

'32 Ford

by avocadoben

Highway Z's white lines turned to dots in the rearview mirror as the needle crept toward one hundred. Bucu horsehide warded off the cool night air as the car raced over freshly paved blacktop. Al's smile was as loud as the coup's roar that shattered the calm Wisconsin night.

As the needle rounded one-ten, midnight black clouded his vision and he glanced in the rearview mirror. From the past rose a smear of red-hot pursuit. Alan measured the distance between him and the cop and stomped on the gas.

"Mr. Barnes, you okay?"

Al shook his head and gripped the steering wheel.

"Mr. Barnes?"

The voice crept into Al's consciousness and he decelerated his imagination, then slowly, reluctantly merged into the present.

Morning sunlight glared through the coup's windshield and he surrendered to the fact that his beloved '32 Ford was idling passively in the driveway, already sold.

"Um, Mr. Barnes, I gotta show my dad the car, so, if you don't mind—can I have it now?"

Alan's voice sagged. "I was just thinking about highway Z." The kid pulled open the suicide door inviting the previous owner's exit. The leather seat seemed to groan as Al slid out and stepped onto his heavily mortgaged driveway. "I had a lot of good times in this car," he told the youth. "You'll treat it right--right?"

"Sure, Mr. Barnes. I promise," the kid said from behind the wheel.

"You gotta be careful with the tranny; she's temperamental. Hates burnouts. In fact, I recommend you take 'er easy; she's not what she used to be."

The youth revved the engine. "Sounds fine to me," he yelled over the rumble. They shook hands through the open window. Al didn't let go.

"Don't worry, Mr. Barnes, I'll take good care of 'er."

Alan released his grip and stepped away as the car rolled onto the street. The driver waved good-bye from under the chopped top and whipped all four hundred horses to life. The roar filled the quiet suburban street and Alan knew what was coming. He scowled at the kid until he, and the car, were lost in a cloud of thick, white smoke. When the fog cleared, the car was gone. Al listened as the coupe made its way to the freeway where it became just one more vehicle in an endless stream of traffic.

"That muta woke up the neighbors," Rita said, handing Alan a cup of coffee.

"Been standing here the whole time?" he asked, feeling sick.

"Pretty much. You gonna throw up?"

Alan reached for the cup. "Did this morning before you and kids got up."

She stood in silent memorial with her husband until last bits of smoke dissipated among the elms. "That car," he began, but stopped, knowing she understood.

"I know, hon." She took his hand. "I remember our first date in that car and how we..." her words disappeared behind a growing smile.

His eyes widened at the memory. "Nothing like making love in a rumble seat." He shook his head at the loss. "I—," he began, but stopped, unwilling to feel the pain.

"I know I can't make make this up to you," she said. "It's too big of sacrifice, but you can bet your life I'm going to wear myself out trying. I've got a few things in mind that might help ease the pain." She squeezed his hand, "You ready for that, big guy?"

"Ready and willing, but you're right, it's a big--"

"Mom?" came a voice through the kitchen window. Rita looked toward the noise, then at Alan. "The greater good," she told him for the millionth time. "You have four kids and a mortgage. The car has two seats. Do the math. Besides, if the boat doesn't work out, we'll get something else. Until then," she nodded toward the house, "we've got work to do. But," she leaned close and kissed him, "I suggest you conserve your energy. You'll need it-- tonight."

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"A boat? You sold your '32 Ford to buy a boat?" George looked at Alan with wild eyes. "If you wanted a boat you coulda borrowed mine, for God's sake. Besides, you don't know anything about boats. What the—?"

Alan struggled to save his dignity. "Family first, George. Some of us marry for life."

George looked wounded, then laughed. "You've had one wife, I've had four. I know four times more about marriage than you. Besides, no one marries for life anymore, look at the stats."

"Rita and I did."

George shook his head. "Any delusion will do, I suppose. Anyway, what we gonna do to make this right?"

"Whacha mean?"

"How we gonna get your car back?"

Alan's head shook. "Can't, Rita and the kids want a boat. It's for the 'greater good.'"

"Al, you're so whipped, pretty soon you'll sit down to pee. Besides you don't know the first thing about boats." He frowned. "What's the difference between Port and," he stopped. "Port and what?"

"Starboard. Give me some credit."

"Is starboard left or right?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"How you looking at it?"

George laughed. "See what I mean! Al, we've gotta get you out of that boat. You're gonna kill yourself."

Al shrugged George off, but knew he was right. "What am I gonna do with a boat?" he thought. "I'm a car guy. Always have been, always will—," he couldn't finish the sentence.

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The boys and Rita had gone to bed long before the logs in Alan's fire pit turned to embers. The flickering light reminded him of when he and Carl learned to paint flames.

Carl loaded the Franklin stove with wood as Al turned off the lights. Yellow and red flames skid past Carl's glasses and danced on the '32's high-gloss-black paint. "Black with flames," Al said, "look, you can see 'em on the paint."

"Carl turned and watched the show. "I love how they move across the paint," he said. "But seeing flames dance and making 'em look like they're dancing are two different animals."

"But you already know how to paint. I've seen you do it a hundred times."

Carl turned his attention back to the belly of the stove and waved for Alan to join him. Al bent next to his mentor and stared into the inferno.

"Sorry to tell you this, buddy," Carl said, "but I'm not painting your flames."

Al shook his head. "Whatcha talking about? You're the best?"

Carl said nothing and stuck a poker into the coals. Silence grew between them until Alan understood. "No way, I can't paint. Not a chance. What happens if I mess up?"

Carl laughed, "*If* you mess up? Oh, you'll mess up. In fact, you'll mess up so much you'll want to quit. But if you quit, the flames will stay in the fire because I'm not painting it for you."

Al's shock turned to terror. "I can't--, I'll wreck it."

