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The Pickup Artist

BY HANK GARFIELD

WORK AT THE STATE FAIR, in the parking area on the infield of the track. It's a boring job, but it's only two weeks of the year, and besides, an artist can always find a way to make even the most tedious tasks interesting.

We park them in sections, cordoned off by string, two rows of vehicles in each section, facing each other. Five of us, plus a supervisor, ensure that everyone parks in an orderly fashion. There's a handicapped section, closest to the grandstand. My job – well, my self-appointed task, more accurately – is to separate out the big pickup trucks and park them in their own sections.

People love those big pickups, especially people who come to the State Fair. Your Dodge Rams, Toyota Tundras, Ford Four-by-Fours. They come in all colors, and they're all huge, with a full back seat between the cab and the bed. After Dick, the

supervisor, saw what I was doing, he grudgingly agreed it was a good idea to give them their own section, away from the less imposing SUVs and the small cars that used to be considered normal.

Dick's been working the fair for twenty years. He's got the routine down pat. There's a big rush at the beginning of the day, then a lull in mid-afternoon, and then it picks up again as people arrive for evening events like the demolition derby or the hot dog eating contest. Mostly we park them as they come in, filling in open spaces when people leave. There's no particular order to it. Or at least there wasn't, until I came along.

He put me in charge of parking the pickups. I waved all the other vehicles on, and steered each behemoth truck into a spot beside the next, all in two neat rows. But this too became boring after a while. To amuse myself, I began parking the pickups by col-

or. I assembled a section with dark trucks on one side and light ones on the other. Then I did a section with one side in color and the other in black, white, silver and gray. One day I had five red trucks in a row, but then I took a pee break, and Andrea, the young woman who relieved me, parked a red truck on the opposite side, totally oblivious to the pattern. We got into a bit of an argument until Dick came by and told us to get back to work.

I got more refined. One day I had red, white and blue trucks alternating in a row. I had seven or eight of them lined up like that. Meanwhile, I was making the black and dark green and sepia and silver trucks park on the other side, and I'd opened up a new section to handle the overflow. "Just park him next to that red one," Dick said when he saw me wave on a family in a black Ford.

"Can't," I said. "That's the Americana

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side. Red white and blue only.”

“For Chrissake,” he growled. “Just park ‘em.”

But what’s the fun in that? Anyone can fill up a parking section. It takes an artist to create a color-coordinated canvas of vehicles. That’s what I am. I’m an artist with pickup trucks.

The rest of the crew began to talk about me. They were just parking cars in rows, one after the other. But I was making people park all over the place, leaving gaps until a truck of the right color came along. You have to work with the materials at your disposal, after all.

The final straw for Dick came when I was attempting to create a row of piano keys: two white trucks, then black-white-black, then two more white ones, then black-white-black-white-black, and so on. The problem was, there weren’t enough white trucks, so I had to fill with light silver and gray, and it didn’t look much like a piano. And the other side of the section was a mess of mixed-up reds and blues and greens. Meanwhile, I’d started a new section up the field. We were getting a lot of black trucks that day, and I didn’t have places to put all of them.

Still, I had almost completed my first octave when Dick strode over and asked me what the hell I was doing.

“I’m trying to make it look like a piano,” I explained, indicating an empty space I was holding in reserve between two black trucks. “I need a white one right there.”

“You can shove your piano up your ass as far as I’m concerned,” he said. “Just park them where they fit. Goddammit, this isn’t rocket science.”

No. It’s art. But nobody appreciates art anymore.

The next day, I was reassigned to the walk-in gate, stamping people’s hands as they entered. It was a boring job, until I started stamping every female on the left hand and every male on the right. When I wasn’t sure, I took my best guess. The day after that, I did it by eye color, and the day after that, height.

There were a few awkward moments when people held out the wrong hand.

Yesterday I saw Sherry, my new supervisor, give me a funny look. I’m afraid she might not appreciate art, either. ■

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