

Gilding My Character

IT WAS AN ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY. I WAS, AS USUAL, LOST.

I pulled up in front of New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, thinking I could get quick directions from a doorman. I was driving a Chevrolet. I think it was a Cavalier. But it might've been a Malibu. I do know it was blue and a very, very baseline Chevrolet.

I caught one doorman's attention. He gave me the bum's rush.

"You'll have to move that car," he said. "You can't park here."

I told him that I didn't want to park. I wanted directions.

But he was on message:

"Can't help you," he said. "You'll have to move that car."

Epiphany!

The doorman was referring to the car as if the car and I were one in the same. He didn't respect the car. He didn't respect me. It was a common car. In his eyes, I too, was a commoner in front of a king's palace, and I was being treated accordingly.

I resolved to return to New York in something different, more opulent, and visit the same hotel and ask for directions. I did. I chose a silver Rolls-Royce Phantom, base price \$328,750.

It is important to note that none of my personal basics changed in the three weeks between my first and second New York visits. I was still short, black and gray-haired—handsome, but in a diminutive, off-handed way. I was still a sinner, no closer to heaven in the Phantom than I was in the Chevrolet. And I was still carrying the same low-credit-limit-miss-one-payment-and-you'll-have-hell-to-pay Visa card.

I pulled up in front of the Waldorf-Astoria.

"Checking in, Sir?" one of the doormen asked.

"Checking in, Sir?"

Okay, it wasn't the same doorman who dismissed me three weeks ago. So, maybe this particular fellow was more compassionate, more mannerly.

I told him that I simply needed directions. He obliged, while another doorman stood guard by the Phantom and even held the driver's-side door open for me when I re-entered the car.

There was no bum's rush, no "You'll have to move that car," nothing like that. And both doormen called me "Sir,"

an appellation that went unspoken by the doorman on my first visit.

It occurred to me that I had gold-plated my character by upgrading my ride. In the Phantom, I was more acceptable in a world that slavishly honors celebrity sans talent—that glorifies image over substance.

Ah, my beloved, late great Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. You asked that we be judged by the content of our character instead of the color of our skin. Alas, you died before the full blossoming of infotainment, an odd form of journalism in which the most inane aspects of celebrity and its accoutrement are treated as news, in which the gown Star A wore on Oscar night or the car Star B drove to a nightclub rival the importance of the latest deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan. Is this the freedom you envisioned?

But I digress. It is sufficient to say that I'm generally treated better, granted more preference in premium automobiles. I have driven so many of them in so many different environments I know this to be true.

For example, consider my current house-hunting safari in the hoity-toity neighborhoods of Northern Virginia. I have gotten it down to a science. If I want the real estate agent on hand to give me immediate and loving attention, I arrive in a luxury car—an S-Class Mercedes-Benz, 7-Series BMW, Aston-Martin, Cadillac CTS-V (preferably black on black in that model), Jaguar XJ Super V8, or a Maserati Quattroporte.

It's amazing!

No real estate agent looks at my ebony hue.

No one asks about my bank account or my political affiliation.

"Very nice car," the real estate agent says. "How can I help you?"

