

“The Friendly Neighborhood Car Gauger”

By Joe Chelius

First Place

Each Wednesday evening when Phil Tomasulo would come to his mother’s house for dinner, Louise Harst would stand at her living room window and frown at the small, petty injustice of it: Rose setting out her two sorry lawn chairs as early as mid-morning, to reserve a parking space in front of her house, and then Phil, a big car driver, cruising up around five or so like some pampered homing pigeon, happily assured of a roosting spot. Phil, Louise suspected, was a prime ulcer candidate—large-hammed and peevish-looking, whose joints groaned in protest every time he took a step. On Wednesdays, on what she’d come to regard as rigatoni night, he’d come straight from the engineering firm where he worked wearing a long woolen coat and spectacles. It amused her to see him in spectacles. As a teenager he’d been a baby bull in muscle tee shirts, preening in the sun and forever applying wax to whatever fancy sports car he happened to be driving. Now, when he’d show up at his mother’s, he’d be carrying a skinny loaf of Italian bread under one arm, putting her in mind of a temperamental orchestra musician arriving at a concert house on opera night, all huffy and self-important.

Rose’s preparations were operatic enough. Louise and Rose had been next door neighbors for more than thirty years, and were friendly in a way, but Louise had never been able to understand why Rose made such a fuss over Phil’s weekly visit. Wednesday mornings it was all she’d talk about, fretting how she would have to get herself to the butcher’s for the special sausage Phil liked. The car’s arrival on their cramped Philadelphia block irritated Louise—its shape and color, the way it resembled something to be driven by a politician or a funeral director

instead of a packaging engineer. At the window, not wanting to confess to feeling envious (her own son, a pharmaceutical marketing executive who lived with his family in New Jersey), she would find herself hoping that Phil would be late or that he wouldn't come at all. But the car would come—it always came—and once it did Rose's door would rattle like the latch on a jack-in-the box. Then Rose, in a boxy white sweater and prim ankle socks, would pop onto her porch in spirited welcome while Louise stood behind the curtains, feeling as spiteful as a child excluded from a birthday party.

Such gall, she would think. Yet the brunt of her disgust would be reserved not for Rose and her lard-bottomed son, but for herself, for connecting her feelings of isolation and neglect with children and birthday parties. She got by alone. Her husband had died years ago, just as Rose's had. But unlike Rose, whose happiness and well-being depended on endless family christenings and chauffeured rides to the Atlantic City casinos, Louise frequented the library and made solitary trips to True Value Hardware, trading words like "joyce" and "jamb" with a crew of earnest-talking, insignia-bearing clerks whose good-natured teasing about her abilities ("Geez, Louise, you should have your own TV show!") helped bolster her spirits against the damaging effects of idleness and self-pity. Louise accepted their kidding like a complimentary peppermint. It made her feel clean and invigorated, so that on Wednesdays, if she happened to drive home to discover that Rose had sneaked the chairs out, she'd simply park farther up the block, telling herself that arguing over a parking space just wasn't worth the trouble. Rose, after all, wasn't proficient with a caulking gun or a pair of pliers. Rose was good on the telephone. Her best practical solution during a crisis was to call up a relative and wait for assistance. Still, Louise was wary about being taken advantage of. More and more often these days she would return from an errand on a Monday, say, or a Tuesday, and find both chairs out, taking the sun like a

pair of decrepit sentries. And lately, it wasn't only Phil who was receiving VIP treatment. Plumbers were receiving it, and the perogie man. Sometimes it would be Rose's friends, sweeping her off for group hair frosting appointments or cruising onto the street as giddy as a one-car wedding party, tooting on the horn as they made ready for another rollicking assault on the casinos. Louise held her council. For a while. She wanted to petition their other neighbors, get them involved, but the Campbells, a young couple who relied on public transportation, didn't own a car, and the Manning's fleet of vehicles included two snow mobiles that sat corralled all summer in a rusted trailer.

One sleeting March morning, Louise had a doctor's appointment. For the past few weeks she'd been suffering from pain in her abdomen and now the doctor, who thought she might have a blockage, wanted her to drink about a quart of barium and report the following week to the hospital for a day of tests. The word "hospital" frightened Louise. She saw herself being wheeled around all day on a gurney, wearing a flimsy gown that tied in the back and having a series of interns press on her liver.

On the examining room table, on paper that crinkled with every movement, she inquired, "Should I pack a lunch?"

"A lunch?" The doctor was young and wore tiny spectacles that glinted like surgical instruments.

"A day of tests. You make it sound like a picnic, a time of fun and prizes."

He was serious and overly solicitous. Perhaps he was the one with the blockage.

"Well, no," he said. "It won't exactly be a picnic."

On the drive home, panic knocked. She refused to admit it. Instead, she concentrated on her driving as if she believed that vigilance on the road was a safeguard for protecting one's health. But the day was conspiring against her. It was still sleeting, for one thing. The sky was the color of nickel, and when she turned onto her block and discovered the lawn chairs out, thieving space, their chrome legs assaulted her eyes with the harshness of the doctor's spectacles. She braked the car and got out. Then she folded up the chairs and tossed them onto Rose's front yard. Rose, like an errant ball-bearing hitting concrete, was out of her house in seconds. She stood on her porch like a distressed flagman at a construction site, wildly waving both arms over her head.

"Louise, what are you doing? I require those chairs."

"Require?" Louise said, summoning support from what she imagined to be a constituency of incredulous neighbors at her back. Rose often got words wrong. The chest congestion she suffered from on humid days was *chest inflation*. The smelly lacquer she used on her dog's paws to make them glisten like party favors was *nail laxative*. Louise suspected that Rose, like a doted-on child, was dumb enough to misuse words but canny enough to comprehend the effect it might have on listeners. Appearing disarming and defenseless came easily to Rose. Skilled at recruiting help, she'd hand knotted trash bags over her porch railing to surprisingly compliant teenagers who'd haul them down to the curb for her. Or, sweeping the sidewalk in white sweater and socks, she'd halt passing strollers and dispense advice on tolerant mothers. There was, Louise believed, a cost to playing the role of dopey, good-willed ambassador for the block: People liked you better, and helped you more, but you lost too much in dignity and self-respect.

Louise, gruff grammarian, spoke up.

“*Require* suggests need, Rose. Where’s your need? Is there a sale at Emilio’s meat store I don’t know about? Are the girls scooting over right this minute, so you can all load up your freezers for the month?”

Rose went distressingly coy, another irritating habit.

“Isn’t it always an occasion, Louise, when a son takes time out of his busy schedule to have lunch with his mother?”

She could dish hurt this way—carelessly, with just a hint of malice. Louise thought of her son in the New Jersey suburbs, where nobody needed to parallel park. He worked long hours and traveled frequently. It was a source of pride with her that she rarely, if ever, burdened him with trivial complaints. She faced her neighbor, Rose of the attentive son and laxative dog.

“You may want this parking space, Rose,” she said, “but you certainly don’t require it.”

She got back in her car and prepared to park. But at that moment Phil rolled up in his massive automobile and, with an abruptness that surprised her, stole into the parking space. She glared at him in the rearview: He had to have noticed her. On most days, parking for him was a science; it required a fierce exactitude, an unwavering application to the rudiments of engineering. Kids would stop throwing a football around to watch him at it—his endless alignment of rubber to concrete, his coming closer each time, his patiently sticking his nose out and trying again. Louise honked at him, twice, this dour old neighbor of his mother who apparently liked to sit in the middle of her street all day and block traffic. She signaled frantically. “Me,” she said, pointing to herself and then to the parking space. He, a packaging engineer, made no connection. She watched him get out of the car and go to his mother, who began to beat him about the overcoat as though he’d journeyed through a sandstorm to see her.

Louise sat motionless. She considered plowing into his car—that would certainly get his attention—but instead she started up the block. It was then she caught Rose's expression in the rearview. There was pleasure in it, Louise was sure—the insensitive mirth of an inglorious victor.

She found parking at the end of the block. Then she pressed herself forward and walked through the sleet, her car keys in one hand and a grubby bag of physician's samples in the other. Her intention now was to give them an earful, Rose and her pasta-bellied son, but the two of them were safely housed by the time she made it back. She imagined them at table, Rose recounting the story while Phil sat stolid as a piece of hulking machinery, silently gorging his food. She stopped at his automobile. It sat before her, blank as a blackboard, its oversized presence inviting indictment. She considered the keys in her hand; she'd never been short on indictment where Rose was concerned. Everything fit in Rose's life. People looked out for her—her son, her nephews, the perogie man; they shielded her from loneliness and neglect the way the plastic on her furniture shielded it from city dirt and coffee spills. Louise drew the house key up from her ring as though it were the blade of a pocket knife. She dragged it across the driver's door, leaving a long, disjointed streak, and then dragged it the other way, digging deep to gouge the paint. She stood back, smiling uneasily and looking toward the house. No one was at the window; no one was even on the street.

Inside, she began to heat soup for lunch. She kept her coat on, and when the soup was ready she poured it into a bowl and ate it over the stove as if she expected to be summoned on a trip. Twenty minutes passed. She found herself going repeatedly to the window and looking out. A UPS truck rumbled past, rattling the windows. No one else appeared.

Past two o'clock she heard a tap on her screen door. She looked up from her book and listened, her stomach muscles clenching. The tap came again, timid but persistent, like the plaintive tapping of a solitary bird.

Louise went to the door. On her front porch she saw Rose standing slightly out of view, a white sweater draped over her shoulders.

"Trouble, Louise."

"Trouble? *What* trouble?" She came outside.

Rose rolled her eyes toward Phil, who stood touching the paint on his car and looking as crestfallen as a boy with a damaged birthday bicycle.

"Philly's car," Rose said almost in a whisper, as if she didn't want him to hear. "Someone has gauged the paint."

A tight smile quivered on Louise's lips.

"I think you mean *gouged*, don't you, Rose?"

Phil addressed her from the sidewalk. "Notice anyone on the street earlier, Mrs. H.? Any of the kids around here?"

As an adolescent, he had always spoken to her with courtesy, but when had this chummy Mrs. H. business gotten started? On rigatoni nights, if she happened to catch him outside, he'd mumble a tired "Good evening, Mrs. H.," and she'd glance toward the sky and say, "Yep, it's certainly evening, all right." His amused response to this quip—a distracted sort of chuckle—gave her a grudging pleasure.

She thought for a moment. The neighborhood had grown shabby in recent years, the kids left unsupervised, toting audio appliances as large as suitcases. Frequently, they would appear

on the block during hours when she would expect them to be in the classroom. His mentioning them gave her a way out.

“There may have been someone,” she said tentatively.

“Kids from the block?”

Louise prided herself on candor. The voice in her head, as she pretended to mull over the question, sounded hollow, insincere.

“No,” she said. “I don’t remember seeing these boys before. But then you never know. Can’t say I recognize many of the kids on the street these days.”

Phil nodded. “You can say that again.” He scanned the block, his gaze falling severely on the house directly across the street. On this dun March day it made a dreary sight, with the droopy eyelid of its low shade, its dented metal trash receptacles, its cheap riding toys lining the porch in a chaotic traffic jam. Other houses, with painted bricks and railings—the garish colors clashing—provided little in the way of cheer.

“There was a time,” he said, looking around him, “when maintaining your property meant something in this country.”

She knew what he was getting at, or thought she did: maintaining your property and being a certain color, he might just as well have said. She disliked such insinuations, considered herself superior to bigoted thinking. But again, when dished up a fat, tempting serve—the chance to put him in his place--she could only swat back feebly.

“Five for sale signs on the block,” she mused. “The realtors must be thrilled.”

Under the white sweater, Rose began rubbing her bare arms as if to ignite a spark. “It’s sad,” she said. “So many these days come from disfunctioning homes.”

Louise considered the word, imagining cartoon households in which pipes with bulging eyeballs spurted water and the electricity kept shutting itself off.

“Houses neglected, people’s property all gauged up.” Rose leaned toward Louise conspiratorially. “Sometimes,” she said, “it can be the people you might least expect!”

And there it was: that bright canniness that seemed hardly possible in so fey and buffoonish a person. Did Rose suspect her? She had drawn the sweater tighter around her shoulders. “Cold,” she said with a shudder. Louise sensed her leaning closer, a rotund friar inviting confessions.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Louise said. Then, before she knew what her tongue was up to: “I have a fun-filled day in store next week. I’ll be checking into the hospital.”

Checking in? Talk about misusing words. Still, it did the trick, as she knew it would. No one would be more frightened of hearing such news as Rose, who converted other people’s symptoms into scrap for her own inoperable tumor sites.

“The hospital! Louise, no! Louise, why? What do they say is wrong with you?”

The pain in her abdomen flared up. Oh, nothing much, she wanted to say, if you don’t count slipping down a notch or two in personal integrity, gauging up people’s property and being complicit in their racial insinuations.

“Some abdominal thing,” she said. “They want me to drink about a gallon of some milk shake concoction so a gang of doctors can decide if my plumbing needs rerouting.”

“Oh, Louise, I’m so sorry. Have you called Michael?”

Of course, Louise thought, the calling of sons--Rose’s solution for every crisis.

“No,” she said. “It’s nothing. I wouldn’t want to worry him. Anyway, I just got home from the doctor’s. I haven’t had time to call anyone.”

“The hospital,” Rose said again. “Louise, are you frightened?”

Rose’s question, so disarming and direct, was delivered with a vulnerability that was even harder to take than was her flair for histrionics.

“Frightened? Not really. Maybe a little. I am tired, though.” Tired of herself, she thought. “I’d like to go back inside and rest awhile.”

Phil spoke up from the street. “Sorry to hear about your troubles, Mrs H.” Then he asked, “Hey, how are you fixed for a driver? Do you need me to swing by next week?”

“Oh, that’s a wonderful idea,” Rose chimed in.

Swing by! For a moment she felt as though she’d signed on to the Rose entourage—the transported and the looked after. It was tempting in a way. A sudden constriction in her throat accompanied the pain in her abdomen. It was a full body assault.

“No,” she said with more abruptness than she intended. “I’ll be fine. I can drive myself. It’s kind of you to offer, though.”

Then another thought occurred to her. Would she even be permitted to drive after undergoing such a test? Her mind calculated quickly. There were buses and trolleys, her own steady feet. She’d figure it out, but later—when she was herself again.

“All right, Mrs. H. But if you change your mind, I’m available. Ma can set up the chairs.” He went around to the driver’s door. “And word to the wise, Ladies. This neighborhood? I don’t see it improving. Not by a long shot. My advice? Sell. Now. When you still have the chance.”

That evening as she sat at the kitchen table with pen and scratch paper, she struggled with the thought of seeking restitution from someone who suffered from *chest inflation* and who applied *nail laxative* to a dog's paws. "A word to the wise," she wanted to write. "We live on a public street, where everyone has the same parking rights. Signed, Your Friendly Neighborhood Car Gauger.

But the note she composed was restrained and dignified—showed her willingness to be held accountable.

Dear Neighbors,

This morning when I returned from my doctor's appointment I may have brushed up against Phil's car. Please forgive my clumsiness. Of course, I will pay for whatever damage I may have *conflicted* (she vigorously crossed out) afflicted.

Respectfully,

Louise H.