

Stability in Motion

My 1990 Camry's DNA was designed inside the metallic walls of the Toyota Multinational Corporation's headquarters in Tokyo, Japan; transported via blueprint to the North American Manufacturing nerve center in Hebron, Kentucky; grown organ by organ in four major assembly plants in Alabama, New Jersey, Texas, and New York; trucked to 149 Arsenal Street in Watertown, Massachusetts; and steered home by my grandmother on September 4, 1990. It featured a 200 hp, 3.0 L V6 engine, a four-speed automatic, and an adaptive Variable Suspension System. She deemed the car too "high tech." In 1990 this meant a cassette player, a cup holder, and a manually operated moon roof.

During its youth, the car traveled little. In fifteen years my grandmother accumulated a meager twenty-five thousand miles, mostly to and from the market, my family's house, and the Greek jewelry store downtown. The black exterior remained glossy and spotless, the beige interior crisp and pristine. Tissues were disposed of, seats vacuumed, and food prohibited. My grandmother's old-fashioned cleanliness was an endearing virtue—one that I evidently did not inherit.

I acquired the old Camry through an awkward transaction. Ten days before my sixteenth birthday, my grandfather died.

He was eighty-six and it had been long expected, yet I still felt a guilty unease when I heard the now surplus car would soon belong to me. For my grandmother, it was a symbolic goodbye. She needed to see only *one* car in her garage—needed to comprehend her loss more tangibly. Grandpa’s car was the “nicer” of the two, so that one she would keep. Three weeks after the funeral, my grandmother and I went to the bank, I signed a check for exactly one dollar, and the car was legally mine. That was that. When I drove her home that evening, I manually opened the moon roof and put on a tape of Frank Sinatra. My grandma smiled for the first time in weeks.

Throughout the next three years, the car evolved. When I first parked the Toyota in my driveway, it was spotless, full of gas, and equipped with my grandmother’s version of survival necessities. The glove compartment had a magnifying glass, three pens, and the registration in a little Ziploc bag. The trunk had two matching black umbrellas, a first aid kit, and a miniature sewing box for emergency repairs. Like my grandmother’s wrists, everything smelled of Opium perfume.

For a while, I maintained this immaculate condition. Yet one Wrigley’s wrapper led to two and soon enough my car underwent a radical transformation—the vehicular equivalent of a midlife crisis. Born and raised in proper formality, the car saw me as *that* friend from school, the bad example who washes away naïveté and corrupts the clean and innocent. We were the same age, after all—both eighteen. The Toyota was born again, crammed with clutter, and exposed to decibel levels it had never fathomed. I filled it with giggling friends and emotional phone calls, borrowed skirts and bottled drinks.

The messiness crept up on me. Parts of my life began falling off, forming an eclectic debris that dribbled gradually into every corner. Empty sushi containers, Diet Coke cans, half-full

packs of gum, sweaters, sweatshirts, socks, my running shoes. My clutter was nondiscriminatory. I had every variety of newspaper, scratched-up English paper, biology review sheet, and Spanish flash card discarded on the seats after I’d sufficiently studied on my way to school. The left door pocket was filled with tiny tinfoil balls, crumpled after consuming my morning English muffin. By Friday, I had the entire house’s supply of portable coffee mugs. By Sunday, someone always complained about their absence and I would rush out, grab them all, and surreptitiously place them in the dishwasher.

My car was not gross; it was occupied, cluttered, cramped. It became an extension of my bedroom, and thus an extension of myself. I had two bumper stickers on the back: REPUBLICANS FOR VOLDEMORT and the symbol for the Equal Rights Campaign. On the back side windows were OBAMA ’08 signs that my parents made me take down because they “dangerously blocked my sight lines.” The trunk housed my guitar but was also the library, filled with textbooks and novels, the giant tattered copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and all one hundred chapters of *Harry Potter* on tape. A few stray cassettes littered the corners, their little brown insides ripped out, tangled and mutilated. They were the casualties of the trunk trenches, sprawled out forgotten next to the headband I never gave back to Meghan.

On average, I spent two hours a day driving. It was nearly an hour each way to school, and the old-fashioned Toyota—regarded with lighthearted amusement by my classmates—came to be a place of comfort and solitude amid the chaos of my daily routine. My mind was free to wander, my muscles to relax. No one was watching or keeping score. Sometimes I let the deep baritone of NPR’s Tom Ashbrook lecture me on oil shortages. Other times I played repetitive mix tapes with

titles like *Pancake Breakfast*, *Tie-Dye and Granola*, and *Songs for the Highway When It's Snowing*.

Ravaging my car, I often found more than just physical relics. For two months I could hardly open the side door without reliving the first time he kissed me. His dimpled smile was barely visible in the darkness, but it nevertheless made me stumble backward when I found my way blushing back into the car. On the backseat there was the June 3 issue of the *New York Times* that I couldn't bear to throw out. When we drove home together from the camping trip, he read it cover to cover while I played Simon and Garfunkel—hoping he'd realize all the songs were about us. We didn't talk much during that ride. We didn't need to. He slid his hand into mine for the first time when we got off the highway; it was only after I made my exit that I realized I should have missed it. Above this newspaper are the fingernail marks I dug into the leather of my steering wheel on the night we decided to *just be friends*. My car listened to me cry for all twenty-two-and-a-half miles home.

The physical manifestations of my memories soon crowded the car. My right back speaker was broken from the time my older brother and I pulled an all-nighter singing shamelessly during our rainy drive home from the wedding. I remember the sheer energy of the storm, the lights, the music—moving through us, transcending the car's steel shell, and tracing the city. There was the folder left behind from the day I drove my dad to an interview the month after he lost his job. It was coincidental that *his* car was in the shop, but I knew he felt more pathetic that it was he, not his daughter, in the passenger seat. I kept my eyes on the road, feeling the confused sadness of a child who catches a parent crying.

I talked a lot in my car. Thousands of words and songs and swears are absorbed in its fabric, just like the orange juice I spilled on my way to the dentist. It knows what happened when Allie went to Puerto Rico, understands the difference between the way I look at Nick and the way I look at Adam, and remembers the first time I experimented with talking to myself. I've practiced for auditions, college interviews, Spanish oral presentations, and debates. There's something novel about swearing alone in the car. Yet with the pressures of APs and SATs and the other acronyms that haunt high school, the act became more frequent and less refreshing.

My car has seen three drive-in movies. During *The Dark Knight*, its battery died and, giggling ferociously, we had to ask the overweight family in the next row to jump it. The smell of popcorn permeated every crevice of the sedan, and all rides for the next week were like a trip to the movies. There was a variety of smells in the Camry. At first it smelled like my grandmother—perfume, mint, and mothballs. I went through a chai-tea phase during which my car smelled incessantly of Indian herbs. Some mornings it would smell slightly of tobacco and I would know immediately that my older brother had kidnapped it the night before. For exactly three days it reeked of marijuana. Dan had removed the shabbily rolled joint from behind his ear and our fingers had trembled as the five of us apprehensively inhaled. Nothing happened. Only the seats seemed to absorb the plant and get high. Mostly, however, it smelled like nothing to me. Yet when I drove my friends, they always said it had a distinct aroma. I believe this functioned in the same way as not being able to taste your own saliva or smell your own odor—the car and I were pleasantly immune to each other.

In the Buckingham Browne & Nichols High School yearbook I was voted worst driver, but on most days I will refute this superlative. My car's love for parking tickets made me an easy target, but I rarely received other violations. My mistakes mostly harmed me, not others—locking my keys in the car or parking on the wrong side of the road. Once, last winter, I needed to refill my windshield wiper fluid and in a rushed frenzy poured an entire bottle of similarly blue antifreeze inside. Antifreeze, as it turns out, burns out engines if used in excess. I spent the next two hours driving circles around my block in a snowstorm, urgently expelling the antifreeze squirt by thick blue squirt. I played no music during this vigil. I couldn't find a playlist called *Poisoning Your Car*.

It may have been awkward-looking and muddled, but I was attached to my car. It was a portable home that heated my seat in winter and carried me home at night. I had no diary and rarely took pictures. That old Toyota Camry was an odd documentation of my adolescence. When I was seventeen, the car was seventeen. My younger brother entered high school last September and I passed my ownership on to him. In the weeks before I left for college, my parents made me clean it out for his sake. I spread six trash bags over the driveway, filling them with my car's contents as the August sun heated their black plastic. The task was strange, like deconstructing a scrapbook, unpeeling all the pictures and whiting out the captions.

Just like for my grandmother, it was a symbolic good-bye. Standing outside my newly vacuumed car, I wondered, if I tried hard enough, whether I could smell the Opium perfume again, or if I searched long enough, whether I'd find the matching umbrellas and the tiny sewing kit. My brother laughed at my nostalgia, reminding me that I could still drive

the car when I came home. He didn't understand that it wasn't just the driving I'd miss. That it was the tinfoil balls, the *New York Times*, and the broken speaker; the fingernail marks, the stray cassettes, and the smell of chai. Alone that night and parked in my driveway, I listened to Frank Sinatra with the moon roof slid back.