

“The Pull of the Motor”

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I.

Nathan’s father died within a year of his wife leaving him. The two-fisted pummeling of grief left him shell shocked, and patterns of behavior he had shown all his adult life began to change. It was in the aftermath of tragedy that he decided to buy the Jaguar.

The big saloon was long and low and wide and heavy, colored a delicious and intoxicating shade of deep cherry red. On a dry November night, its intoxicated new owner paced slowly back and forth beside it under the dim lights of his suburban garage, clad only in a pair of flannel pajama pants, a sweatshirt and old white gym socks. He ran his hands along its rear quarters, curved and taut like the haunches of a crouching cat; he opened one of the dual chrome plated LeMans style fuel filler caps and then closed it just to hear its satisfying click; he opened one of the rear doors, then gently stepped down into the rear seat, admiring the red tinted interior lighting, and then electing to close the door, reveling in the silence, stretching his legs, making foot fists through his socks on the deep carpeting and inhaling the smell of Connolly leather. In the furthest reaches of his mind he felt the thought arise again that this was as much as it should take, that he should be satisfied with this and go no further, like he had a few nights ago and a few nights before that; that every time he risked it he might as well be risking his life for all the financial damage it would cause...

But as those thoughts arose they were blocked by those nearer to his immediate senses: that it was always about the fear of financial damage, and that was what had held him back all his life, and that was why he was almost 50 and alone again and *financial damage be goddamned I’m going to enjoy myself if it’s the last thing I do...*

He closed the driver’s door and the most forward thoughts, those that talked out loud to no one but himself, came forth:

“I’m only going around the block,” he said as he slid the original serrated key into the ignition slot, his every sense bursting with electrified intensity, feeling the “snick” of the first switch position, then lighting up the dashboard and hearing the warning buzzers and the hum of the electric fuel pumps, his mouth nearly watering at the final twist against the resistance to run the starter, and the air-gulping “whoosh” from the intake as the big “XK” engine (rarely mentioned in print unless preceded by the word “legendary”) fired up and began its suggestive thrumming. He watched the needles on the analog Smiths gauges slowly rise to position themselves correctly-40 pounds of oil pressure, 13.5 volts, a steady 700 RPM idle, left and right fuel tanks nearly full.

He looked in the rearview mirror and saw the blank white of the closed garage door behind him; he would be able to run cold for only a few seconds in the 2 car-sized space before the air began to foul with carbon monoxide.

He was always “only going around the block...”

Always a practical man, Nathan Burke was a dreamer and not a doer. It was only toward the end that Rebecca began to cite this as a reason for her leaving. In the final two years of their marriage she became increasingly abusive, insulting him regularly and then, later, attacking him physically. She used his refusal to hit her back as fodder for more insults, calling him weak, spineless, a coward. At first all

this only embittered him, but after she moved out the memory of those incidents began to haunt him. Later when his father was sick he would come home from work to the empty house and find himself reminiscing about his childhood more than he ever had, as childhood belongings that he had scarce seen or thought of for years began to assume new significance as they reminded him of his boyhood in his father's care. His stops at the liquor store on the way home from the office went from 2 nights a week to every other night and then to every night. It was in the immense heat of the summer that his father died, peacefully and with little pain, for which he was thankful, but which left him feeling like a significant reason for living was suddenly gone. He had been responsible, gone to school, gotten a decent job, bought a house, got married...and now he suddenly no longer had a father to approve.

One chilly September night after coming home to the cold dark house after a particularly disappointing day at work he drank his usual glass or two or so of whiskey and decided to rummage through some boxes in the basement whose contents he had not seen in many decades. There amongst the memories of books and college papers he found a case containing his childhood cache of toy cars. The small metal Matchboxes and Hot Wheels, some still caked with mud and sand from the back yard of the house he grew up in, brought a smile to his face as he remembered the times he spent with his father racing them down ramps and colorful plastic tracks. As he took each one out of its eggcrate-like space within the case he found he could remember things about each of them: which were the fastest, the slowest, which tracked straight and true on freewheeling and which would bank to the right or to the left. And then one particular piece stopped him; it was a battered little Matchbox, more worn than most of the others because it had been his favorite; the model with an unmistakable shape, a shape like a missile with a windshield and wheels: a Jaguar E-Type coupe. It had once been a deep shade of candy-apple red, but years of back yard adventures now left only traces of its once brilliant paint clinging to the dull metal of the body, its wire wheels stained with corrosion. And yet at that moment he might as well have been looking at a concours example of the real thing under klieg lights, because it was beautiful to him. And he remembered very quickly why this had been his favorite car...because it was his dad's favorite. Growing up his father had always driven necessary gray or white work-ready pickup trucks, but he had always wanted a Jaguar. Nathan remembered that then.

Through the haze of the alcohol and in the dim light of the basement he found his childhood memories more vivid than he had ever experienced them, and soon he felt the warmth of tears on his cheeks. For a moment he thought of Rebecca and how she would react to this, a nearly 50 year old man crying beside a box of childhood toys, but he batted the thought away instantly and, getting down on the floor in spite of his aging bones, played with his toy cars late into the night.

Seeds were planted on that night, and rapidly there emerged a less practical Nathan Burke. In the evenings that followed he closed the garage behind him and lifted his briefcase and the night's box of bottles from the trunk of the Honda Accord and found himself looking back with contempt at the dull sedan and the old Chevy pickup truck beside it while he fumbled through his keys to the door into the house. He turned the idea over in his mind at night by the warmth of Irish Whiskey. An E-Type was out of the question, of course; though they were little more than used cars when he was playing with his Matchbox model in the yard, the prices they commanded now were far beyond the reach of his middle class income. But one of the saloons was a different matter, and he could have the same drivetrain at a mere fraction of the money. Of course the driving experience would not be the same, but what would his father have bought? Maybe an E-Type, but then again maybe something more versatile.

"Which one do you want, dad?" he said to the darkened living room.

He typed a search into the internet without even thinking, merely a lark, never expecting he would find anything in his part of the country without looking for months, perhaps years, for the right car. Yet, on the very first page of results there was a low mileage example being sold by the family of the

original owner just on the other side of town. From the photos it appeared to be in almost flawless condition...and what an exceptional color!

The fall light was already growing long on the Sunday he drove to the other side of town where the mansions hid among the leafy lanes, yet there was still enough sunlight to reveal a remarkably well preserved 40 year old car with no evidence of rust, its paint still deep with lustre, its interior showing only the smallest amount of wear, and an odometer reading less than 50,000 miles. Although the test drive revealed the car's performance to be somewhat underwhelming, he attributed this to its age rather than anything being actually wrong with it, as to every inspection he could give it seemed to be in top order. He left the owner's house wanting to offer less but knowing that he was going to wind up owning it; that one simple scan of the internet ads had revealed an almost perfect car practically on his front doorstep.

He did have a few days of deliberation, during which he feared both that the car would be sold to someone else and that it wouldn't be. But after doing some simple math a few times he left work early one day and dropped by the bank to make a cash withdrawal, and the deal was sealed that evening before the sun set. He drove the car home knowing it needed a few things and knowing where he would get those things taken care of. Getting the car to the only shop in his metropolitan area that could appropriately work on it, and later picking it up when it was done, was harder than paying for it; the shop was inconveniently located and kept inconvenient hours, but he managed it with the help of the ride-share apps. He came back roughly \$2000 poorer but the shop had assured him he had made a good choice, that the car was indeed in excellent original condition and shouldn't need any additional major work in the near future beyond the things he had just put right. Overall the investment had not broken him, and with the impending divorce he knew he was best off spending the money he had saved anyway.

II.

As fall headed toward winter the weather remained abnormally warm. As the days got shorter, he wanted to try to work the "bugs" out of the car before the broadside of winter hit, so although he was conscious of keeping the original mileage as low as reasonably possible, he drove it when he could. Even so, he was loathe to put it into rush hour traffic; the roads in his region had become insanely crowded by the massive population growth that had hit the area within the last decade, and even the cheapest of the modern cars on the highway had steering, braking, and acceleration that far exceeded the ability of his newly acquired museum piece. He drove it to work and back only once, and though he adjusted his timing that day to avoid the worst of the traffic, the trip out and the return were anxiety writ large: every unsignaled lane change, every tailgater, every flying asphalt chunk thrown up by an 18-wheeler threw him into apoplexy. From that day on he pledged to take the car out only in friendlier circumstances: no snow, no rain, no rush hour. He figured Rebecca would have laughed at that too.

The afternoons began to gleam with the unmistakable slanted sunlight of October and still the weather was light-jacket friendly with no sign of precipitation. He always managed to keep going to work, and he had recently taken to tuning the radio of his Eurasian commuter to an FM station that seemed to play an almost constant stream of 1980's retro; some of the top-40 garbage annoyed him as much now as it had in his youth, but the station also played some of the best "New Wave" of the era. The AM talk stations filled with the constant spew of the spiraling crime rate, the worsening homeless problem, police brutality, out of control real-estate costs, the political division-it had all simply become too much; he had to tune AM out. Upon returning home he did very little but sit and drink and remember. The TV was always on, usually a clip or partial episode that he had managed to find online of

a TV series that he remembered watching with his parents as a child: The A-Team, Simon & Simon, Knight Rider. It was background noise, as the case of old toy cars had come up from the depths of the basement to rest on a living room end table, where every now and then he would pick one up and roll it back and forth across the coffee table, remembering how he once played with these same toys on the living room rug watching many of these same shows, often using them to re-enact the chase and crash scenes that were such a ubiquitous feature of the prime time programming of his youth. Sometimes the furnace kicked on; the house stayed at a tolerable temperature. He kept as many lights off as he could to save money, but on a trip down the hall to the bathroom or back from the kitchen he would try not to look into the darkened empty rooms that he and Rebecca had years ago christened, made plans for, set aside for purposes which would never be realized. Yet the warmth and the darkness and the booze and the memories swirled together into a potent brew of emotions, the type he had been raised to keep at bay but which the grief of loss was bringing inexorably to the fore in an approaching storm. More and more often these evenings lead to the garage, where he could pour over the details of the Jaguar, this strange new totem from a distant land that seemed to have resurfaced from the mire of the past and come to him with so little effort simply because he desired it, something that he virtually never experienced. And that was how the night drives began.

At first it was just once around the block. Maybe more than once. Then it was down the street, through the neighborhood. It was not every night, but it was becoming more frequent. Nathan was a responsible, sensible, play-it-safe citizen who always had his registration and insurance updated and his inspection cards punched and he knew the risk he was taking. When he asked himself why he was taking that risk, he could not answer. He only knew that the car was pulling him to it; its materials and fittings pleased his every senses, the note of the exhaust on acceleration and the ever-present smell, a cocktail of leather conditioner and fuel and oil and anti-freeze, was more arousing than any perfume he had ever experienced. It was the most indulgent thing he owned, and in the drunken haze of the lonely evenings it was a light in the dark. It was irresistible: once it seized him, he couldn't stop.

When he was not in the garage or in the car he was in the basement, as his excavations under bare incandescent bulbs took him deeper and deeper into long forgotten boxes where he lit up with every discovered memory of a life he had forgotten. In one he found something he had no idea still existed: the stuffed animals he slept with as an infant. Who had even packed them? Picking one up was like a redux of the night that had started this strange and accelerating plunge, the night he found the toy cars and recognized the model Jaguar as his favorite; here now was his favorite teddy bear, his first, his guardian and his confidant when he was barely even old enough to walk. Looking at its threadbare face, still wearing a friendly smile and staring benignly at him with its two unblinking glass eyes he again felt tears blurring his vision, and he carried the dear thing upstairs with him and put it in his bed, knowing it was as glad to be with him again as he was to have found it. Another night's excavation into another cavernous box revealed layer upon layer of board games: Operation, Perfection, Mousetrap, Connect-4; and beneath this was a true treasure: a large shoebox filled with cassettes, his "mix-tapes" from his teenage years. Of course he hadn't owned a cassette player in longer than he could remember.

But the Jaguar had a cassette player! Its original high-end Alpine stereo system was completely intact, the power antenna and the radio functioning perfectly. Could the cassette player possibly work after all these decades? Another nighttime foray into the garage revealed the answer: yes! It worked flawlessly!

And then it was out onto the open road over the hill into the neighboring town and back. And then it was the highway, pushing the throttle to the floor and holding it in second gear all the way up to 80 miles per hour before shifting silently into high, as solid and stable as a bank vault. With the climate control set at 70 and the power windows up tight against the dry winter night he cranked up the volume, reduced the tape hiss by hitting the "Dolby noise reduction" button, and reveled in the irresistible rhythms of his high-school years: Billy Idol, Adam Ant, Depeche Mode, Duran Duran.

“Everything starts in England,” he said out loud as he sailed down the off ramp nearest his house. But why? There’s no glamour or glitz there like in the vast USA, but it seemed like almost everything he had so loved in his formative years—the music, the toys, the cars—originated there. He shook his head looking around the car’s darkened cabin at its lush materials, thinking of how its country of origin had changed so much as to be unrecognizable to the people who would have designed and built it; the factory it was assembled in had long since been demolished and turned into a housing project. And yet even the cassette player still worked! How was this possible? How had this orphaned machine survived in this condition against all the odds, and how had he found it with a single web search just by wishing it to be out there? Had he found this car, or *had it found him*? This wasn’t luck, this was fate; and as the evenings blurred by, his booze-soaked brain began to impart a sentience to the big red cat that made it even more seductive and pulled him ever more relentlessly to it, going farther faster longer louder. As he roared down the final main road toward his home he lowered the windows and opened the sun roof admitting a blast of cold air and let out a wild whoop:

“WoooooHOOOOO! What do you think dad, what do you think? We finally got a Jag! Are you proud of me?”

On a Wednesday night after a long and frustrating day at work Nathan wound up leaving the office at nearly 7:00, one of the last ones out. He was angry about the results of a recent project and a dressing down by management where he had been forced to defend himself against a customer’s complaints due to a co-worker throwing him under the bus. That anger came out in his driving and as he aimed for the usual liquor store determined to make an even larger purchase than usual, a warning shot was fired over the bow. Lights flashed behind him in an epilepsy-inducing radiance and he knew he was nailed, looking down at the speedo of the Accord reading 80. He drifted over to the right to stop and began to get out the usual paperwork, telling himself that at least it wasn’t 20 over, but it only got worse from there. Nathan had been raised with a respect for law enforcement but the cops in the city had changed; the staggering population swells and the double-digit crime increases had produced a police force that was hair-triggered and confrontational, and the cop was as abrasive as he thought he could get away with, breathalyzing him in spite of his being stone-cold sober and then threatening him with a car search, a body search, and arrest, all before letting him go with a summons. As he merged back onto the freeway with his eyes tinted deep red, he thought about how this might have gone if, instead of being stopped for speeding on the commute home from work, he had instead been stopped on one of his late night jaunts in the Jaguar. The notion chilled him. This stretch of highway was heavily patrolled—the commuters were always a juicy target for revenue—and although the freeway that was a nightmare during rush hour could be wide open and almost pleasant during off hours, he reminded himself again never to attempt *this* route on one of *those* nights. When he made it to the liquor store he outdid even his initial intentions and dumped a new record in one shot, \$140, carrying out two boxes of bottles filled with beer, wine, and Irish whiskey, but even after leaving the store and heading home his hands were still shaking and his heart still pounding with a mixture of terror and rage. He decided to stick to the surface streets from the liquor store back to home.

III.

The long run of dry winter nights had to end eventually, and the week of Thanksgiving the temperatures plunged into negative territory followed by a heavy snow storm. He had been dreading this holiday and the weather only made it worse. Every hour he had to fight the urge to call Rebecca. He called his sister and listened to her go on about the wonderful weather in California. He called a couple of the only friends he still had who had not moved out of the state in search of more affordable housing. Beyond this there was not much more to do. He stocked up prodigiously on liquor before the storm hit.

As he ate his Thanksgiving dinner, a “Moons Over My Hammy” from the local Denny’s, he attempted to find some degree of comfort by tuning into the traditional Thanksgiving Twilight Zone marathon on TV, but he found that having no one to discuss its weighty and ironic plots with just left him feeling even more alone. This led to a personal best in alcohol consumption as he drained well over 1/3 of a fifth of whiskey following the beer he had rinsed his evening meal down with. It was an indulgence that would cost him in the dead of night, when he awoke in bed still fully clothed, his head pounding with what felt like the worst headache he had ever experienced; he had made it to his bed at some point, but he had forgotten to turn on the space heater in the bedroom and close the door, and as he rolled over he realized he had not awakened from the pain of the headache but from the freezing cold: the house was frigid enough for him to see his breath.

After what seemed like an eternity of lying incapacitated he finally managed to sit up and began to shuck his clothing, stumbling through the hall into the dark bathroom and, unable to stand the light, stood in the complete darkness under the shower head as hot as it would get, trying to alleviate the pain with near boiling water on his head and neck. He stood there for as long as the hot water lasted, and when he felt the temperature going down he screwed back the taps and stepped out, the bathroom warmed at least in part by the steam, and pulled on his warm woolen robe.

Like a wounded dog that looks for an unusual place to crawl off to alone, he operated on instinct, making it to the small bedroom that he and Rebecca had initially set aside as the nursery and which later became his home office. A small but powerful space heater sat on the floor and he managed to bend down and click it on, then returned to his glacial bedroom and grabbed two things from the bed and brought them into the smaller room, closing the door to shut in the heat. He dropped the pillow on the floor and laid down on the area rug in his robe, clutching tightly the other item he had grabbed: the old teddy bear he had found in the basement. He nuzzled it underneath his chin just like he had as an infant and doing so filled his nose with a smell that brought an intense explosion of recall, a smell he would later identify as baby powder. Whose baby powder? It could only have been from one person...and how could it still smell like that near half a century later? His body was then racked by prodigious sobs, and he curled into a fetal position clutching the toy bear, his tears wetting its little head as they had so many decades ago, and he heard a single word repeating in his head like a chant, realizing as his lips began to move with it that this was the remembrance of the childhood name of his stuffed companion:

“Ivan...Ivan...Good night, Ivan. Say goodnight to dad, Ivan. Goodnight, dad. Happy Thanksgiving...”

He was awakened by a tribal pounding. As he rolled over in pain he was unsure if the pounding was in his head, but when it came again he knew someone was at the door. Sun was streaming into the room though the blinds, brighter than ever as it gleamed off the new fallen snow. The space heater had run all night and the room was now uncomfortably hot, but when he opened the door he passed from the heat into the icy hallway.

The pounding came again. “I’m coming,” he shouted. “Who the hell is it anyway?” He slid the thermostat up to 65 degrees-about as warm as he could afford to keep the house now-and looking into the living room toward the door he heard the murmuring of voices and confirmed his fear about who it was.

Well, they would have to wait; he wasn’t answering the door in his robe. He stepped into his bedroom, divested the robe and pulled on a pair of warm sweat pants, an old flannel, a pair of new warm socks and old black Converse sneakers. Crushing a ball cap down low over his bedhead hair he was swallowed 2 aspirin from the bathroom cabinet and was then ready to confront them. He opened the door.

There was Rebecca with Brandon Simpson. Brandon had been their friend, a neighbor up the street they had gotten to know when they first moved into the house and who himself had been through a contentious divorce some years ago, losing the house and custody of both his children. The experience

changed him in the usual ways: a gym membership, loss of weight, a new tattoo, a Mustang GT coupe which now sat in Nathan's long driveway caked with snow. As his relationship with Rebecca had deteriorated, Brandon—who now lived across town in an apartment complex with gates and a pool—had ceased to be *their* friend and became *her* "friend."

"I'm just here to pick up a few things, OK? I won't be here more than a few minutes. Brandon is here as a witness."

"Happy Thanksgiving to you too, dear," was Nathan's response.

"We're gonna come in, OK?" Brandon said as if he were asking.

Nathan knew that he would only make things worse if he tried to resist, so he let them two of them push past him into the house. Rebecca immediately walked down the hall to the master bedroom while Brandon closed the front door and sized up his old neighbor.

"Well...you look like shit, man. Rough night?"

"Big party. You know, strippers, whips, chains; got a hangover."

"Ah, yeah. That sounds like you all right!" He slapped Nathan's shoulder. "Man, its cold in here!"

"What is this," he heard Rebecca exclaim from the hall. She had exited the master bedroom already with a basket of some belongings and was looking across the hall into the small bedroom. "You're sleeping on the floor? With a *teddy bear*?"

Nathan just looked down the hall at her, his expression hardened in the slatted glare of the sun through the living room blinds. Rebecca rolled her eyes and snorted in an exaggerated display of contempt and came back into the living room, setting the basket down in an easy chair. She then walked the other way through the dining room toward the kitchen, and Nathan, his mind still moving slowly, suddenly felt a pang of fear.

"Where are you going," he asked. He wanted to reach out and grab her by the arm but knew he didn't dare.

"I need to get some things from the basement," she answered.

The house was structured so that reaching the door to the basement required going out the kitchen door into the attached garage. So, here it came. It had to come sooner or later; he had hoped it might be later, but as usual he had no choice: might as well get it over with now. He followed her toward the kitchen, heard her open the door, and then stop. He came up behind her with Brandon close behind him, and there she stood on the threshold of the garage, her hands on her hips.

"What in the *hell* is *this*?" She turned around slowly, her hands still on her hips. "You bought a Jag-war? You bought a fucking *Jag-war*? Are you *fuckin* kidding me?"

Nathan wisely did not respond. She turned back around and stepped into the garage. Walking alongside the car, she leaned down against the side of it peering into the windows as the two men followed her. In spite of all the animosity of the last two years he still loved Rebecca, but of course it was different now, and his own life had changed so much since she had moved out that he now felt she was an interloper invading his space rather than his companion returning to the house they had shared; this was no longer their house, it was *his* house, at least until the provisions of the divorce were laid down, and he felt a sense of violation at the sight of her touching his car.

"Well, I guess you're getting busy spending our money, huh? When did you decide to get something *nice*? You never would have bought a car like this when *I* was here."

She locked eyes with him for a second and then continued back over to the door to the steep stairway that lead down to the basement. She clumped down the stairs switching on the light, and he heard her continuing to go on, "And what have you been doing down *here*? Everything is all over the place, dammit; you made a royal mess of this!"

The sound of things shuffling around ensued.

Brandon let out a low whistle as he brushed past Nathan and walked up alongside the Jaguar. "Man, she's a beauty! She looks almost new!"

Without asking he reached for the door handle and swung the driver's door open. Nathan's ears turned red with a rush of blood; it was one thing for Rebecca to be here, but the sight of this man appraising his car, this man he had once called a friend and who he knew was now fucking his wife, filled him with ire.

Brandon stuck his head inside the cabin and looked around. "Wow! Only 45,000 miles! Are you kiddin' me? What year is this, early 80's, something like that? Where did you find this thing?"

"I bought it from a guy on the southside," Nathan answered tersely.

"Oh yeah, well I guess that's the part of town where you'd find something like this." He slammed the door shut as if testing its solidity and continued walking along the side of the car toward the rear. "Must have cost a mint, huh?" He looked up at Nathan waiting to see his reaction.

"It was remarkably cheap," Nathan answered.

Brandon just looked at him for a few seconds. "Yeah? Well, that's the thing about old Jags, isn't it? No matter how cheap they are, they still make you look rich." He put the palm of his hand on the roofline and leaned against the car as if striking a pose, looking at Nathan all the while. The two men stared at each other.

The tension was broken by Rebecca trapesing back up the stairs carrying a single mid-sized box.

"OK, I got what I needed, we can go now. Thanks for the nice car, Nate. Should I take it now or come back for it later?"

Brandon chuckled but his mirth was cut short when he saw what happened to Nathan's face. Rebecca's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Becca," Nathan said with a voice of uncharacteristic confidence, "You're not taking this car."

Rebecca feigned a little laugh herself after a moment of silence. "Wow. For a second there it almost seemed like you were standing up for yourself."

"Whatever," Nathan replied. "You're not taking it. This is *mine*."

Then an even more intense silence

"Well, I guess we'll see what you want to trade me for it," she finally replied. The two of them were eye to eye: the tension in the garage was becoming flammable.

Brandon dropped the posing and made the wise decision to deescalate. "OK Becca, you got what you need, right? I think it's time to go."

"Yes," Nathan agreed. "It is."

He followed behind them slowly as they walked through the house. By the time he got to the open front door and looked out at them, they were already standing at Brandon's car loading the boxes into the trunk.

As Rebecca shut the trunk and Brandon stepped in behind the wheel, she looked back at him and said, "You know Nate, you might want to consider getting a dog. It will make a better companion than your little teddy bear."

Nathan shut the door quietly. The prodigious rage that welled up inside him was unlike anything he had ever experienced, but this was not a rage that caused a man to slam a door or throw a bottle; this was a rage of resolve, an unconscious series of actions that came from a place where thought and feeling were no longer relevant. And yet, there was something, something in the back of his mind fighting for recognition, something that seemed somehow "off;" something that one of them had said?

He walked with abnormal swiftness back to the garage. He opened the door of the Jag and slid in behind the wheel and looked at the odometer:

45,278.

"Wait a minute...*that can't be right...*"

He extracted himself from the car and again made his way back across the house to his study, still pausing in his haste long enough to pick little Ivan up off the floor and place him on the top of his desk propped up against the computer monitor. He pulled open the top drawer of his filing cabinet and took

out the folder of service records and other relevant information he had received from the car's original owner. On top of the stack of papers was the official title they had both signed at the time of purchase, and as he flipped it over he saw the odometer reading printed in neat block letters in the required field, confirming what he already knew:

46,363.

IV.

Rebecca had signaled her intentions; of that Nathan had no doubt. He did not know or care what minor personal items she had gathered and taken that chill morning after Thanksgiving but he was sure it was only a pretext; her real purpose was to let him know she was coming for her share and would not play nice about it, and in addition to whatever lawyers were involved she had someone that would fight with her. This was only as he had expected, and he knew what he was going to do about it.

The weather continued its warming trend in the days following Thanksgiving but it was a slow rise, and the roads remained too icy for him to take the car out. He contented himself with his bottles and a series of stories read from books he dug up from the basement, some vintage television episodes and commercials on the web, an occasional phone call to a friend or distant family member. During his few lucid moments he wondered about the discrepancy in the odometer readings, but what he really wondered was why that discrepancy did not bother him. Old Jaguars were, after all, known for their "idiosyncrasies;" perhaps he could convince himself this was one of them. Only briefly did he allow himself to entertain the notion that the previous owner had somehow "rigged" the device to run backward in order to make the car appear to have less mileage than it actually had, yet he knew enough about how these things worked to know such a reengineering project would represent an enormous effort, one that could be worth no man's time.

"And anyway, what difference does the clock reading make," he asked out loud of Ivan, who stared back at him with his characteristic stoic silence. "The car's immaculate condition has been well proven; the mileage is only a number. To your health, my old friend!"

He raised his glass to the little bear who at the moment sat on the mantel with a small cone-shaped party hat on his head and a tiny lei around his neck, debris of unknown origin he had found in the corners of the vast cache of basement boxes, and downed another glass.

And thus no more thought was given to any clock reading; he surrendered completely to reminiscence, existing almost every waking hour in a semi-conscious netherworld. When the 4-day holiday weekend ended, he did not notice; all he noticed was that the winter sunshine and its glare on the snow burned his eyes, while the night, though still hiding patches of ice here and there, gave him the cover he needed.

He set up the straggling pieces of a Hot Wheels track he had found and raced his toy cars along it; he played Perfection and Toss-Across; he connected to the web with the "smart TV" and streamed grainy uploads of CHiPs and Hart To Hart and Hardcastle & McCormick; he spun old 45 RPM records by The Knack and The Greg Kihn Band and OMD on a portable phonograph that he remembered Rebecca having in her dorm room when they met and which she had left in the basement with her own discarded past. He slept most of the day. He danced and sang and played all night. And he did not answer the voice messages from his colleagues and managers in the office asking him where he was because he no longer had any reason to. And once the ice was off the ground he buckled the passenger side lap belt around his little friend's threadbare belly ("Buckle-up for safety, buddy!") and fired up the mighty "XK" and pulled the Borg-Warner 66 into "drive" and launched the heavy saloon into the night toward the highway, where it picked up speed not with neck-snapping force but *elegantly*, like a fast high-rise elevator. With the heater and the stereo on he inserted one of his last mix tapes, one that he knew

dated from his college years and played a track by The Primitives that, although it had been 30 years since he'd heard it, he was able to belt out the lyrics as he executed the transfer ramp for the turnpike toward his former office:

"Hey ya goin' too faaaaast, if ya don't slow down your gonna craaaash, you don't know what's been goin' down, you been runnin' all over town..."

This was followed by a couple of tracks copied from "Honey's Dead" by The Jesus & Mary Chain with their wind-tunnel guitars and feedback noise begging him to lay harder and harder into the throttle as the cat devoured the dark road ahead. When the tape went blank he chose to hit the eject button and check out the 80's FM station and caught the pulsating bassline and opening verse of "Words" by The Missing Persons, and he knew *every single lyric* like he had heard it only yesterday. He romped down harder on the throttle as he sang along, flying past the few other cars on the road (a Renault Alliance, a Ford Bronco II, an Oldsmobile Cutlass Cierra, an Audi 5000 S...)

As "Words" faded out what he heard next could only have been part of the station's retro "shtick" because it was the jingle for an ABC news break, which had to have been a nostalgia rebroadcast; that wasn't really Ted Koppel introducing himself (except that it was), and that wasn't really a live clip of President Reagan discussing the decision to launch an air strike against Libya in retaliation for a terrorist attack in West Berlin (except that it was), and he wasn't really looking right at the instrument panel and watching the odometer rolling *backwards* taking mileage *off* as the speedometer needle touched 100 miles per hour...*except that he was!* That was when his review mirrors exploded in a storm of flashing red and blue lights.

He lifted off the throttle knowing the inevitable had come, but the immensely heavy car had generated such momentum that slowing it down was a long process, and by the time he finally began to drift to the shoulder he could tell from the amount of light blinding him that there were at least three boxy Chevy Caprice Classics rolling up behind him.

He twisted the key to shut down the hot engine as he heard blasts of radio static behind him. He unclipped his seatbelt and turned to his passenger, patting the little bear affectionately on the head.

"I love you, buddy. I'm gonna miss you."

Some garbled order was barked at him through a loudspeaker but he did not know or care what it was. He pulled the latch and pushed open the door.

"Sir, stay in your vehicle!"

He put a foot out, then another, raised himself up on wobbly legs to look behind him but all he could see was 3 colors of blinding flashing light.

"Sir, get back inside your vehicle!"

Nathan smiled; why the word 'vehicle?' So stilted, so formal. He put his hands around behind his back to stretch and inhale a much needed breath of cool, refreshing night air...that was all he had to do to launch a cascade of nine millimeter bullets in the glitter of shattering safety glass.

The last time he lifted his head and looked up, the thought that went through it was, *that's not a Caprice Classic! It's a goddamn brand new state patrol Dodge Charger...*

V.

It was a miserable day in mid-January, gray and cold as a bitch, a perfect match for the inside of the police impound office. Rebecca Burke slammed the front door open and stomped in angrily across the snow and dirt smeared floor. Several steps behind her, struggling to keep up under the weight of a small toolbox and a heavy car battery, came Brandon Simpson. He hobbled as best he could across the slippery floor looking at Rebecca's figure framed tightly with visible anger: no fewer than three lawyers had told her she had no hope of winning a wrongful death suit against the police department and paying for those consultations was where a lot of her Christmas money went. Not that it was much of a

Christmas with the shadow of her ex's death hanging over the entire holiday. What Brandon didn't understand was why they were now here; he had tried to make the case that by even going through this she was taking on potential problems for very little gain and keeping wounds open. But the way she walked said it all: she was determined to go through with it, which is why he was now standing against a wall holding a car battery while she stood in line waiting to step up to a bullet-resistant window with a fist full of paperwork.

She had to admit they were decently efficient but since there was money involved maybe that made sense; this operation was all gravy for the police department.

"Shakedown motherfuckers," Rebecca spat as she stepped away from the window and joined the queue to go out the back doors to the massive impound lot. She did not even look at Brandon; he supposed she just expected him to follow her. And he did.

She had a "claim ticket" with a number on it but there were a lot of aisles and what seemed like thousands of cars, and the snow just made a lot of them look the same so the navigation was difficult and, with the cold, painful, and Brandon followed dutifully lugging the battery all the way. She finally did find it roughly halfway up an aisle roughly halfway down the lot, and her anger was mollified slightly when she discovered that someone had taken the trouble to tape plastic sheeting over the missing back window and left side windows. She opened the driver's door and, though the interior was still mostly immaculate, the door panel not only had 3 bullet holes in it but it was also covered with dried blood, and the sight of it made her weak. She leaned against the side of the car and closed her eyes for a moment to steady herself.

"Pop the hood, babe," her valet requested as he stood there holding the battery. She quickly found the hood latch and pulled it, springing open the front-hinged hood. He stepped up and found the safety catch and raised the hood, then crossed to the other side of the car and put the small toolbox down on the fender and fumbled inside for a ratchet and socket combination to unbolt the battery cable ends.

"Look at the corrosion on these cables," he said as he worked. Rebecca sunk down into the wide leather driver's seat, immediately amazed at how comfortable it was, at how perfectly it seemed to fit her; it was firm yet supple, and even in the freezing cold the fine quality leather yielded to the touch. Her eyes moved over the set of vintage airline-style gauges, unlike anything she had seen in the American and Japanese cars she was used to. As her eyes moved to the right they fell to the passenger's seat and she saw a towel or cloth of some kind on top of something. She reached out and removed the cloth and drew in a sharp breath. Sitting there on the seat was the old worn out teddy bear she had seen on the floor in the spare room, the room that was to be their child's bedroom, the child they tried to bring into being and now would never be. That day...that was the last time she had seen him alive, and as she replayed it again in her head as she had so many times since the day that phone call came informing her of what had happened, she felt her eyes welling up with tears.

She picked up the bear and at first thought to throw it into the back seat but she stopped as she was drawing back her arm. She looked down at it, at its dark glass eyes. She tried to remember if she had ever seen it before and then it came to her...that day so many years ago when she went with him back to his father's house to get the last few things he had left there so his father could sell the house and retire to the desert. She'd found a small group of little stuffed animals stored in a burlap bag in the basement, and asked him if he wanted them. He said no, that they should just donate them or throw them away. And it was she who had protested, it was she who had encouraged him to keep them, and suggested they he might pass them on someday to their son or daughter. And he embraced her and agreed. At the time he didn't remember the names he had once given them, but she was determined to take them and store them, at least for a while, until they could be loved again.

"Becca, are you OK?" Brandon was looking at her through the frost covered windshield. She was clutching the little bear to her face. She did not answer but inhaled deeply, and what she smelled was unmistakable: it was her husband.

Brandon continued to look at her for a while but eventually went back to trying to tighten the corroded nuts of the battery cable ends onto the posts of the new battery. Eventually he was finished; he looked at her again to see that she had not moved.

"Becca, the battery is in. You can try it when you're ready."

She finally looked up. Carefully, as if it were a living being, she cradled the teddy bear and put it back into the passenger's seat, smoothing the fur on its head as if making sure he were comfortable. She then reached into her coat pocket for the set of keys she had been given at the window in the office. Like the rest of the car they looked practically new, and she knew instinctively-though she could not have said how-which of the three keys was for the ignition and which way to insert it. Once turned, all the dash lights came on bright and strong and the buzzers sounded, when she ran the starter it too sounded strong and fast. But the engine failed to start, nor did it start on the second or the third try.

"Looks like its not gonna go," Brandon said. "Probably the fuel pump. Maybe water in the lines. Its been sitting here in the cold over 2 months. Ah Becca, why do you want to do this? Why don't you just let them sell it at the next police auction and take the money?"

She ran the starter a fourth time, and again the engine failed to fire. Brandon dropped his wrench into the toolkit and zipped it shut.

"Hey, it's cold as hell out here. I'm gonna go back out to the parking lot and wait in the car, OK? Come get me when you're ready."

He waited, watching her, hoping she would concede, but she just stared intently at the car's instrument panel. He picked up the toolkit and started walking away and heard her run the starter again. And then he heard the engine suck in a gulp of air and begin to hum with a strong, even idle. He turned and walked back, approaching the still wide open driver's door.

"Well, OK, you got it going."

"How do the tires look," she asked.

He kicked one, then walked around the car and said, "They look OK. Right rear might be a little low but nothing flat. Becca, are you seriously thinking about driving this thing?"

"We've already talked about this. I'm taking it back to the apartment for a while until I can get storage for it."

"And then what?"

"I'll decide then!" she snapped. She looked back at the dash. The temperature gauge had still not moved but the fuel gauge had, showing it still had half a tank. She dipped the throttle slightly and watched the tach needle bounce.

"So you're gonna drive it with the door panel looking like that," Brandon said pointing at the spray of blood on the leather. Her response was to reach out for the door and pull it shut.

"Wait for me near the exit, then follow me home, OK?" she asked through the sheet of plastic over the missing window. He said nothing but turned again to make his way back through the impound lot, the office, and the parking lot to his own car.

Rebecca intended to wait a few more minutes to let the car warm up. She turned the fan of the climate control on; she heard the electric vents adjusting themselves and then felt the slightest hint of warm air, and with it came a blend of aromas that she somehow knew and that yet were unlike anything she had experienced in such a combination; that salve on the leather, the oil, the gasoline, the anti-freeze all mixed together into a vintage mechanical concoction that reminded her of things in her young childhood: of her dad and her uncle and her older brother...and of Nathan. For the first time in months, she smiled.

The temperature gauge was rising, the heat was coming up. She leaned back in the seat and gripped the thin leather covered steering wheel with both hands. She gunned the engine for a moment and it responded willingly. Yes, she would see about cleaning up the door and fixing the glass; a car this classy and in this condition, with only 44,968 miles on the clock, was worth saving. At first she thought she

would probably sell it on; now she thought she might keep it. There would be no more summer days or winter nights with Nathan; there would be no baby to pass the little bear on to...but the big red cat that he had so loved was hers now.