

Summer Steel Romance

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Part I: Cub's Dream

The sound comes only in the small solitary hours of Sunday morning when the streets are empty and the only noise is the hum of night traffic on the freeways. I'm on the streets somewhere near a downtown stop light two or three hours after the death of Saturday with a crew full of loneliness and that frustration which is more intense for having no definite cause; I catch in the distance the beginning of the sound.

It's the noise of a thousand parts, competition tuned into a symphony of hi-lift cams, straight through manifolds, and road speed tires hissing on the pavement: a ton of real GT material shifting through the darkness, trebling the speed limit while comfortable citizens dribble into their pillows, dreamlessly. The noise comes closer, rises an octave into third gear for the lights, then down, howling into second as the car pulls up and throbs, waiting just out of sight round the corner of the block.

They're out there now, faces lit in the dash board glow, laughing, while the machinery grumbles beneath their feathered feet. The man I cannot see is tall and lean and given to quiet laughter that crinkles fatless cheeks browned by Caribbean suns; the hands on the wheel have piled poker chips, typed sonnets, felled villains, flown Phantoms; and the eyes (a mere glance from which could stop a charging buffalo) are blue chips, promising female investors an undreamed of return on initial outlay; and the girl . . . the girl is Helen of Troy and Cleopatra and Jane Fonda and Julie Christie and with the capacity for both the emotion and the expression of love which leaves Julie Andrews at the turn.

The lights go green, the clutch engages, and the white wrath goes past like Halley's comet, bearing its invisible passengers toward— what? To a long straight ribbon of road out there, somewhere beyond Minnetonka: a white track faintly phosphorescent beneath the rising moon. And at the end of this road in the middle of an enchanted wood, there is a house standing above a motionless lake.

Outside of it, the Gran Turismo coachwork is drawn up in shimmering lines, and inside there is a party that has been going on since the beginning of time, where all the men are brilliant and all the talk is scintillating and all the love is pure (and the booze never runs out). All the couples are idyllically in love, as if for the first time, and all the men are those whose friendships endure to the grave—not that one thinks of the grave, since all the girls are 22 and all the men are 29 and ever more shall be so.

Part II: A Young Dog's Desire

Every year toward the end of April something in a man yawns, rolls over, opens its eyes, and says, "I need that car." It's caused by a lot of things—blond-haired, long-legged, big-eyed girls, willow-soft sunshine, cats-paw kite wind, and Italian bodied, wire wheeled, petrol-filled topless sports cars. They're the kind of cars that turn level-headed, middle-aged men into Luigi Fagiolis who drive their Ford sedans muttering "varroom, varroom" as they drive Gran Turismo fashion through the streets of their home towns, turning every stop light into the start of the Monza, the bend at the end of the drive into the hair-pin at Monte Carlo, their wives into brave women waiting by the checkered flags gallantly for their heroes. When the beast turned over in me, I was still too young to resist. I picked up the lance of good faith, the shield of innocence and charged into the used car lots.

Auto Row in Minneapolis runs the full length of Lake Street from the Mississippi River and 36th Street on the east on past the Lake Street Cemetery, Psychedellia, The

Fire House Theater, and the Black Forest all the way to the Calhoon Beach House on the west. You never notice them when you're driving. All you see are a flash of bare light bulbs, '65 Fords, Chevs, maybe a rusty Cadillac, men in their working clothes and hands in their pockets, women with their hair in curlers, haggard, holding one grubby-faced, squalling little kid in their arms and another bug eyed and big eared hanging on her skirts, and last but not least the salesman. He's the hero of Steinbeck and Nader, sophisticated, but not stuffy, shifty with an honest face, expansive, but at the same time a little too skittish with his accountants.

I finally found the she-car where Penn and Broadway Avenue North meet. A sexy Italian body over disc brakes, hydraulic clutch, stitched leather seats, aluminum pistons all covered with, what else, but the British racing green. The brakes were nonexistent and there was no exhaust system back of the manifolds, but it was Brrritish, the tires were tyres, the gas was petrol, and the hood was not a hood but a bonnet. The people on the mall must have thought one of the Formula 1's had broken loose from the circuit. I rolled down Portland Avenue grinning like a sheik, just beginning a long summer of romance.

Part III: Falling Out

The romance is just about over now. The new car is going to be delivered in April. Yes, I've sold out. The body is gross, the engine reliable, the suspension smooth, so smooth that if you run over a curb you sway back and forth for a hundred yards afterward, all covered with what else, Detroit Blue. I wore sheep skin jackets that summer, piled poker chips, and stopped charging buffalo with my eyes; and the girl . . . the girl was Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, and a little Irish with blown brown hair and freckles. I hope whoever loves my car will take it down the road to Minnetonka, to the enchanted wood, to the party which never ends, and stays young forever. Don't worry, you whose hair rises at the sound of a real GT. There is such a place. I've been there.