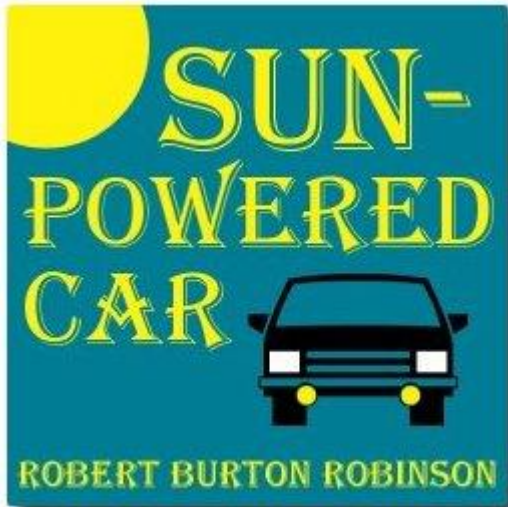


Sun-Powered Car

by Robert Burton Robinson



GENRE: Humor. LENGTH: 1,364 words. SYNOPSIS: A washed-up TV reporter sees a chance for a big story when he discovers an amazing invention while passing through a small town.

It was just another lousy day in the life of a has-been TV news reporter.

Malcolm was past his prime. And at age 57, he'd long ago given up on his dream of sitting in the anchor chair. But the assignments he'd been getting recently were just downright degrading.

It was a three-hour drive back to the city. He was starving. Didn't they at least have a McDonald's in this crummy little

town? He decided to stop at the next restaurant he saw—no matter what it looked like.

Helen's Hamburgers: the best burgers in town, the sign read. Malcolm suspected that Helen's might be the *only* burger joint in town. The fact that there were no cars parked in front made him hesitate. He checked his watch. It was only 11:00 AM—too early for most lunchers.

He parked his car and got out. Just as he was about to go inside, he heard something coming up the street. It was too noisy to be a bicycle, yet too quiet to be a car. He turned around.

The brakes squeaked on the 1957 Chevy Bel Air 4-door hardtop as it pulled in behind his car. It was in decent shape for a 50-year-old car. But an odd-looking luggage rack had been bolted to the top. Malcolm hated to see a great classic car defiled like that.

But why was the engine so quiet? Then he realized that the flat thing on top of the car was not a luggage rack—it was a solar panel.

A middle-aged man wearing overalls got out of the driver's seat. Two husky twenty-something guys in jeans, T-shirts and boots got out of the back seat.

Malcolm held the door for them. The older man thanked him. The three men took a seat at a round table near the front window. Malcolm picked a spot several tables away.

A woman in her mid-forties wearing a flowery 1950's style day dress walked to the men's table. "Howdy, Ned. How are you boys doing today?"

"We're fine, Helen."

"Well, what'll you have?"

One of the younger men looked like he was about to speak when Ned said, "Just give us the usual."

"Okee-dokee." She walked around behind the counter and yelled back to the kitchen as though she were calling hogs, "Three triple cheeseburgers with onion rings, one vanilla shake and two chocolate shakes."

"Got it," shouted a male voice.

The bell on the door jingled as a middle-aged man in a black and gray beard entered the restaurant. His jeans had obviously never been near a washing machine. And his cowboy hat was so crumpled that Malcolm guessed the man slept in it every night. "What that heck did you do to your car, Ned?"

Ned grinned. "I finally got it right, Jake. It's my crowning achievement."

The men discussed Ned's car for a few more seconds. Then they talked about Jake's chickens for a while.

"What can I get you today, Sir?"

Malcolm had not noticed Helen approaching his table. And he hadn't even looked at the menu that was printed right on the table.

"Uh...what do you recommend?"

"You're not from around here, are you?"

"No, Ma'am."

"But you do look kinda familiar for some reason," said Helen.

Malcolm tried not to smile. "You ever watch Channel 12 News?"

"Yes. Sometimes. It's not my favorite, but..."

"I'm their senior reporter. Been there for over 25 years."

"You're the anchor?"

"No, I'm not an anchor. Should have been, but never quite made it."

"Oh—are you the guy who reported the big high-rise fire last week?"

"No." He sighed. "I was on a farm that day. The people said they had a high-jumping pig. They claimed it was destined to break the Guinness World Record of 27.5 inches. That stinky animal couldn't even clear a cinder block."

"I've never heard of a jumping pig."

“I wish *I* hadn’t. Just give me a hamburger, fries and a coke.”

“Coming right up.” Helen turned to walk away.

“Oh, one other thing, if you don’t mind,” said Malcolm.

Helen turned back around, smiling. “Onion rings?”

“Uh, no thanks. I just wanted to ask you about that man over there—Ned.”

“Yes? What about him?”

“I heard him telling that man with a beard that his car was sun-powered.”

“Yeah. Isn’t that something? He finally got it working.”

“He did it himself?”

“Yep. He loves to invent stuff.”

“Is that what he does for a living?”

“No. He’s a farmer. But he used to work for an aircraft company. Until they shut down. Then he took over his daddy’s farm.”

“Interesting. Thanks.”

Helen walked away.

Malcolm’s mouth began to water—but not for the burger and fries. What a story, he thought: Farmer outsmarts young

high-tech whipper-snappers, building the first practical solar-powered automobile—in the form of a '57 Chevy!

A young waitress delivered the food to Ned's table, and the three men began to gobble it down. By the time Malcolm had reached them, they were half finished. "I apologize for interrupting your lunch, but I just had to ask about your car."

Ned smiled as he continued to chew. "She's a beauty, ain't she?"

"Yes. And I overheard you say that the car is sun-powered."

"That's right," said Ned.

The two young men both nodded in agreement as they stuffed their faces.

"So, does it use any batteries?"

"Sure—for nighttime driving."

"Of course. Because there's no sunlight."

"Yeah. I can't be driving around in the dark. Might hit a cow. Besides, it's illegal."

"You mean you only have batteries so you can run your headlights?"

"And taillights. *One* battery. That's all."

"You're kidding me," said Malcolm.

“Nope. Just the one six-volter.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.” Malcolm suddenly realized that he wasn’t writing anything down. But how could he possibly forget any of this? “Mind if I take a closer look?”

“No problem.” Ned sucked down the rest of his shake, took a few bills out of his wallet and dropped them on the table. “Come on.” He stood up and proudly led Malcolm out to his masterpiece.

“Check this out,” said Ned, popping the hood.

Malcolm could not keep his jaw from dropping. There was nothing under the hood except a six-volt battery, strapped down with a bungee cord.

Ned closed the hood and walked around to the side of the car. “Back here is where the action is.” He opened the back seat door.

Malcolm was confused. “What is this?”

“This is where the power is applied.”

Malcolm took a closer look. The floor board where the passengers’ feet normally rest had been cut out to make room for what appeared to be bicycle gears, chains and pedals.

“I thought you said this car was completely solar powered?”

“*Solar* powered? Heck, no. I said it was *son*-powered. That’s what I call it—my son-powered car.”

The two young men walked out of Helen's and took their places in the back seat, positioning their cowboy boots on the pedals.

"Well, then what's this?" Malcolm pointed to the solar panel on top of the car.

"That's a solar panel."

"Then why don't you use it?"

"I tried. But it only gives me enough power to run the headlights. And I don't need the headlights in the daytime." Ned got into the driver's seat and shut the door. "Let's go, boys."

His two sons began to pedal as Ned steered the car onto the road.

"Nice talking with you," shouted Ned as they drove away.

Malcolm stood there shaking his head. He should have known better than to think he would be so lucky. He went back into Helen's and started eating his lukewarm hamburger and fries.

Then it hit him. Ned's car was not the technical breakthrough story. It wasn't the solution to skyrocketing oil prices. But it *was* a quirky, human interest story. And he was going to get it!

He threw some cash on the table, rushed out of the restaurant, jumped in his car, and sped off. Ned could not be more than a few blocks away.

It was *not* going to be a lousy day after all.

THE END

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