

from Juked #4  
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DAVE HOUSLEY

## *What the Cadillac Knows*

THE MAN: TALL, heavysset, thick in the bottom. He drives with the seat back, leaning away from the road like a hipster, a pimp, hands slung low at eight and four on the wheel. The man wears sandals year round, with thick, rubber soles. He goes heavy on the gas, heavy on the brakes. Tires squeal, brakes screech, gas is almost always low, oil is gummy and constantly in need of a change.

Today is no exception. The man throws himself into the bucket seat, grumbling about the woman and the appointment. He drives as if he is inflicting his will over not just the car but the landscape itself, careening through curves, barely slowing at stop signs, jamming the Cadillac through the morning commuter traffic by sheer force of will.

He listens to the sports talk radio, every now and then loudly agreeing or disagreeing with an exclamation in Russian.

The man is often angry.

Today he is no more angry than any other day, no more hurried, but there is a different mood, an unsettled feeling that lingers like the stink of nachos left overnight with the windows closed.

He careens to the 7-11, comes back with a package that smells like donuts and coffee, squeals tires out of the parking lot,

DAVE HOUSLEY

and slams back toward home. He does not wear his safety belt.

The man leaves the Cadillac running, and then they are both back in the car, both drinking coffee, eating donuts and wiping their hands on the bucket seats.

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The woman: smaller, skinny, quiet, bony ass rigid in the passenger seat. She sits to the right, exhales smoke through a crack in the window. This makes the man angry, and he turns up the radio, grumbles under his breath.

You want me to put it out just ask, she says, her voice barely audible under the whoosh of air and the radio babble.

It is not even nine o' clock, he says.

The health nut, she says, he doesn't start smoking until dark.

This is the usual conversation.

The rest of the time, there is silence. Not silence like cornfields and open skies, long country roads. But angry silence, silence that feels more like waiting for an alternator to finally slip, a long downhill and a fragile brake caliper that's not going to make it much longer.

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This morning the man and the woman drive to a large office complex in the suburbs. They are in the building for an hour and when they return the woman is excited, babbling, crying.

I really think this is what we need, she says. For us.

The man drives slower, his hands gripped tight at ten and two on the wheel. He leans forward in the seat, slows at yellow lights.

The woman does not smoke. She drops her cigarettes out the window, one by one, like confetti, or crumbs that will trace the direction home.

The man turns up the radio and stays in the right hand lane.

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The other woman: younger, heavier, she smells like perfume and fried food. They meet in the back of a strip mall, behind the restaurant where she works. The man taps taps taps on the steering wheel, taps taps taps on the gas. After five minutes, he will beep the horn, first a gentle tap and then a full blare, enough that the other woman is often furious by the time she straps the safety belt across her full bosom.

Jesus, she'll say, calm down. She will turn the radio to the modern rock station, singing along. He will drive faster until they reach the motel. In the parking lot the Cadillac's exhaust pipes will tick the time away, oil dripping slowly from the cracked head gasket until they come back an hour or so later, smelling sweet and pungent, like driving past a cornfield on a hot summer day.

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When he is alone the man drives to meet other men. They convene behind strip malls, in parking garages, the Cadillac ticking beside a quiet Audi or the businesslike hum of a BMW. The man takes an envelope from the glove compartment, returns with another envelope or a small package. These, he tucks into the spare tire reservoir in the trunk.

The men shake hands, sometimes with a laugh, other times a quiet word. They drive away in separate directions, the man muttering under his breath and gunning the Cadillac through traffic.

Under the passenger seat, he keeps a gun.

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Once a month, the woman takes the car to a restaurant on the edge of town. After a few hours, she exits with another woman, similar age, shape, build, and they lean on the Cadillac and talk and smoke cigarettes and look at their watches until the SUVs and family wagons and convertibles have all vacated the parking lot. Finally one of them will sigh, mention the late hour.

The woman will get behind the wheel and sit while her friend's SUV starts up, moves toward the highway. She will turn on the radio, moving the dial until she finds an old song, and then she will make her way home.

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Today the other woman is angry. What the fuck do you mean? she says. You have responsibilities now. This has to be over.

It's not the same with her, the man says. Not like this.

They are parked in the alley behind the restaurant. He has cut the engine and the radio is off. Crickets chirp and the highway makes a light hum in the distance.

Yeah, the other woman says. This is so great, right?

But it is, he says.

She gets out, slams the door.

He stays in the alley for a long time. Finally he turns the ignition and drives home.

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Where are we going? the woman says.

To celebrate, the man says. He stays in the right lane, signals all his turns and eases to a full stop at all of the signs. They move out of the suburbs and into the country.

They drive for a long time in silence.

This is so nice, the woman says. Lovely.

The man grunts. He lights a cigarette.

God I'd like one of those, she says.

Go ahead, he says. My mother smoked the whole time, and look at me.

She takes a pull from his cigarette, cracks the window, puffs into the night air.

He takes a right and follows a gravel road that runs alongside a creek. He finds a pull-off and stops. He keeps the car running.

It is ten degrees cooler in the country. The creek babbles white noise.

Come, the man says.

The woman stays in her seat.

He opens the passenger door and stands. She holds onto the seatbelt strap. The man is breathing loudly, like a bear. The creek is churning. Finally the man shuts the door. He gets in behind the wheel.

I just wanted to go for a walk, he says. Like we used to. In the country.

The woman still clutches the seatbelt strap. Take me home, she says.

The man backs out and hits the gas hard. Stones kick behind them and the car fishtails into the country lane.

The man drives too fast, as usual. He careens toward the city, screeching through turns, daring the wheels to come off the country road. The highbeams cast shadows along the trees and brush, jigsaw monster shapes bursting forth and then slipping into black.

People shouldn't trust one another. Not really. This the Cadillac knows, has felt in every lurching motion, every quick stop and near miss in traffic, in the dents along its side and the long key scratch a business associate of the man etched into the right quarter-panel years ago.

When they get home the woman opens the door before the car has stopped. She jumps out, snakes into the house. The man sits, quiet, his hands still gripping the wheel, until the Cadillac has stopped ticking and the only sounds are crickets.

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It is almost morning, light just starting to seep into gray sky, when the woman slips into the Cadillac. She opens the door quietly, drops a bag onto the passenger seat, edges behind the wheel, inserts the key as carefully as if she is picking a lock.

She lets out the brake, puts the car into neutral, and allows it to drift down the gentle slope of the driveway. When the car has stopped, sideways in the quiet street, she turns the key and the Cadillac grinds to life. She taps the gas and the car eases past the dark houses.

She stays in the right hand lane, stops completely at stop signs, signals turns well in advance. She maintains this pace, creeping, really, all the way to the highway.