

Backstory

by Katrina Gray

The truth is that I've never driven a Karmann Ghia, but I've always wanted to. I imagined how tooling around in it would feel—eighteen-wheelers rushing by and nearly blowing it over, the stealthy engine shaking the bucket seats, enthusiasts giving you little waves of recognition. But I don't know. I don't know if any of that is true at all. Maybe they don't even have bucket seats, but the Internet says they do. Only someone who has ridden in a Karmann Ghia would know for sure. Really, though: it was the only car my character could have driven. As you can see, he *became* the Karmann Ghia, because it was so much a part of him. My editor even said so: “Ralph, the Karmann Ghia is the only car for Henry. The only one he could have possibly driven.”

And I don't know a thing about receiving an abortion. I really don't. It may look like I do, because I really researched it. I walked around Brooklyn asking women, “Excuse me, have you had an abortion?” I got slapped a few times, and nearly arrested. For art, I told myself. Then I just decided to buy some videos from the Focus on the Family Web site. They're quite graphic, and the women's faces are blurred. No one of course knows who the babies are, so their faces are not blurred—that is, when you can even make out faces in the jiggly piles of bloody tissue. But I am now officially receiving weekly emails from James Dobson, giving me tips about faith-based finances and how to meet the everyday challenges of homeschooling dads. James Dobson does not know that I live alone in a third-floor walk-up or that I am homosexual. I would like to keep it that way.

That first line—It all started when I tried to make Amish friendship bread—well, that was just brilliant. Everyone says so. It's brilliant because probably people have never heard of Amish

friendship bread, so it jars them a little. It makes them go, What? How can a book called *In Defense of Armageddon* begin with baking and the Amish? I thought of that line first, and out came the rest of the book after that. I was in the shower, picking at a curious scab on my scalp. It bled. For some reason, this made me think of a dumb chain-letter thing at work a few years back, where one person gives ten people uncooked bread dough, and then that person mixes some up according to the instructions, and gives dough away to ten other people. It's supposed to feed everyone in the world if you keep it up. This seemed unlikely to me, and stressful. I threw mine away. I don't bake, and don't trust raw dough sitting out for the ten days or whatever that you're supposed to mess with it. But it gave me this idea, so there's no bad luck. "Yet," my coworker Jean said when I shared this with her.

I was sitting on the toilet when I wrote the entire second chapter—the one with the lovemaking scene. The story came out quickly.

I do not have an affinity for Junebugs. Why I chose this as Henry's obsession, I don't know. I think I just like the word Junebug. And it seemed plausible that someone might really like Junebugs, that they might remind them of childhood summers, or they might like that shade of shimmering green. Junebug green, as Henry calls it.

And, seriously, do you think I know what it's like to die? I had to guess at that one. But I could be pretty liberal, too, because no one else knows either. There was no one to ask. The only research to do was Googling exactly how long it takes to die from exposure to the elements. I had to narrow it down: Henry could not die from just any exposure. You know why. It had to be sun and heat. So I figured out about how long, and I had to write those excruciating scenes. They made me thirsty. I had to run out for Tanqueray after only a few paragraphs, but I hadn't been outside my apartment for days because of the long weekend. I'd grown stubble, and I felt rough. It

was raining when I walked out, and I thought, Henry would rejoice. Henry would live. I felt selfish and cruel for at least not sharing my drink with him.

The Indian guy at the counter looked scared of me. I felt conspicuous, like everybody knew that I was about to walk back home and murder a perfectly good fellow. I could have made Henry remember to pack extra water in his Karmann Ghia. I could have made the motor last through that stretch of New Mexico. I might have let him drink his own urine instead of making him write his name in the sand so people would be able to identify his body.

I called Ray to come over, told him that I was feeling lonely and needed him. He stood behind me and brushed my cheek as I wrote those last lines. I cried. It was perfect, Ray told me, that I had the junebugs descend on Henry's decomposing flesh. It would have been a comfort to him. Ray nibbled my ear to demonstrate, and I laughed. Out of respect, I stayed strong.

I clicked the last period into place and unbuttoned my jeans, which were glued to me and soured from the rain. Ray slid his index finger along my neck and took his pants off too. We were wordless. I climbed behind him on the futon, which rattled with all our weight. I grabbed Ray's hair, and it was dry and hot. Ray moaned. I squinted my eyes. "Oh, God, Henry—" I said.

