the corner of the store. Willie grabbed the broom handle and swung it around banging several chairs as he tried to maneuver it around the tables. Loula and John chuckled. “He is growing up so fast. I noticed you were speaking with Augusta and Ollie. Did they mention it’s John Stradford’s birthday party this weekend?”

“I told them we would be there.” John kissed her on the lips. “Looks like you have been busy.”

“I have. So what did you find out at the car lot?” Loula replied with apprehension. “Are those stories true? They don’t have much stock so they prefer to sell to whites only?”

“I think they think this Negro isn’t supposed *to be able* to buy a car!”

Loula chuckled. “They didn’t believe you had the money? Well I’m not surprised. They’re just ignorant. You could buy most any car four times over!” Loula put her arms around John’s neck. “So did you decide which one you wanted?”

“Yes. The Chalmers Thirty for sure.”

“The Thirty Pony Tonneau!” Loula hugged John. “You are going to be the talk of the town. You know that, right?”

“And you will be sitting right next to me.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Loula stepped back behind the counter as a couple teenage girls walked in.

“Hello Mr. and Mrs. Williams,” both girls said together, then giggled.

“Willie! It’s Julia and Anna,” Loula shouted. Willie peeked from around a table, dropped the broom, then ran and hugged Julia. “Would either of you be able to watch Willie this Saturday?”

“I can,” Julia responded.

“Yea!” Willie shouted.

John kissed Loula on the cheek. “We’ll talk more about it tonight, Lu.”

“Okay.”

“See you later Willie.”

“Bye daddy.” John left the store.

John stood up from the small square dinner table. “Another fine meal my dear.”

“The corn was especially fresh,” Loula responded as she washed out a pot in the sink.

John cleared the rest of the plates off the table and set them next to Loula. “I’ll go tuck Willie in. Meet you on the front porch in a little bit?”

Loula smiled at John. “Sure.”

John and Loula rented a small wooden framed two-bedroom house at 101 Greenwood Avenue. It wasn’t fancy, but also did not consume their income. It economically served all their needs. They were thrifty and believed God fearing Christians should be prosperous. John sat on a rocking bench on the porch.

Jo Oliver, walking a small dog, paused in front of John. “It’s a fine evening tonight, John.”

“That it is Jo. It surely is.” John replied. Jo lived next door. He was nearly sixty, and cared for his sister Mollie, her daughters, Julia and Anna, and her son, Sam. Jo’s wife had passed

not even a year ago and Mollie's husband was killed in a freak accident while working in an oil field just a month later. John would give them extra vegetables when he had them, and Loula would bring home treats from the confectionery for the kids.

Loula came from the house carrying a small plain bag. "I thought I heard your voice Mr. Oliver."

"Good evening, Mrs. Williams."

"Here." Loula handed Jo the bag. "There's a little something in there for you, Mollie, and the kids."

"You are too kind." Jo accepted the gift. "We'll see you again in church on Sunday." Loula waved as Jo entered his house.

Loula went back into their house and returned with two small ornate cups of hot tea. She sat next to John on the rocker and handed one to him. "Thought you might like some tea on this cool evening."

John pulled a small blanket draped over the arm of the rocker and spread it out over Loula's legs. After sipping his tea, he put his other arm around her and started to rock very slowly. "So, John. Let me ask you one question about the car. I know you have been looking for some time now." Loula sipped her tea. "I just want to know why you want a car? We work just blocks from where we live. Everything we need is right around us."

"That is true. But..." John took a deep breath. He placed his tea cup on the small table next to the rocker. "I have been thinking about that. Having an automobile is about freedom. It means we do not have to rely on anyone else to go wherever we want, whenever we want."

“Himm,” Loula mumbled. “A horse gives you the freedom to go where you want. Or you can take a train to go almost any place else. Isn’t that freedom?” Loula was intelligent. Logical. She had a natural ability to make sound business decisions. John valued her judgement.

“I suppose it is in some respects.” John continued. “But it isn’t the same. You can’t take a horse anywhere far at night. Not safely, anyway. And we have both been on one when the heavens open up to a downpour.” Loula smiled. “As for the train, they are good for longer distances. But they only run at certain times, and the coach for our Race is always crowded.” John sipped his tea. “Have you noticed how the number of cars around Tulsa is increasing?”

“Yes. I have. But the men who own them have money. Certainly more money than we do,” Loula replied.

“Probably. But today, while I was walking around, I saw a man, a woman, and two children, well dressed, standing around their car which had obviously experienced some sort of mechanical problem. They had no idea what to do. And at that moment, it occurred to me, what if I, you and I, had a car repair business?”

“Me? Fix cars? Ha! Are you not feeling well Mr. Williams?”

“Lu. Please hear me out,” John said seriously.

“I think I know where you are going with this.” Loula put her head on John’s shoulder. “If you believe that an automobile offers a sense of freedom, you know everyone is going to want one. Is that what you are saying?”

“That is what I am saying. You know I can fix almost anything. Some of the cars being made now use inferior parts. It is probably why some are so much cheaper than others. It means...”

“So why the Chalmers?” interrupted Loula. “Why *that* car?”

“I think it is the best car, for the money, being made.”

Loula took a deep breath. “Okay. If you think it is best.”

“Okay? So we agree to get the car? So the flowers worked?”

Loula smiled. “Go to the bank tomorrow. You may need to give them notice to take out that much money.”

“God truly blessed me when I found you.”

Loula leaned into John and kissed him. “I love you, Mr. Williams.”

“I love you too, Mrs. Williams.”

She stood up and stretched. “Coming to bed soon?”

“I will be right in.” John gazed at Loula with a smile.

Loula folded the blanket and put it on the arm of the rocker. She picked up the two cups and opened the front door, paused, and turned around. “Do you know how to drive?” Loula chuckled to herself while entering the house.

John’s face turned to one of shock. He had never driven a car before.

John entered the Central National Bank building located on the corner of East Second and Boston. He followed the roped off area where Black citizens of Tulsa were able to do their banking. John recognized the woman behind the brass metal bars. “Good morning to you Miss Alma.”

“You too, Mr. Williams. What can I do for you this morning?”

“I will be taking out some money from my account to purchase an automobile. I will be needing seventeen hundred dollars.”

“Of course. That amount of money will require a signature from my supervisor. Please fill out this withdrawal form for me,” Alma instructed as she slid a paper to John.

“I can wait a day if you need more time.”

“No need Mr. Williams. We have the money in the bank for you. Please give me a moment.” Alma closed and locked her bank drawer and stepped over to a man sitting at a desk behind all the tellers. John couldn’t make out what they were saying, but the man stood up and approached.

“Mr. Williams?” The balding man was white, and considerably shorter than John.

“Yes sir.”

“My name is Mr. Calloway. I understand you want seventeen hundred to purchase an automobile. Do you have the Intent to Purchase form?”

John looked puzzled. “No sir. I was told I needed the cash first before they would speak with me about the purchase.”

“Where are you purchasing the vehicle?”

“The Tulsa Motor Car Company. I spoke with Mr. Jacobson.”

“I will try calling them.” Calloway went back to his desk and picked up the phone.

“What kind of car are you wanting, Mr. Williams?” Alma asked.

“A Chalmers Thirty.”

“That’s nice.” It was obvious to John that Alma had no idea what kind of car he was talking about. Mr. Calloway returned.

“Mr. Williams, I am afraid that no one there knew who you were. Mr. Bellamy, the man I spoke with, said he has no recollection of you shopping for a car. He went on the say that he

hasn't sold a car to any Colored before. Lastly, he stated all the cars on the lot have been sold. I am sorry." Mr. Calloway returned to his desk.

Alma unlocked her cash drawer. "Will there be anything else Mr. Williams?" Disgusted, John shook his head and left the bank.

By the time John arrived back at the Tulsa Motor Car Company he had worked himself into an emotional frenzy. He marched straight up to the modest office building. Mr. Bellamy, heading home for the evening, met John at the door. "I remember you. You're that Colored man who wanted to buy one of my Chalmers."

"I am. I came back to inquire why you said you had no recollection of me?"

"I never said that," Bellamy protested.

"The teller supervisor at the bank, Mr. Calloway, said that you did." John was fuming.

"No matter. Do you have the money with you?"

"No!" John shouted.

"Your kind don't seem to understand. We are a business. No money? No car! There. That simple enough for you? Although it wouldn't make any difference if you had the cash. We don't have any car to sell you. It's time, once again, for you to get off my lot."

"Excuse me, Mr. Bellamy," Jacobson said squeezing through the door jamb. "I will escort Mr. Williams off the lot."

"See to it." Mr. Bellamy disappeared back into the office.

As they approached the street, Jacobson looked around, then pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. "Here. Take this to the bank. It is the Intent to Purchase form you need. But be quick about it. I tagged the car you wanted as sold. It's parked around the side. If Bellamy finds out, he won't ever sell you a car and I will be fired."

“Why didn’t you give me this before?”

“Like I said, I am new. Plus, sometimes, I am compromised between what is the right thing to do, and what I can do, without jeopardizing my job.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jacobson. But I am not sure I will be able to make it back today. The bank will be closing soon.”

“Tomorrow is Friday. Mr. Bellamy does not come into the office until around eleven on Fridays. If you can be here shortly after nine in the morning, tomorrow, I will sell you a car.”

“I will go to the bank first thing, and then come straight here.” John nodded and left for home.

John was standing at the bank doors when it opened the next morning. He proceeded to the same teller. “Miss Alma, I have the Intent to Purchase form and the withdrawal slip for you,” John said handing her the papers. “I would like to make a withdrawal of seventeen hundred dollars.”

Alma took the papers over to Mr. Calloway. He looked at John then scribbled his signature. She disappeared into a back room only for a minute, then returned to her station carrying a handful of cash. “You will be receiving a combination of hundred dollar bills, several fifty dollar bills, and the rest in twenty dollar bills.” Alma counted out the money in front of John. He took it and put it in his leather satchel bag. “Is there anything else I can do for you Mr. Williams?” Without saying a word, John nodded and left the bank.

Mr. Jacobson was standing outside smoking a cigarette when John arrived at the car lot. He took one more drag then flipped it to the ground to the other fifty plus butts. “Did you get the money?”

“Right here,” John replied patting his satchel. Jacobson raised his chin and peered at the black bag. “You don’t believe me?”

“It’s policy, Mr. Williams.” John opened the bag and showed Jacobson the money. “Okay. Good. Can you take it out for me?” John removed the money. “The car you are purchasing comes with several extras including the canopy top and the windshield. The cost is seventeen hundred dollars.”

“I am ready to buy it.” John counted out the money and handed it to Jacobson.

“Let me type up the paperwork. Wait here.” Jacobson went into the office while John examined and marveled at the blue Chalmers. Over an hour passed.

Jacobson finally emerged from the office with several pieces of paper blackened with an abundance of ink. “I need you to sign this document first. It is the bill of sale showing you paid for the car. You can see here that you purchased a new 1911 Chalmers model Thirty for a total of...” Jacobson paused. “Oh no. He’s early.”

Mr. Bellamy pulled onto the lot in his polished red Rolls Royce, parking near the side of the office. “What is going on here Jacobson?” he said stepping out of the car.

“Mr. Williams is purchasing one of our automobiles. He already paid the \$1700. The money is in the office safe.”

“I thought all the cars were sold including that blue one over there,” Bellamy said pointing.

“It was, sir,” Jacobson replied. “I sold it to Mr. Williams.”

“What? When? Is that the paperwork?” Bellamy jerked the paperwork from Jacobson’s hand. “It’s not signed yet.”

“No sir. Mr. Williams was just about to sign it.”

“Your figures are incorrect Mr. Jacobson.” Bellamy’s tone of voice was getting aggressive. “You didn’t include the... the service fee.”

“The what fee, sir?” Jacobson questioned.

“It’s new. The service fee we charge to people of...” Bellamy paused.

“To people of what, sir?” Jacobson asked.

“The fee is a forty dollar service fee we began to charge the beginning of this month. You should have been aware of it.”

“But sir, Mr. Williams already paid for the car.”

“Mr. Williams has not paid the full price of the car!” Bellamy yelled. “The full price is \$1740. Now, void this paperwork and we will sell the car to another patron later today!”

John reached into his pocket and pulled out three crisp twenty dollar bills. “Here, Mr. Bellamy. Here is the remaining forty dollars, as well as a tip to Mr. Jacobson for doing such an excellent job. He is a fine employee and speaks very highly of you and your business. It is very obvious you trained him well.” John held out the money to Mr. Bellamy.

Bellamy stared at the dollars and shook his head. He looked at Jacobson. “Sell him the damn car!” Bellamy stormed into the office.

Jacobson took the money from John and smiled. “Let’s get these papers signed so you can be on your way.” Jacobson took a pen from his pocket and handed it to John.

After signing all the papers, they walked over to the car. “Do you know how to drive Mr. Williams?”

“Uh, not really,” John embarrassingly replied.

“It’s not hard. Let me show you.” Jacobson opened the drivers door for John.

It was barely daybreak on Sunday when John was stretched out over the Chalmers engine. He used his Golden Rule tape to measure different components and parts. He had a sketch pad next to him, and was drawing a metal bar with a hole at each end. "Eighteen and one quarter inches, with two three-quarter inch bolts secured by a cotter pin." John walked around to the outwardly turned front wheel and stuck his head under the fender. "So that is how the wheel is able to turn. Clever design."

Loula appeared around the side of the house dressed ready for church. "What in God's name are you doing John?"

Startled, John raised his head so fast it bumped into the curved fender underside. "Ouch!"

"Is there a problem with the car already?"

"No my dear. You know me. I just want to learn how it works. The parts. The machinery. The..." Loula stood by the side of the house, the sunlight glowing through her long white hemlock dress decorated with a textured bodice and long puff sleeves adorned with a simple scalloped ruffling at the hem. The seam followed the gentle curves of her body from her waist where pearl buttons sealed the front row up to her neck. She wore the black onyx brooch he had given her for her last birthday. "You are... an angel."

Loula smiled and curtsied. "Thank you."

John put his pad and tape measure down and walked up to Loula and passionately kissed her.

"Mom!" Willie shouted from inside the house. "Can I eat now?"

John and Loula both laughed. "I am bringing in your father, Willie. Please wait." Loula took John's hand and pulled him toward the house. "You need to get ready for church."

John unhooked the canopy and folded it like an accordion. He lifted up Willie and sat him on the backseat on the driver's side. He opened the passenger door and held Loula's hand as she stepped into the car. "I think you will find the leather seats comfortable." John checked to make sure the windshield was locked in place. He sat in his seat, pushed a button, and started the car. He pressed the clutch, and moved a side lever until it clicked. He turned around and looked at his son. "You ready back there, Willie? You look sharp young man. I like your cap. Hold on!"

John pulled out onto Greenwood Avenue and crossed the tracks. He turned right on First. Loula looked over her shoulder. "Isn't the church the other direction?"

John smiled. "It is. I thought we could drive around a couple blocks first."

"I don't want to be late."

"My dear. This car can go fifty miles an hour. We will be to church early. Promise." John turned down Boston.

"John!" A.J. Smitherman shouted standing on the side of the road holding a camera. John stepped on a pedal and pulled on the break lever.

"Are you working on a Sunday, Andrew?" Loula enquired.

"I needed to take a few pictures for the A. L. Black Print shop across the street for an ad we are running next week in the Muskogee Cimeter. There aren't many people around on Sunday morning, so I can get some good shots. Speaking of which... So this is the car."

"Yes," John responded. "This is it. The 1911 Chalmers Thirty."

"Wow. You actually did it. You bought a car."

"Lots of people have cars, Andrew," Loula commented.

"Oh no. Not like this. I need to take your picture." Andrew stepped back and spread the wooden tripod legs on the ground and attached his camera.

“This is ridiculous,” Loula exclaimed.

“Loula, you look dashing. And Willie in his cap? Perfect. Smile everyone.” Willie stared at the camera obviously confused while John and Loula were not posed for the picture. “Got it! I am photographing history!”

“I think you drank too much Choctaw last night Mr. Smitherman. What are you talking about? History? It’s just a car!”

“Oh no, Loula. I beg to differ. This is history. You know you are the first.”

“First what?” Loula said with curiosity in her voice.

“Not what. But who. The first of our Race to own a car in Greenwood. Heck, I think probably in all of Tulsa. You not only bought a car. You bought *the* car. *The first car!*”

“Is that true, John?”

“Apparently. I didn’t know.”

“Oh it’s true alright,” Andrew continued. “You two are a symbol of prosperity for our community. Of hope. A beacon of light for our Race to follow.” Andrew smiled, then took a step backward without looking and accidentally tripped over the tripod.

“Be careful!” Loula yelled.

Andrew caught his camera just before it hit the street. “That was close!” Andrew straightened himself up. “So, John, driving isn’t too hard, is it?”

“Oh no. It’s very difficult,” John sarcastically responded. “And I don’t think you’re coordinated enough!”

Andrew quipped, “And you still think you’re funny!”

“How about you and Ollie come join us for supper next Friday,” Loula offered. “John will show you *the* car!”

“Great! I will let her know. Take care,” Andrew said.

“You do the same.” John put the car in gear and drove down the street with a smile on his face. He meandered through the city down different streets with people gawking as they passed. It was a beautiful Sunday morning, September 11, 1910, when John drove out of Tulsa for the first time.

Loula raised her hands above the windshield catching the cool breeze. “Freedom,” She whispered. She lowered her arms and gazed at John.

John glanced over at his wife and smiled. “Yes. Freedom.”