

Tap Twice

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When I drove for the first time, I almost caused a three-car accident in front of the West Warwick Pizza Hut.

My dad had let me drive his Nissan, fondly dubbed by me and the neighbor kids as “The Babe Magnet.” I think right then and there, amidst the honking (the other cars) and the middle finger out the window (mine), he realized I’d need a car as tough as I was. A car that would shake if the needle hit 75, a rattling reminder to slow down. A car that, when I accidentally backed up into the Hoxies’ front lawn, would pull up an old stump, roots and all. A car that would cradle me as I sobbed on the rumble strip after my first fender bender.

That car turned out to be silver 2003 Grand Am with spoiler that could stop traffic. The ripples along the side probably had aerodynamic purposes, but all they accomplished daily was to make it look like a blown-up Matchbox. She was nobody’s dream car. Too sturdy to total, numbers worn off of the radio, and a heater with only one setting: on.

She’s the best first, only car a girl could ask for.

Early mornings after getting a car meant driving my brother to jazz band, a pre-school-day elective starting an hour before first period. I’d get the best parking spot—not closest to the school, but closest to the exit—and lever my seat back, legs across the center console. She would shut off after running her battery 20 minutes, cutting short Lite Rock 105’s clockwork blaring of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, a la Jimi Hendrix. I would fall asleep to the sounds of my math homework hitting my chest.

Before the first bell rang, my best friend would rap his knuckles on the window, scaring me awake, and thump the hood of the car twice for good luck, a compulsive habit I carried like a rabbit’s foot and that so many of my friends would inherit too.

Late nights also meant idling, just as curfew hit. From the patch of street where I e-braked, you could hear the motor vibrate up the lawn, through the thin walls, and all through my house. My ma could roll over in her sleep, look at the clock, and even though I wasn’t across our threshold, know I was home. Parked in front of the lawn, I believed I was beating the system. Tipping the scales. Stealing five more minutes before my chariot turned into a pumpkin.

Despite my love for *my* car, I don’t really care about them much in general. I can pick a 2012 Dodge Challenger out of a lineup only because one belongs to my boyfriend. I know punch buggies because who doesn’t? But to me, most cars are just... cars. Moving things I don’t think about unless they’ve cut me off on the highway. Steel boxes going from one place to the next.

But there's something about that possessive in front of the word *car* that holds your heart for a second. *My car*. Where you can feel something clutch and release in your chest.

The night I moved to Chicago, I snuck out to *my car*. The beeper hadn't worked for two years, and as I turned the key I whispered, "bloop bloop" under my breath, before settling into the faded grey seat. Everyone was asleep already, my dad and my boyfriend able to zonk out at a moment's notice without any anxiety toward the 15-hour drive ahead. Not a drive we would be doing in my car, but in a pristine rental van bursting to the seams with a life in cardboard boxes.

But in *my car* toe prints smudged the windshield, from where I had kicked my feet up all summer, sitting at the beach. Where the sun drifted through the open windows, winds shimmying through the knots in my hair. It smelled like three months' worth of sunscreen and a lifetime's worth of spilled slushies. My education dangled from the rearview mirror.

Almost seven years the car had been mine; the steering wheel sun-stretched, hugging my fingers. She held every secret I had. The sunsets parked at the townie beach, the day I drove the state after cutting fourth period, the night I left her parked at La Caretta because I drank one too many margaritas after taking the GRE and had to walk home. The dust under the seat probably still buddied up against glitter from my prom dress.

When I turned my head to the right, I could see every copilot who had balked at my liberal use of the U-ey (but not enough that they ever offered to drive). From the front seat, the world was only limited to how far a 20-dollar bill at the Cumby's would take me—about four hours in any direction.

Sitting in the driveway at the top of the hill, it was quiet. Summer. That warm kind of night where the headlights coming up the road might as well be fireflies and the fireflies in the trees, tiny cars.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about driving away. Not to Chicago. Not to anywhere really, just somewhere. There was always 20 dollars in the glovebox, just enough to get myself out of a pinch. Fill the tank. Pay to park. Run away.

I didn't though. I sat in my car for what would be the last time in a long time, and I stared at the ceiling. This time the next day, I would be 1,000 miles west, staring at the ceiling of an apartment I had only seen in pictures. How could you say a goodbye like this? To a beat-up piece of essentially scrap metal my boyfriend said would barely sell for two months' rent. *My car*.

In my driveway, on my road, in my town.

I closed the door reverently and sat on the hood still warm from the August heat. Leaning back against the windshield, I knew where in the sky to look for constellations and wondered if I would still be able to find them in Chicago. If the world would still feel as big without a car. If going to grad school and leaving this life behind was just another kind of running away.

As my feet touched the pavement, I tapped the hood twice.