

2-18-2013

## Good Company

Barbara Drake

*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Drake, Barbara (1972) "Good Company," *Amaranthus*: Vol. 1972: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1972/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Amaranthus by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## GOOD COMPANY

Something Nan noticed about Jack when she first met him was that instead of pictures of girls in his wallet he carried snapshots of old cars. Well, she reflected, he'll never leave me for another woman. That was in the middle of her freshman and his junior year at the state University.

Six months later, they eloped in Jack's carefully restored 1936 Ford convertible. During the honeymoon, when they returned to the parked car, often there would be notes tucked under a windshield wiper- -

Want to sell yr. car?

Call Merv 332-1823

Or- -call Bill, call Sam, and one time, call Fanny. In this way Nan learned that Jack was not the only one in the world so possessed.

But Jack did not want to sell his car or, as it turned out, any of his cars.

Five married years later, hands sunk to the wrists in dish-water, Nan looked out of her kitchen window and mused over a rambling country yard filled with old cars.

In five years, Nan had come to know that to Jack an abandoned car was something out of time, a relic of the near past. For him, the shape of a particular cowl or headlamp, the dusty odor of a cushioned interior, conjured up past times as clearly as if the car itself were a kind of time machine. And so he rescued the lost beauty of a 1932 Chevrolet sinking slowly wheel-less into the loam of an ancient farmer's field: and with an eye to comfort and rehabilitation he salvaged a '49 Cadillac abandoned in a gas station and sold for storage.

"Beautiful old sedan," he would say, after dragging a skeletal Plymouth into the yard. "Good tires, Nan, real good tires." Or, "they were going to junk it, Nan. I can always use it for parts."

Parts for what, she wondered, since she could not remember the last day he had found time to work on any of the cars. Jack had become the teacher he planned to be when she married him; more and more, he put his time and energy into his job, but still, he could not resist bringing home the cars.

It was difficult to mow around them and so, in the enormous yard, thick patches of grass grew around fenders and through grills, pierced rusted running boards and spread

luxuriantly in the cavities where engines should have been. That, outside her kitchen window, was Jack's "yard." Inside the house was a different matter. One might search Nan's cupboards and closets in vain for the unused and unusable garment, the outworn or worn out shoe. Old newspapers went to the trash burner. Old bread went to the birds. Nan knew exactly how many rags she should keep against a season of cleaning, and how many jars for the summer's jam. Whatever she did not use, she sent to the Goodwill, the garbage can, the compost heap, or the trash burner.

Outside, the homeless cars had come to surround her like unearned guilt.

Then, one warm evening as Nan walked back up the road from the mailbox, the first evening of the year in which she truly sensed spring, Nan heard a sound like breathing.

It was a difficult sound to locate. It seemed to come from among the cars. It might have been wind in the clumps of long dry grass, set loose at winter's end. A power line followed the driveway and she peered at it for a moment trying to coordinate the sound with the direction of the line, but it seemed to come from somewhere lower down. Was it an animal, or someone hidden, there among the cars? Keeping her distance, she circled the cars until she was certain there was no one hiding among them. Between the cars she could see only a cluster of spare transmissions and bent wheels going nowhere.

At precisely the moment when she heard Jack open the door of the house, behind her, she saw a movement in the crazed windshield of the '31 Plymouth. A girl's tender face smiled out at her.

With a gasp, she turned to Jack and then back to the Plymouth. There was nothing but the fluttering headliner behind the glass, a dust colored tatter of soft material draped downward. From the tall grass surrounding the cars, a handful of pale speckled moths fluttered upward, like souls of lost drivers called forth from rotting upholstery.

"Here's the mail," she said abruptly, and went into the house.

The rest of the evening, whenever she passed the kitchen window, Nan glanced toward the Plymouth, and once or twice it seemed to her that she perceived the dim form of a feminine head turned toward the house, as if it searched for something.

That night, when she and Jack went to bed, Nan lay in the dark thinking about the cars. They had begun to crowd her

too closely, as if she had been made to live in a graveyard strewn with the relics of other people's lives.

"Jack," she said. "What are you going to do about the cars?"

"I was just thinking about that. I've got it all figured out."

"You have?" Already she felt a sense of relief.

"If I move the model A down by the fence, and bring the Plymouth forward just a couple of feet, there'll be just enough room."

"Enough room for what?" she asked, her voice suddenly growing tense in the dark.

"For the Phaeton. I told you about the one I found in the old guy's barn out east of the viaduct. I've wanted a Buick Phaeton since I was a kid. I know I told you."

"I didn't know you were going to buy it."

"I can't just let it sit there. They're going to knock down the barn for the new freeway. Honest, this is the last one. Oh man I'm sleepy. Say, wake me up early. I want to get out there and tow it home before somebody beats me to it."

"Does it run?" she asked hopefully.

"Well, no. It's got a cracked block and somebody stole about everything they could pry off inside. That car hasn't been driven for thirty years. That's what's so great about it. The body's beautiful. But I promise you. I'll get this one running for sure." His words merged into a deep and immediate snore, like an engine at idle.

Nan lay stiffly in bed, unable to shut her eyes.

Shortly, she arose and pulled on her bathrobe. She went to the window, looking out at the cars and the yard with its strange alternations of clipped lawn and rampant grass surrounding the sculptural forms of moonlit cars. She stared curiously at the Plymouth, but not even the torn headliner moved now. Then, a sense of movement, rather than a movement observed, attracted her attention to another car, a station wagon. What was it? A 1948, or was it '49, something-or-other. She remembered only that the floorboards were gone and that the wood, its finish gone, had begun to warp and splinter. Perhaps a cat was taking a midnight shortcut in one window and out the other.

But as she watched she knew what it was she saw. A woman's face, full and comely, gleamed above the steering wheel. Even at this distance Nan could see the redness of the lipsticked mouth, the pertness of the powdered nose. Behind the woman, in the back seat (but there was no back seat, she recalled), there was a movement as of children

wrestling and tumbling about. The woman's face turned. Wide eyes under finely plucked brows stared at Nan. A gloved hand rose over the dashboard, and waved.

Stunned, Nan could not move from the window. Instead, she looked to the other cars. In the model A, a boy was sleeping. His arm dangled on the outside of the rusted door, one large hand loosely open; his wrist protruded from a checkered sleeve. His head, with its thick russet hair combed into a broad wave, leaned back on the window frame. Under pale eyelids, his eyes moved as if in a dreaming sleep. Widely-spaced teeth gleamed between parted lips.

Nan almost screamed when the boy suddenly jerked his head forward, opened his eyes, and looked directly at her. But when he put an index finger to his lips, smiled sweetly, and shook his head in a negative gesture, she felt strangely soothed.

Nan stood at the window a long while. Finally, she backed toward the bed and slipped beneath the covers next to Jack. Huddling to the warmth of his body, the clarity of what she had seen slowly turned to dreamlike uncertainty and she fell asleep.

The next morning, Nan felt a sense of apprehension as Jack started off after the Phaeton. Mr. Loftus, the previous owner, had offered to steer the Phaeton, as Jack towed it behind his old pickup. As soon as Jack had gone, and as if to shake off the phantoms of the night, Nan took her coffee out into the bright yard. This morning, the interiors of the cars were dry and dusty but lit by the spring sun. If Nan seemed to hear a sigh or the exhalation of a long held breath, it was easy to attribute the sound to the stretching and groaning of metal warmed by sunshine, or to the hiss of grass springing up as it dried. Soon, she went indoors to wash the morning dishes. She kept her eyes turned downward toward the sink until she heard the sound of Jack towing the Phaeton up the driveway.

Jack and Mr. Loftus unhitched the Phaeton and pushed it into place behind the Plymouth. "I'll be back as soon as I drive Loftus home, Nan." With a wave, Jack was gone again.

The sound of Jack's truck still hummed distantly when Nan, turning to scrutinize the Phaeton, found herself face to face with the new, or old, driver.

One arm rested on the window frame of the Phaeton, the other was draped carelessly over the steering wheel, and on this one he rested his chin. A cigarette dangled in the corner of his mouth and he looked at Nan quizzically from

under dark hair that slanted across his forehead.

He was more clear, more distinct than the others had been. And he seemed to be alert with a kind of anticipatory pleasure. He took a long look at each of the other vehicles, shook the hair from his eyes, stretched, and sat back in the seat, grinning as if he knew his car could take any other car in the yard.

His chin had the shadow of a dark beard, shaven but lying close beneath the surface of the skin. He wore a blue suit with wide lapels, and a darker blue shirt buttoned up at the neck, but with no tie. He looked at Nan for a moment, and she returned his look, for the first time curiously at ease among the cars.

As she watched him, he lifted his hands from the steering wheel and moved them in an open-handed upward and outward gesture, at the same time making a cheerful grimace, as if he were saying the next move was up to her.

Nan hesitated only long enough to perform the classic gesture of the woman untying her apron and folding it aside. Through the slow-breathing air of the spring morning, she went from her doorstep to the front of the Phaeton and stood, staring at him through the windshield. He jerked a thumb toward the passenger's side. Nan walked around the car, and got in.

For a moment, she glanced at the other cars. The boy in the model A seemed to be laughing sleepily. The woman in the station wagon, her gloved hands on the wheel, regarded Nan with a critical, almost envoius look. The girl in the Plymouth blew a kiss and waved her hands as if to say, go! A movement of hands and faces, eyes and lips, seemed to stir in all the cars, a murmur of voices as if sound carried from a distant neighbor's party.

Nan felt only faint surprise when, remembering that the Phaeton did not run, it seemed to be running. As they backed out of the yard and turned down the driveway, the man reached over and squeezed her knee in a cheerful, intimate gesture. She sat back in the seat and stretched out her legs, laughing.

What was Jack going to think when he got home? His wife and his Phaeton, both gone at once. She would love to know but she wasn't going back to find out. Someday, perhaps, he would discover the girl in the Plymouth, or would it be the woman in the station wagon? At any rate, she was leaving him in good company.