

**The Lucky Car Company**

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*Alvernon Bartel, what a loser you are! No job because you drink too much. Millie left for that fake cowboy at Joe Duncan's Bar. All you have is what you carry on your back, and you sleep in a rundown one-room apartment with a bed that sags like a hammock and smells of months-old puke. \$381 in your wallet won't go far. You dumb shit; get things together!*

For Al, life was no different than from previous years and places. When he had money, he wasted it. When there was love, he spoiled it. He'd never had a decent place to live or a nice bed to sleep in, and the puke on this one was his.

Running bony fingers through matted, greasy hair, he stared at the hazy mirror. The person looking back with hollow sunken eyes was definitely a loser. The toll of not enough food and too much beer had given him the look of a bony, mangy horse. There was just a bit of food left in the refrigerator and some cans on the shelf. He knew that it was now or never. He had reached the bottom.

Opening the wallet, he recounted the bills. Yes, just \$381 and some coins. He showered, shaved and combed his hair, as best it would allow. In the pile of clothing in one corner, he found pants and a shirt not too wrinkled or smelly. *Time to get a job boy!*

Three days passed and Al hadn't found work. Finally, he went to a "pay-by-the-day" employment agency. An insurance claims position was available, with opportunity for a permanent position if he performed well. However, although he said he had one, he didn't have the car needed to get to work.

Back in the apartment, he sat on the “hammock-bed” and counted his money once more. Food to keep him going had eaten up all but \$311. *Geez! Will my problems never end! How am I going to buy a car?*

It didn’t take long to figure out that \$311 won’t buy a car that can get you to work. Moreover, he still needed money for other things. He needed that car!

One whole day was spent walking about Coachella looking. He didn’t even walk into the big lots to ask the dealers; he saw his hopes priced too high on the car windows.

Al just about gave up when he saw a sign on the front of a small, gray, weatherworn building sitting in the middle of a large, cactus-dotted, dirt lot.

***Lucky Car Company***  
**Compañía de Carros de Suerte**

*Funny name for a used car dealer! Well, last chance.* He entered and walked about the car-filled lot with gaily-swinging multi-colored pendants hanging on lines stretched across and around it. There were no prices shown on the car windows, just signs saying:

**Lucky!**

**Very lucky!**

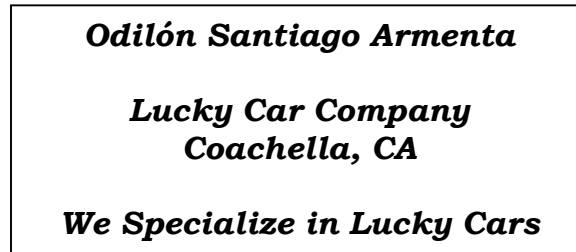
**Super Lucky!**

**Lucky and  
a Half!**

**More Luck than  
You Need!**

*What a strange place!*

A wiry, smallish Mexican-American man in a black suit and dark western hat and black boots walked up to Al. Black hair, streaked with silver hung over his forehead; a bristly black moustache covered his upper lip, his skin a sun-wrinkled golden tan. Dark twinkling eyes, shrouded by black bushy eyebrows, peered out from his 60-year or so old face. Smiling, he handed Al a glossy business card:



“Permit me to present myself. My name is Odilón Santiago Armenta, may I be of service to you?”

“Al Bartel. Maybe you can help me. Mr. Santiago, I need a car for work, one that is dependable and reasonably priced.”

Santiago smiled, “Excellent Mr. Bartel, glad to be of service. I have just the car for you; this green 1998 Ford 4-door has lots of power. It’s extremely lucky and costs only \$7500.”

Al blushed with embarrassment because the price was way beyond what he could pay. “I can’t afford that much.”

Arms crossed and feet apart, Santiago considered this, stroking his mustache and nodding his head. “Well, I have one that is not so lucky, a 1994 Dodge, very sporty candy apple red, and the cost is a mere \$2800. But I assure you, it is still quite lucky.”

Again, Al explained that such a car was beyond his means at this point. Santiago didn't give up, but kept showing progressively less costly cars, saying, "Less Lucky" each time. However, all were way beyond Al's few dollars.

"Mr. Santiago, I guess you can't help me, but thanks for taking the time."

Squinting, Santiago tilted his head to one side. He looked up at Al, and said, "How much do you want to spend?"

In a low voice, "I have \$300. I expect that you have nothing that I can buy."

Santiago slowly shook his head, rubbed his chin and said, "I have a not very lucky car. Yes, not very lucky. I would ordinarily sell it for \$500. If you want it, you can have it for the \$300."

He walked to the far end of the lot where one car sat alone, as if shunned by the others. It was a 1985 Chevrolet, badly beaten from minor accidents. Its thinning dull blue paint job showed rust through it, along with sad looking tires, a bent antenna, and two cracked side windows. Santiago climbed in and started it up with a roar. It sounded good.

"Please, drive it around the lot. I don't carry insurance for driving my cars on the road. The back of the lot is quite large. Try it."

Al looked dubiously at the car. Shrugged, thinking, *what choice?* Slipping into the driver's seat, he looked at the interior. The seats were worn, with rips where the vinyl was sewn together. The headliner hung down in the back. There was a big hole where a radio used to be. *Nice antenna!* The carpet was dirty and thin, with the metal floorboard showing in spots. He shifted out of park and drove around the lot. It handled nicely. Accelerating to 30 mph, he yanked the steering wheel back and forth, raising a cloud of dust. The lot was big in back and had a straight albeit bumpy stretch where he got the car

up to 45 mph. He slammed on the brakes and the car skidded to a stop. He could see nothing wrong with it, ugly as it was, and \$300 wouldn't buy a car from anyone else. This left him with \$11. *Thank God for pay-by-the-day!*

He pulled up to Mr. Santiago, the motor quietly ticking, Al said, "It seems to be OK, I guess I'll take it. However, why do you call your cars lucky?"

"Because they are. They have been blessed by the *Santo Patronal de los Choferes*, San Cristobal. All of the cars I sell have proven to be lucky, and yours will be also, but not as much as others I have. Yes, not as much. Definitely not as much."

Al rolled his eyes upward, started to say something, but stopped. *He seems so serious about this. No laughing.*

Al left with the car, thinking about blue skies and a bright future. Three blocks away the car sputtered, backfired, and came to a stop. White smoke poured from the exhaust and from under the hood. With repeated attempts, he got the car started. With many stops and starts, he drove it back to the Lucky Car Company lot. However, he couldn't find the building. *I must have made a wrong turn.* Yet, no matter where he drove, there was no sign of the building, the lot full of cars or Mr. Santiago.

He checked in the telephone directory; there was no listing for the Lucky Car Company. Locating a public phone, he dialed for information. "Do you have a listing for "Lucky Car Company"? No? Do you have a listing for "The Lucky Car Company"? No? How about, as best as I can pronounce it, "Compañía de Carros de Suerte"? Are you certain? Yes, Yes, Thank You." *Damn! Once again a loser!*

However, while driving home to his one-room apartment the car performed well. *It must have just been something in the fuel.* He stopped at a convenience store and bought ten dollars worth of gas, to freshen it up.

The first day of work was just fine, including his assignments. The boss was happy with him. Reviewing insurance applications and claims was not an exciting job, but there was to be a paycheck at the end of the day. Except that there wasn't, something about the paperwork and computer entries.

Over the next days there were a series of misfortunes with the car, building in intensity. Parts fell off, tires went flat, and there was a speeding ticket when the car accelerated on its own. Then the brakes failed and he went through a stop sign, another ticket. He was often late to work, with his boss becoming increasingly disgruntled. In addition, he still hadn't been paid, more complications. *Pay-by-the-day! My ass!*

Worried about his job, Al drove slowly and carefully to work. *I will actually be on time today, even a bit early.* Suddenly there was a near miss with a pickup truck as the steering wheel loosened. Swerving erratically, Al tried to turn the wheel; the car hit the curb and careened into a telephone pole. The air bag didn't work and the seat belt broke.

Al, dazed, with a large bleeding cut on his face and bruised ribs, perhaps broken, sat slumped. People rushed up to the car. They pulled him out of the smoking car, water spraying from the radiator, and laid him on the ground. Soon an emergency response van arrived and he was placed on a stretcher. As the team began to strap him down and roll him toward the van, he heard a familiar voice talking to him. He opened his eyes and looked up into the face of the emergency worker. Mr. Santiago, dressed in an emergency services uniform, returned his gaze.

"There you are, you plucking brastard," mumbles Al, through cut lip and broken teeth. "I wush ma mongy back. Your car armost krilled me."

"But it is a lucky car Mr. Bartel. You must have faith," he said with a wink, his image slowly blurring, replaced by that of a concerned young man in white.

“Sir, please calm down. We are here to help you. Don’t move.”

*Lucky? Faith? What a bunch of crap!* Al rolled his head to one side and dazedly looked across the street, now crowded with vehicles and onlookers. He saw a mini-mart. The image went in and out, from clarity to an oily blur. Staring hard to focus, he pushed up, realizing what Mr. Santiago meant, and, despite efforts to restrain him, threw off the emergency workers. Jumping off the stretcher he hobbled, bent over, and lurched between the stopped vehicles to the mini-mart, holding his side

Pushing open the door, he confronted a shocked young clerk, and shoved the remaining \$1 bill into her hand. “One lottery ticket, please.”

The girl stared wide-eyed at his bloodied face and said, “What number combination do you want, Sir?”

“Any number will do, just sell me a ticket.”

He took the ticket with its randomly generated number and shoved it into his wallet, and slowly and painfully collapsed on his side to the floor, a big smile on his face.