

Side GLANCES

By Peter Egan, EDITOR-AT-LARGE

TO START AN ENGINE

AN UNWRITTEN RULE OF AUTO MECHANICS states that when you pull an engine, there is always one thing you've forgotten to disconnect. It's usually a choke cable or a ground strap—something just strong enough to swing the engine like a wrecking ball into the firewall, or the nearest painted surface.

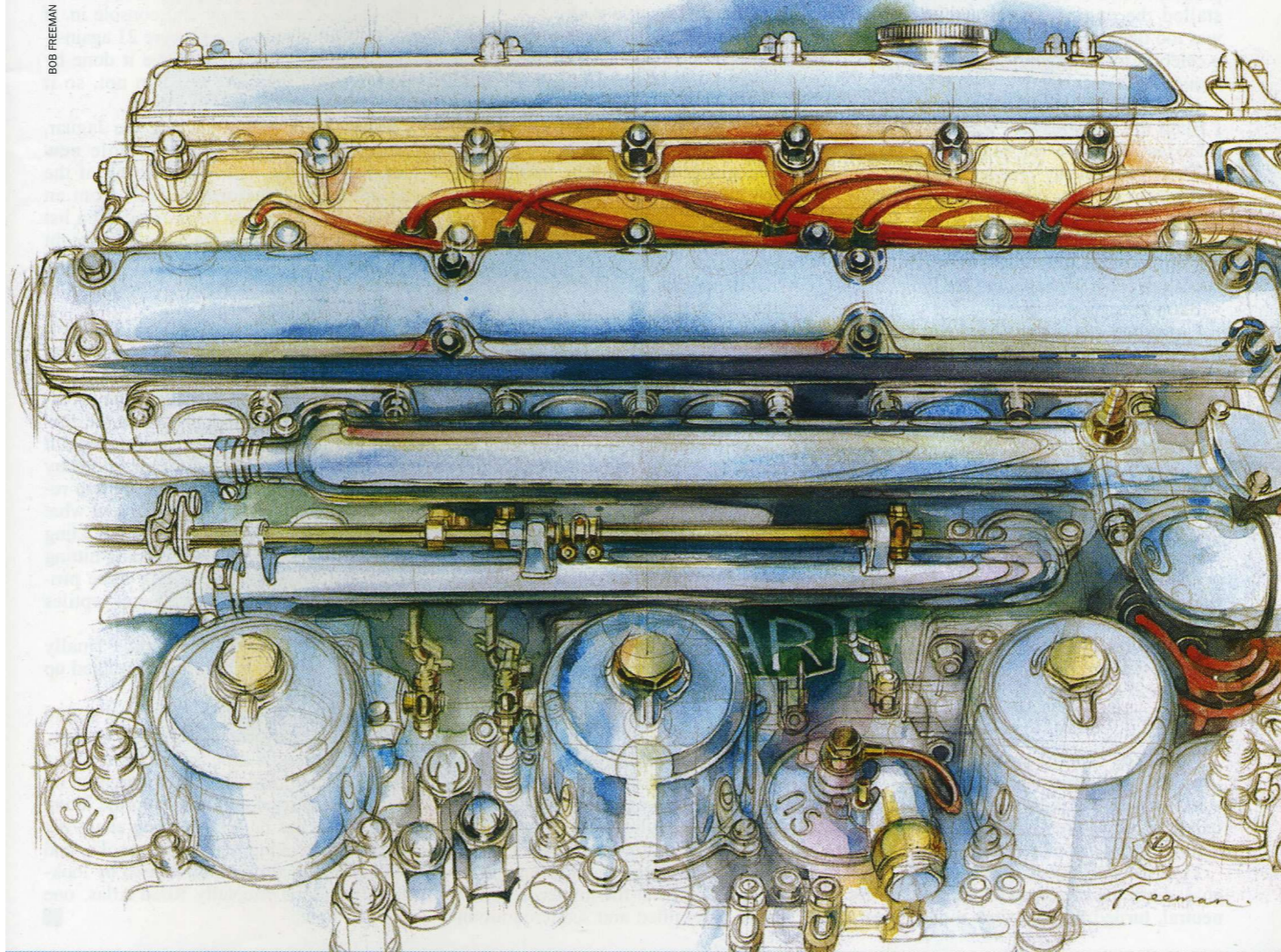
Another rule, of course, is that, when you put the engine back in the car (years later), there is always one thing you forget

to tighten adequately. Usually it's a water hose or an oil line that spews fluids all over the floor and under your jackstands, or a stray wire that throws sparks like a wall switch in a Frankenstein movie.

Knowing this, I sat on a shop stool in my garage for a very long time the other night drinking a Mountain Dew (plenty of caffeine for staying awake in the wee hours), staring at the engine compartment of my E-Type Jaguar.

The engine was in; everything was hooked up. Time to crank her over. But certainly I'd forgotten something.

Starting with the radiator, I allowed my eyes to travel slowly backward along that lovely, long straight-6, trying to imagine what would go wrong. Throttle linkage connected, ground strap on, fuel lines tight. Still no water in the cooling system, however, and no exhaust system. Just the twin cast-iron headers to direct the hot



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flaming gases downward and prevent eyebrow fires (always a serious concern in the Egan family).

I have a superstitious belief that adding coolant and hooking up the exhaust system on an engine that has not yet proven itself to have oil pressure is a form of hubris that invites disaster, like buying trophy polish before the Indy 500.

I checked the oil dipstick again. Full, all 10 quarts.

And, yes, the gearbox had oil in it. Only the day before, I'd finally removed the small note over the ignition key that said, in my own handwriting, "THERE'S NO OIL IN THE GEARBOX, STUPID." A procrastinator's trick from the night I installed the engine and transmission, but was too tired to do another thing and drank a celebratory margarita instead of messing around with gear oil and funnels.

I got tired of looking at this warning, so I filled the transmission with golden gear oil at last and threw the note away.

Then I lay on my creeper under the car and waited for gear oil to ooze out of some orifice or seal. But none did. Good. It was spookily dry and clean on the underside of the engine and gearbox, especially for a British car. But probably not for long.

Show time.

I climbed out from under the car and placed the ground strap on the battery and stood back, half cringing, like a Neanderthal man who'd just shaken a spear at a woolly mammoth and was waiting to see what would happen next.

Nothing. No sparks, no fires, no small mushroom clouds from the dash or starter motor. I reached into the car and turned the ignition key to ON. The fuel pump, which had been dormant for nearly three years, instantly began pumping clean new fuel into the glass filter bowl and thence into the three big SU carburetors. The float bowls filled and the fuel pump stopped ticking.

No leaks. No stuck and overflowing needles and seats. Still dry under the car. Unbelievable.

I took the sparkplugs out, disconnected the coil and spun the engine with the starter motor. The oil pressure needle gradually began to tremble and awaken, and then it climbed to 60 psi. Still no oil leaks.

I put the plugs back in, set the choke on cold, sat in the car, checked the gearbox for neutral, turned the key, took a deep breath

and hit the starter button.

The engine turned over smoothly a few times then immediately started running with a deafening roar, like half a Merlin with straight pipes. Fast. Too fast. The revs soared past 3500 and I shut it off.

Of course, I'd forgotten to install the return spring on the front carburetor, because I couldn't find it in any of the dozens of boxes and trays and drawers full of Jaguar parts that had filled my garage these many seasons.

I walked to my treasure trove drawer of random forgotten springs and selected something that probably came off a Briggs & Stratton lawnmower in 1963. I bent the spring into temporary usefulness and hooked it on the throttle shaft.

With the spring in place, I started the engine again and it settled down to a smooth, if loud, idle and it revved with a glassy, almost turbine-like silkiness, the engine hardly rocking on its mounts.

Ah, the joys of a big straight-6. My favorite engines. Nothing like 'em. Lovely balance, wonderful sound. And the Jaguar six is an engine that actually says *varoom!* when you rev it up, as if pronouncing the word in precise English.

I shut the engine off before it had time to overheat, then opened the garage doors into the warm summer night to let the smoke out. The garage was thick with a white cloud that mingled the smells of exhaust, hot paint and gasket cement. And maybe a little human sweat. As personal valet for this magnificent engine in its moment of reawakening, I was soaked in perspiration.

I sat on my shop stool and looked out into the night, where lightning bugs twinkled through the dissipating haze like rising champagne bubbles. A beautiful night for an engine start-up. Especially an engine that ran, idled normally, had excellent oil pressure and leaked no fluids. My brain almost buzzed with pleasure, or perhaps from near asphyxiation from fumes. In any case, I was quite happy.

It would be nice to say that this successful Jaguar engine rebuild was my own doing, but I had, in fact, farmed most of it out to my friend and professional race-car mechanic, Steve Straavaldsen.

I hesitated to do this, because rebuilding engines is actually my favorite part of auto mechanics. But there was a moment last fall when I looked at the immense number of Jaguar parts piled and scattered around

my garage and realized if I added an engine rebuild to the endless list of tasks to be performed, the car would remain in my workshop for yet another summer without having its tires touch the ground. So I called Steve.

In the world of automotive work, Steve is a rare paragon of efficiency. I dropped off the engine on a Monday morning, and he called me back that afternoon to say he'd completely stripped and examined it. The crank was fine, but it needed pistons and a rebore. He sent the cylinder head to California for refurbishing at a place called Straight Six, then rebuilt the short block and had the engine back to me by the end of the month. Amazing. All I had to do was install the carbs, crankshaft pulley and distributor and set the timing.

And now the engine was in the car, running. And running beautifully. For the first time this millennium.

Done working for the night, I cleaned my hands, took off my coveralls and sat down to plan my next move. Not much left. The exhaust system, coolant, some heat shielding. Put the seats, carpet and console in. If this were a race car—and I were 21 again—I'd pull an all-nighter and have it done by morning. But it's not, and I'm not, so it would probably be done in a week.

Sitting there and pondering the Jaguar, I was suddenly struck by a whole new vision of the car. With the starting of the engine it had transformed itself from an endless list of tasks to be crossed off a list into a working car, a machine that might soon provide transportation for two people and their luggage. A magic conveyance in which to go places.

If this sounds stupid and obvious, I apologize, but I'd worked on the car for so long as a stationary icon of mixed worship and dread, I'd nearly forgotten about the promise of mobility, which I'm told is the reason cars were invented in the first place. It took the actual ignition of gasoline by sparkplugs in those six big cylinders to remind me why I'd bought the car, and what it was for. All that smoke and the crackling exhaust were like a bolt of lightning hitting the primordial soup and jolting mere protein and minerals into Life. Soon reptiles would walk the earth. And Jaguars.

At 1 o'clock in the morning, I finally turned out the garage lights and walked up to the house.

I looked in on Barb, who was sound asleep, then went downstairs to the kitchen, where I sliced up a lime, salted the rim of a glass and fixed myself a large margarita on the rocks. I carried the drink into the living room, sat in my favorite reading chair, my clothes still reeking of exhaust smoke, and amused myself for an hour or two by looking at the Rand McNally Road Atlas, one page at a time.