

James Beach

“The Chassis Concept”

CLEARING diamond dust from his front teeth with his tongue, the boy lifted a pudgy cheek from the plate. He wheezed in the light dust.

“You trip like a ’tard,” a teammate scolded.

“My *grandpa* plays better’n you,” scoffed another.

The boy remained on the plate, elbows akimbo, a peasant in their kingdom. If he were a prince he would be a stellar ballplayer—movies all showed poised, agile princes. Peasants watched sports on satellite. His dad, acting as co-coach, was busy with other boys. Advice to simply ignore the taunts and jeers of teammates—

“Just ignore ’em?” the boy had had to ask his dad, incredulous.

“That’ll really get their goats,” his dad had assured.

“Their goats? What are we, peasants?”

“They want to be all-stars just as much as you, Son. All of us, playing the great game, our souls sparkling underneath. God leant us each a chip off the heaven block. It’s up to us alone to polish the diamond inside ourselves, to shine like we mean business.”

—the advice was maybe wrong.

Tasting dirt, the boy wobbled to his feet, swept the puckered knees of his orange-white striped uniform with his blood-crusty palms. He tucked his cap in his hip pocket.

He watched his dad swing his jaw suddenly toward left field, as if following a pop fly. The scrimmage continued. Somebody hit a grounder—the clank of leather on aluminum made the air teem with breeze-distortions of shouts and whistles.

By now the boy had left the diamond. As he trudged up the grass hillock he thought about how he and his dad played catch; about the sour endings, with Dad displaying a rare scowl, and Son working up his sulk. A disconnect, a misfiring, their games.

“Snack time, lard-o?” a teammate yelled.

“This game ain’t over,” sang another.

“Wuss.”

Their words rang elliptically until the boy cleared the mowed tip of the park basin with a triumphant wheeze. When he glanced back, he could see his dad at first base, coaching stellar player Ty Sneeth. Ty Sneeth was a sworn enemy since Grade 2.

Fontana was littered with SUVs from the scrimmage. Across it the boy could go off-road into a huge summer-dry, reedy lot where he and Henry Mosley built a lean-to last year that nobody else found. They did a lot of stuff together until Henry’s mom had had to move again.

The lean-to was still there—in parts. A hand-painted chipboard campaign sign from the town crazy’s property (what sense was a *Green Party*?) gave shelter to a frenzied mess of solar-blind silvery bugs; they re-tucked themselves below the damp, pale grass. When he climbed on a sun-bleached vinyl floater, a musty stink discharged as he sank his girth.

Under a clump of leaves was stashed their palm-size electronic gamer in a styrofoam cooler buried up to its rim. Henry had sworn it would last the winter in the plastic bag— a something had got in and chewed a hole in the bag and let in snow or rain, or whatever.

“This supposed to be a fort?”

The boy quit messing with the dead game-player and looked up to see a wiry kid, about his height, holding a bright green dune buggy and its box remote. He wore a faded “Star Wars” shirt with stiff baggy jeans and sloppy shoes. His grown-out crew-cut sat a shade lighter than his uni-brow.

“What if it is?”

“Not much of a fort,” the new kid said. Big lips muffled his crackly voice. A sketchy moustache and a smattering of tiny pimples told the boy the kid was probably already in junior high.

“It was a lean-to, last summer,” the boy told the teen, stepping in the damp gray silhouette of the sign/roof. The 2 x 6 that had supported an edge of the campaign ad was weathered, unbowed, rough. He kicked at it, knew it was half buried in the ground, at Henry’s insistence—it vibrated.

“You tryin’ to demo’ it?”

“Dunno,” the boy said.

The new kid parked his green dune buggy on a dirt mound to join in the battery on the 2 x 6. Before long the board splintered, came apart. It left a raggedy stump jutting out of the ground.

“Only idiots love baseball,” the teen said, studying the boy beneath the uniform.

“Yeah?” the boy challenged, pulling the baseball cap from his hip pocket in a show of contempt. “I just quit.” He picked up some of the 2 x 6, jammed it through the adjustable back of the cap, and chucked the thing into the reeds. He never wanted to play ball again; he wanted to strip off his uniform.

They stared awhile at where the orange cap disappeared in the reeds.

“Bet my buggy can jump it,” the teen asked next, indicating the stump.

“Bet it can’t,” the boy answered.

“Bet it can,” the teen said. He retrieved his toy and paced about a yard from the stump before positioning it at the obstacle.

“Let *me* drive,” said the boy.

“C’*m* on.”

“Hold on.”

“Can I *ever* play with it?”

“Sure, later. Only if I jump it, you owe me something.”

“*kay*.”

The teen surveyed the ground, adjusted some levers on his remote, punched a button that pitched the dune buggy forward.

Surprised at the poise and agility of the vehicle—at the accuracy of the remote signals—the boy watched the buggy go up and over the toothy stump with little more than a wobble.

“How’d you do that?” he asked, admiring the operator.

“You owe me. That was the deal.”

“So how? That buggy doesn’t look like much.”

“Looks matter for squat! This chassis, see here? now that’s where the money’s at.”

The boy sighed. The chassis looked like a squared-off little skateboard—a dented, plain metal rectangle surrounded by big rubber wheels. He touched it, felt its cool with his fingers.

The teen grinned, showing off clear plastic dental-work. “It’s all in the chassis,” he explained, tongue working expertly despite the braces.

“The body’s got nothing to do with it? I get it.”

The teen retrieved the buggy and flipped it over, showing the boy its scratched, slab-like undercarriage. “This top here, this hot little dune buggy design frame? is nothing. It’s junk. You could put almost any thing on this and it’d run the exact same.

“See,” the teen continued, “this is a universal idea, to copy the exact same chassis and put different bodies on top. That way, any race is fair. It’s all in how you drive. Everybody’s got the same chances of winning.”

The boy did catch the thrust of the teen’s concept. “We’re going to see all these cars—dune buggy, pick-up, moving van, a ’vette—and they’ll all look different, but they’re all the same underneath.”

“Exactly,” the teen said, grinning as before. “And it’s bigger than this toy, much bigger. It’s hitting the auto *industry*.”

The boy nodded, grabbed for the box remote. It had a steering wheel and buttons for forward, reverse, thrust, off. He turned the chassis in his mind awhile. The idea reminded him of what his dad had said, about everybody being an all-star.

“Nah,” the boy declared, “Life is never fair like that.”

“Come again?”

“Think of how each of *us* are so different,” the boy said. “We all buy cars and trucks that factories put together different. It’s American busyness. Henry Mosley and me already had this conversation, like, last year.”

The teen stooped to swipe at several silver bugs crawling up the cuff of his jeans. “Who’s Henry Mosley?”

“Maybe I’m wrong,” the boy eventually said. He missed his friend. Maybe his dad was right. Maybe Henry Mosley’s old mom had just had to move. And maybe he was too fat. Maybe he did play like Ty’s grandpa.

“This is a universal idea,” the teen reiterated.

“kay.”

“Nobody’s looking at things from the same angle in ‘America’. People don’t or won’t or can’t see the whole picture. They’re *lazy* thinkers, they *follow* the crowd.”

“Peasants, on the baseball diamond of life.”

“Watching baseball on satellite, kings of their stupid lot of remote controls. But by the time I hit college, cars—kid, they’re gonna be...”

“Out of this world?”

“Out of this *world*. Hydrogen, hydrogen’s fuel for the future; its emission is pure H₂O.”

The dipping sun silhouetted Ty Sneeth as he sprang from the reeds, swinging the jettisoned splinter of 2 x 6. After a malicious chuckle he spat, “Hydrogen’s for suckers,” and plucked the baseball cap off the end. He swung the board like a switch-hitter then tossed up the cap and slugged it into the fat boy’s stomach.

Then he set his elbow atop the 2 x 6 and leaned his lithe, princely body into it, as if the wood were supporting his weight.

“Did my dad tell you to fetch me?” said the boy, sounding tinny as he clenched his chubby fists. He glanced down at the cap at his feet.

“I volunteered.”

“Hah!”

“Did.”

The teen stood tall and gangly in his faded “Star Wars” shirt. “Hydrogen energy,” he said, lips flapping round his plastic braces, “will save the people of this planet.”

“My daddy says we’ve got enough oil in the Caspian Sea to feed every necessary motorized vehicle for a 100 years.”

“Your daddy’s missing the whole idea,” asserted the teen.

“Hydrogen emissions? Squirting out water?”

“You get it yet?”

“We’ll turn the planet into a new Venus in no time flat.”

“You’re a brain’s washed stupid, jock-o.”

“Jock zero,” added the boy.

Sneeth gave a sudden aggressive growl, wielding the 2 x 6. He dug in with his cleats and played a violent riff with the board on the dune buggy's body, which fractured and split away from the chassis like a reptilian eggshell.

"Now you've done it," the fat boy huffed, sounding less tinny, more robust. He felt what he thought might be that bit of heaven sparkling inside.

"Done *what*," Ty Sneeth shouted. He tossed the board before fleeing into the reeds. Stumbling, his cap falling away, he replaced it, back forward, as he tore the right sleeve of his uniform on a prickly bush.

The boy laughed out loud, nudging his new pal.

"Look at that," the teen marveled. His fingers quivered on the remote as he deftly spun the motorized vehicle out of its body. "What did I tell you, huh? What did you say? Out of this *world*! This universal design will change everything."