

# The Style Invitational

**THIS WEEK'S CONTEST**

## Week 794: Ripped Off From the Headlines



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

### Man With Apple Hovering in Front of Face Sues René Magritte's Estate (the Onion, Nov. 25)

As revealed in a recent cover story in *The Washington Post Magazine*, the editors of the *Onion* write the paper's headlines before writing the stories, or even knowing quite what they're going to be about. That won't come as a shock to regular *Onion* readers, since the headlines are often the funniest element of the consistently funny satirical paper, sometimes rendering the stories themselves almost anticlimactic.

The *Onion* not only spoofs the news of the day ("Black Guy Asks Nation for Change") but also glories in treating total non-news as headline news, usually in stories about the population of pathetic schmoes with whom the editors seem suspiciously well acquainted ("Woman Profoundly Moved by Lyrics Artist Put Zero Time or Effort Into"). And it does it in a perfect deadpan sendup of conventional print journalism — we can only hope that there will be enough newspaper readers left to understand what the *Onion* is making fun of.

So how does the *Onion* come up with all these zingers week after week? It turns out that the staff — a cadre of wickedly funny writers who might not fit everyone's description of "well adjusted" — brainstorm wildly for days on end, generating hundreds of ideas, finally winnowing them down to a couple of dozen gems. Uh, not to hammer home any analogies, but... **This week, Losers: Send us some Onion-type headlines.** They can be on any subject, but they have to be funny on their own, without stories attached. They can't have been published somewhere else.

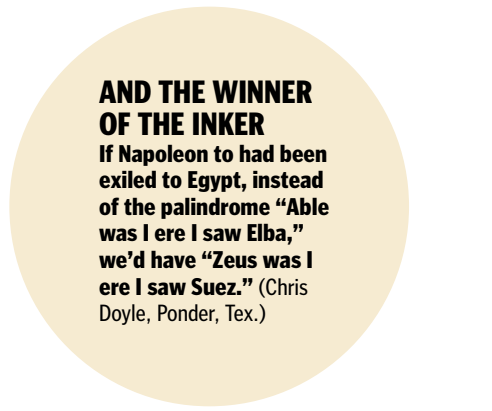
Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place receives a combo of two prizes: a stuffed Che Guevara doll that was donated two years ago by 195-time Loser Roy Ashley of Washington and has been decorating the Empress's desk ever since; and a genuine 1972-vintage "Nixon Now" campaign button, courtesy of 18-time Loser Ed Gordon of Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

**Other runners-up** win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable Mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. First Offenders get a smelly tree-shaped air freshener (Fir Stink for their First Ink). One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to [losers@washpost.com](mailto:losers@washpost.com) or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Dec. 15. Put "Week 794" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of *The Washington Post*. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published Jan. 3. No purchase required for entry. Employees of *The Washington Post*, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's results is by Roy Ashley; this week's Honorable Mentions headline is by Mike Ostapiej. John O'Byrne, all the way over in Dublin, suggested we do the *Onion* contest.

**REPORT FROM WEEK 790**

*in which we asked you to tell us what would be different had some event not taken place: We acknowledge that some of these effects might not withstand the most rigorous logic, so don't bother writing in to Free for All, The Post's weekly Page o' Niggling Rants.*

- 4** If the chairs had been bolted down on the Titanic's deck, we would have been spared one overused cliché. (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)
- 3** If Watergate hadn't happened, reporters would be coining each new scandal "Something-pot Dome." (Larry Yungk, Arlington; Russell Beland, Fairfax)
- 2** the winner of the Potty Elmo: If newspapers hadn't been invented, we'd be shouting crossword puzzle answers at the town crier. (Stephen Langer, Chevy Chase)



**WHAT MIGHT HAS-BEENS: HONORABLE MENTIONS**

- If Shakespeare hadn't written "Hamlet," an infinite number of monkeys would be looking for jobs. (Beverly Sharp, Washington)
- If Ralph Nader had not run for the presidency in 2000, Uday Hussein still would be the chief motivator of the Iraqi soccer team. (Howard Walderman, Columbia)
- If her father had owned a more down-market lodging chain, Paris Hilton might have been named Indianapolis Motel 6. She'd still be just as talented, though. (Andy Bassett, New Plymouth, New Zealand)
- If Noah hadn't been so OCD about getting two of every last animal, I'd be able to sit on my deck without lighting all those citronella torches. (Kevin Dopart, Washington)
- If God hadn't given the Ten Commandments to Moses, Judge Roy Moore would have been ordered to remove the statue of Baal from the courthouse. (Mike Turniansky, Pikesville, Md.)
- If Abraham Lincoln had not been assassinated, then Andrew Johnson would never have been president and, uh, well, lots would have changed. Like, instead of "Bush 41" and "Bush 43" we'd have had "Bush 40" and "Bush 42." (Zack and Russell Beland)
- If Philo T. Farnsworth hadn't invented the TV, guys would have to sit on the couch all weekend reading the football newspapers. (Kevin Dopart)
- If Herman Melville hadn't written "Omoo," countless crossword puzzle constructors would have been ruined and might have turned to a life of 34 Down: Illegal act. (John Shea, Lansdowne, Pa.)
- If Wham! hadn't come along, Andrew Ridgeley would be practically unknown today. (John Shea)
- Had the Anglo-Saxons not named their goddess of spring Eostre, then that place in Polynesia with the big heads that look like John Kerry would be called Passover Island. (Roy Ashley, Washington)



- Had guns never been invented, the Washington Wizards would still be known as the Washington Poison-Tipped Arrows. (David Garratt, Glenn Dale)
- If Eve had never tasted the apple, you'd be reading this naked. (David Garratt)
- If Alexander Graham Bell hadn't invented the telephone, Superman would have to change in port-a-potties. (Randy Lee, Burke)
- If the endoscope had not been invented, we would have ended up relying completely on space aliens for anal probes. (Larry Yungk)
- If McDonald's hadn't been founded, American cuisine would be unknown to the rest of the world. (Russ Taylor, Vienna)
- If the South had won the Civil War, Virginia would have named every school and road after a Southern general — in other words, three more than there are now. (Larry Yungk)
- If Hope and Crosby had never stopped making those "road" films together, well, it would be kind of creepy trying to make a movie with two dead stars. (Russell Beland)
- If the Albany Perforated Wrapping Paper Co. had not invented toilet paper in 1877, for the last 130 years pranksters would have had to litter front yards with corncobs. (Larry Yungk)
- If the Style Invitational had never been created, I would have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked. (Ira Allen Ginsberg, Bethesda)
- If Barack Hitler Obama hadn't changed his middle name, he might not have gotten elected. (Chuck Smith)

**Next Week: The 1K Club, or Chains, Chains, Chains...**

**Strange bedfellows: Week 794's two second-place prizes.**

# Down-on-Their-Luck Car Dealers Don't Catch Many Breaks

CARS, From Page C1

no public back there."

Here's Brobby, a native of Ghana, up at Dreams: "I've been in business in the city since 1985! Now they are saying we are like criminals!"

He says he got cited for having his fence out on the sidewalk by 12 inches. He's worried the city will come back to clear his lot. "They say I don't sell cars! I'll show you my bill of sales!"

Maybe he's right. Or maybe the city is right to clean up the area. But, see, you sit out here to try to make a more-or-less honest dollar, and it seems that people don't care about the hard end of the American dream, where things are brutal and people walk in to pay for the only car they can afford with \$20 bills that smell of sweat and cigarette smoke.

**A Promise: 'Beautiful Cars'**

Richard Stovall over at Atlantic Motors can tell you about that. He's 91 years old and has been selling cars along this stretch since before the mayor was born. A city inspector came by the other day to check out his titles and other paperwork, as if he were doing something wrong all this time.

Stovall: "D.C. doesn't know a damn thing anymore."

Atlantic is a one-story concrete-block building with grimy white walls and faded awnings and maybe 15 beaters out front, including a Ford LTD Country Squire with the imitation-wood veneer peeling off its sides.

"Beautiful Cars," promises the sign out front.

Stovall sits inside the cold one-room office — papers piled up on the two desks, the ceiling panels gone brown with water damage, the TV blaring — and talks about how the industry began to die about 10 years ago when local car auctions started admitting the public, not just dealers. Now people think they can go to an auction and cut out the middleman, which would be him.

He still sells a few cars now and then, like that red Saturn out front. He asked \$1,500. Man offered him \$1,300.

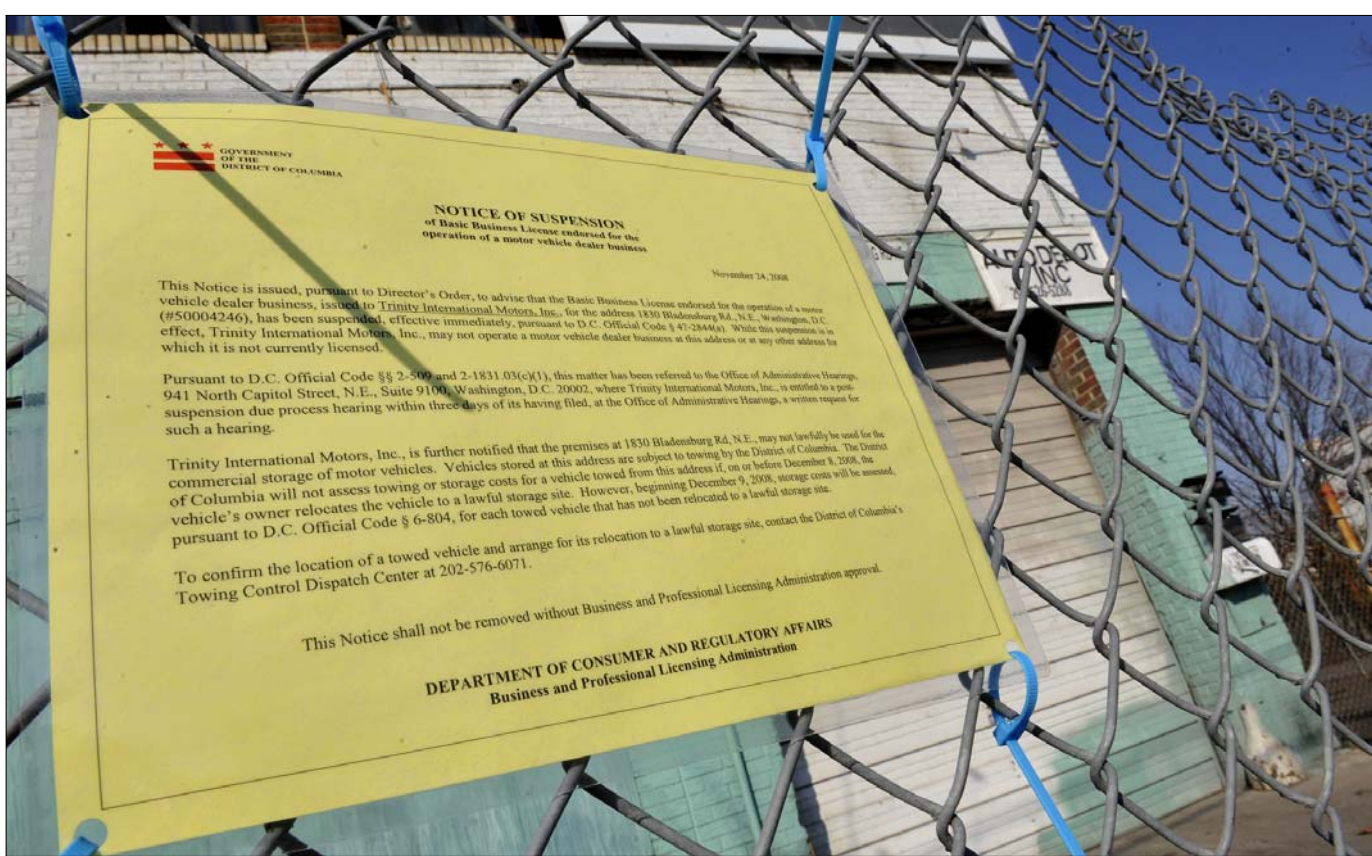
"I said: 'Well, you go ahead and take it. That's your little baby.'" Dude is downtown getting the tags for it now.

How much did you pay for it?

"Let's say I made about \$300."

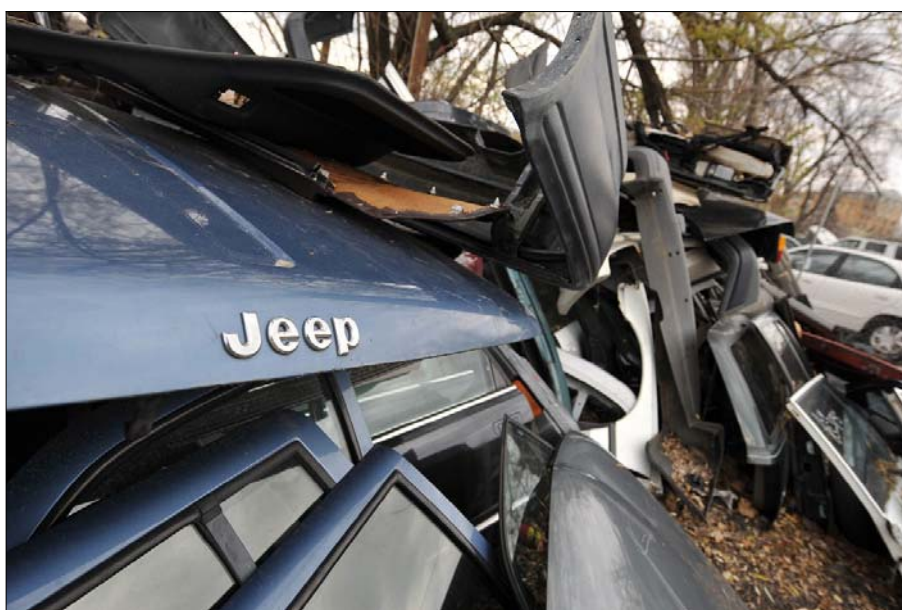
Stovall is a retired Maryland State Police officer. He's wearing white sneakers, a T-shirt and a flannel shirt with a jacket zipped up over both, and a blue gimme cap. One son is retired from General Motors, lives outside Detroit with a yard "big enough for a football field." Another son supervises the truck fleet for a federal agency. His daughter is in human resources. He lives in Maryland. He's on his third marriage.

"Everybody in my family does something," he says when asked why he still



PHOTOS BY MARK GAIL — THE WASHINGTON POST

**Across the District's used-car lots, suspension notices are being posted by the city. Officials say the sites are junkyards, not showrooms. "There's the potential for money laundering," D.C. Attorney General Peter Nickles says. "They're a blight on the community."**



bothers to run the place. "Nobody sits around."

The city says it isn't after places that are actually selling cars, but Omar Arbab, who helps Stovall run the place, is feeling defensive. "We have all the titles for every car we sell," he says, unprompted.

Arbab volunteers that the crackdown is giving him high blood pressure: "I have a medical condition."

"Omar has had a couple of encounters he

didn't like so much," Stovall says, mildly.

Across the street, there are suddenly the rotating blue lights of the city tow trucks, here to shut somebody else down. It's a miserable red-brick factory front, two stories. There are so many signs out front it's hard to keep track of what's what. Auto Depot. Trinity International Motors. Aristol Auto. American Best Motors. Many of these supposed used-car lots are fronts for storage lots that ship beaters abroad, mostly to

Peter J. Nickles, the city's attorney general: "There's the potential for money laundering. They're a blight on the community. They pose serious health and safety concerns."

Out on Bladensburg, the wind is cold and hard. A woman and three little girls, the smallest one toting a pink backpack, walk past, the sunlight fading and winter coming on. They make everything else seem old and dirty and used up.

A block down the street is ACE Import and Export. Inside its trailer office are four men, three of them from Nigeria. The television is blaring soccer: Chelsea vs. somebody. One guy is working on a Guinness. Nobody wants to see his name in the paper, but everybody has something to say.

"The business is dead. It has died. If you can sell more cars to Africa than you can to people here, what is that to anyone?"

"If it is so easy to sell cars, why can't GM do it?"

"Guinness is a good beer. I think the Irish make it."

It is pointed out that the city seems to have passed them by. Maybe they will be okay.

"No, no. They are taking their time. They are going for the easy places first. They will come for us. Just wait."

**'Sitting Here on Nothing'**

A few days later, the city comes for Stovall.

Workers blocked both ends of his lot, then "towed off everything," he recounts. Twenty-five or 30 cars. Took his license. Told him he couldn't have cars on the lot that weren't ready to be taken for a test drive.

Arbab was taken to the hospital from the stress of it, Stovall says.

"His blood pressure, the sugar, it makes him go out of his head," Stovall says, in part referring to diabetes. "We don't know if he's okay or what."

Stovall is appealing the order, but that will take days or weeks. He might win — Fenner did and now has most of his cars back — but even if he does, he says he'll have to find someplace to take the cars that aren't in running order, the ones he was working on.

"They got us sitting here on nothing."

You work hard all your life and your kids do okay, but the years go by and the road out front stays dirty and there's always traffic and fumes; and then the darkness is falling on another day, the cold coming, your fingers aching if you leave them out of your pockets too long. You get a view of the western horizon from the car lot — Bladensburg runs along a slight ridge, and there is no hint of a skyline or a city or anything beyond — just a pale pink and blue and orange streak of sky behind the lousy buildings across the street.

You long to glimpse the lady and little girls again. Something pure, something new, something worth it all.

**The View From the City**

Linda K. Argo, director of the city's Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, is fed up. In a telephone interview, she's reciting the problems with the lots: the rats, the debris, the "crummy" appearance, the way hustlers are gaming the system.

Look at the property at 1900 Bladensburg Rd., she's saying. "It's one lot, one lot, and there are eight licensed dealerships there. And let me see how many salesmen. . . There's six, 20, 52, wait a minute — 69 total salespeople. On one lot. And sometimes when you go to 1900 Bladensburg Road, you can't find anybody at all."