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At nine o'clock in the morning, the park was clean and deserted. There were no candy wrappers or smashed beer cans on the ground, no golden retrievers leaving a trail of crap, no snotty toddlers running around, and no Spanish-speaking mothers running after them.

It was the first day of spring, but if you look at Dana, you wouldn't know it. He was standing on Newark Avenue, across the park, bundled up in his yellow parka, black knit cap, and matching gloves. The torn edges of his denims were tucked in his military-surplus combat boots. Despite all that, he was shivering. He should have been in school, but he woke up late. The alarm clock did not go off, and both his Mom and Uncle Joey had already left for work.

The only thing that held the boy's interest at the moment was the black car across the street, right by the park. It looked like a poor man's Batmobile, a sports car with muddy tires and a body showing some rust. The car wasn't there last night, or at any other time, as far as he could remember. Shifting his weight from one leg to another, a part of him wanted to keep on walking. Better late than never and all that. His school was only three blocks away, past the mom-and-pops, the abandoned food processing plant, and the carpet warehouse guarded by six Dobermans.

But Dana stood there gawking at the black specter of a car, mesmerized by its sleek shape and exotic red stripes, transfixed by the peculiar bump of its hatchback. Unlike the expensive toy cars he used to gape at, this one was not inside the display window of Kay-Bee Toys. So he crossed the street to take a good look.

Dana let out a quiet "Whoa!" when he saw that it was a Camaro. He looked around before breaking into a goofy grin: he saw that the car doors were unlocked and the car key was lying on the front seat. He walked around the car, scrutinizing it. *Not bad, not bad at all.* He didn't know much about cars, but he guessed that this baby was a third-generation Camaro, probably a V8. Those were the things he heard Uncle Joey say about Camaros.

His Uncle Joey, the man currently living with Dana's Mom, knew a lot about cars because he was a mechanic. That was how he met Dana's Mom - fixing her old, rattling Ford Escort. She was broke and he was single. So what the hell. Uncle Joey moved into Dana's apartment shortly after that. He wasn't too bad; he had never been in the slammer and he was clean. Unlike the other mechanics at Exxon where he worked, Uncle Joey cared about good grooming. He shaved his pointy chin every day, kept his thinning blond hair short, and wore spotless white shirts when he wasn't working on cars. Although Uncle Joey was a couple of inches shorter than Dana's Mom, he was wiry. He once pushed

a stalled car single-handedly.

Dana gave the car another once-over before moving away. He trudged toward the playground - a sorry excuse for a playground, if you ask Dana, with its rickety swing set, corroded monkey bars, and a sandbox littered with dog poop most of the time. The boy plopped on a swing, his legs too long, his weight bearing down on the wooden seat.

What's a Camaro doing in this park? Dana watched the other cars roll along Newark Avenue: vans, sedans, and SUVs whose drivers were oblivious to the existence of a free car, a Camaro ready for the taking. A police car didn't even slow down. Was everybody blind or was it Dana's lucky day? He kicked the dirt on the ground as he tried to propel himself on the swing, making it creak long and slow as if it were in pain. All the while, he kept an eye on the Camaro.

If only Victor were around, he would know what to do. Dana left a message in Victor's answering machine, telling him where he'd be hanging out. Half an hour later, no Victor in sight. *Where the hell was he?*

Dana liked Victor as much as he disliked himself. Victor was a pretty cool name, for a start. Dana hated his name, hated its girly sound, hated his Mom for picking it, hated his Dad wherever he was for allowing the name. Who on earth would name a boy Dana in a place like New Jersey? Every boy he knew had a manly, respectable name like Victor or Antonio or David or Matthew.

Victor was 17, a pretty cool age to be. Dana detested being 13, being in the eighth grade, being clumsy, being tall and stocky and yet not considered a man. The day he showed up in school with a mustache, the airheads in his class started singing "Ch-ch-ch-chia!" to the tune of the stupid commercial for Chia Pets. The bushy facial hair was gone the following day. Even Dana's pale complexion, which only emphasized the freckles on his face and arms, was a source of constant irritation to him. He preferred Victor's perennial tan, which looked good when he played basketball shirtless in the summer. On the basketball court, Victor displayed the biceps that went with the moves, while Dana only had the baby fat to go with the fouls.

Dana wasn't even allowed to drive, even though Uncle Joey said Dana drove better than most idiots on the road. Victor, on the other hand, drove a mean-looking Dodge Ram pick-up truck with big wheels. Victor didn't have to go to school either because he made money working in construction sites with his brothers and uncles. He could get away with smoking and drinking by the strength of his personality, just by the way he swaggered into a liquor store and flicked his cigarette ash in somebody's face. He wore his arrogance for everyone to see, like a new leather jacket or a high-top Nike.

One time, Victor crashed a party in a Manhattan club, where a bouncer twice his size blocked his path. "*Que pasa?*" Victor whispered to the man. He always reverted to Spanish when he was ticked off. The question was harmless, but the smirk on his handsome face was pure menace, the glint in his dark eyes cut like a razor. In an instant, the bouncer learned what everyone who ever met Victor knew: Nobody dared bother Victor.

Girls fell for him instantly, that goes without saying. An 18-year-old girl named Cheryl, who happened to be Dana's first cousin, was the reason Dana became buddies with Victor. Cheryl used to baby-sit Dana after school. That was only last year, when Dana was 12. Talk about humiliating. Cheryl, with her three-inch skirts and mile-long legs, looked like a fashion model or a hooker, depending on how you look at it. Victor befriended Dana so he could hang around Cheryl. She was a toughie, the kind of girl who used her high-heeled boots to either seduce a guy or kick his ass, depending on what he deserved. And yet Victor had Cheryl wrapped around his little finger, at least for a while, until she caught him with another girl. Now they're history. But somehow, Victor continued to hang out with Dana.

Dana jumped off the swing and slowly approached the black car. Gray clouds hovered low, blocking the tepid sun. The budding leaves on the trees fluttered slightly with the chilly breeze. The traffic slowed down until there was none - not a car or a cop or a pedestrian in sight. Dana heard nothing but his own breathing, slow and heavy, leaving a ring of vapor in the air. For a split of a second, everything became deadly still. It made Dana's skin crawl.

And just like that, he broke into a mad dash toward the car, hopped into the driver's seat, grabbed the key, and started the car. One, two, three, he counted under his breath, before he heard the Camaro's engine purr. "Awesome!" he blurted. And he was off.

Dana was surprised at how smoothly the car glided under his inexperienced hands. Uncle Joey would be so proud of him. He couldn't believe he was really driving. Forget about Victor; he was missing the joy ride of a lifetime. Dana drove on North Avenue, passing by the train station where he and Victor tried to break into a Lexus just a couple of days ago. The car's alarm was so loud. It spooked the hell out of them.

Dana drove by the supermarket where his Mom worked. She was probably hosing down crates and crates of apples at the back of the building. Then she would wipe one apple at a time, lovingly and tenderly, till it shone like a gem. Only then would she arrange them in a pyramid in the produce section. Despite her crooked teeth and her freckled cheeks, Dana's Mom was not bad-looking. Her ready smile made up for her physical imperfections. Her dedication and cheerfulness were valued at the supermarket, but they weren't enough to get her a raise. Dana's Mom was so broke that she agreed to live with Uncle Joey just so there would be someone she could split the rent with. Poor Uncle Joey had no clue.

Next, Dana passed by the apartment building where he lived, feeling disgusted by its shabby gray paint and the broken windows on the third floor, which had not been fixed two months after some drunk pelted them with rocks. Dana and his Mom have lived in the building for as long as he could remember.

Mrs. Schmachtenber, who lived with her two cats next door, was as close to having a Grandma as Dana could ever get. Despite her fragile health, she baked brownies or peanut butter cookies or a casserole for Dana and his Mom almost every week. Before Uncle Joey was in the picture, Mrs. Schmachtenber once cared for Dana during a bout of flu that lasted for days and days, so his Mom could go to work. The other kids in the building made fun of the old lady's German accent and called her a Nazi behind her back, and yet they never refuse her cookies, those bums. Dana may not care for his apartment building, but he could never entirely hate the place that was home to Mrs. Schmachtenber.

The boy let out a long sigh. It was time to burn some rubber on the highway, away from his neighborhood. He took the New Jersey Turnpike, heading south toward nowhere in particular. His heart was pounding so hard he couldn't hear the roar of the Camaro's powerful engine. He hit the gas and sped away, as free as the seagulls circling the sky above him. The pale sun winked in the side-view mirror. Driving was definitely better than dozing off in Mr. Helmsley's English class, even better than shooting the breeze with Victor.

The Camaro was so low that Dana felt like he was sitting in a recliner. The acceleration was so smooth it was like floating in the ocean. In the few minutes that took him from the park to the highway, Dana began to feel a strange connection with the Camaro. Call it a sense of ownership, a surge of self-confidence, or perhaps even a taste for power. It felt good whatever it was. He never felt that good before, not even when he was in love.

Everybody called her "Kathy M" to distinguish her from "Kathy B," who was in the same class. Kathy M may not be a real beauty as Victor pointed out, but she was everything that Dana thought a girl should be: sweet, smart, and didn't talk trash. Dana was content to admire Kathy M from afar, at least while he was trying to lose weight. Watching her every lunchtime, Dana knew that she peeled off the pepperoni from her pizza and sprinkled lots of cinnamon on her tapioca. She drank only Diet Coke. She and her little sister took swim lessons at the Boys and Girls Club on Saturday mornings. She rooted for the New York Yankees not because she liked baseball, but because she had the biggest crush on Derek Jeter. Dana knew a thousand other things about Kathy M. If that wasn't love, then he simply didn't know what the word meant.

One day, Kathy M didn't show up in class. Her family had moved to Oklahoma. Dana was bereft. It never occurred to him that Kathy M could leave like that — permanently absent like Dana's father. Not dead, but not around either. What good was it to love someone like that? Although the eighth grade class still had Kathy B, there won't be any other Kathy in Dana's life.

He cranked up the heater and turned on the car radio, bouncing from station to station until he settled for a dance tune with a Spanish rhythm. It was definitely Victor's kind of music. He wondered again about Victor's whereabouts. Then his thoughts turned to the Camaro's owner. Why did he leave the car at the park? Or perhaps a chick owned the car? He sniffed the stale cigarette odor and tossed a glance at the ketchup stain on the front seat and the cigarette butts on the floor. *Nah, it's gotta be a dude.*

Dana drove about 20 miles before he noticed that he was running low on gas. Refueling was out of

the question because whatever little money he had, he already used to pay the tolls. He took the next exit and drove back to the park to see if Victor was there. The thought that the Camaro's owner might be waiting for him, as well, crossed his mind, but he shrugged it off.

Dana felt his spirit plummet as soon as he got off the highway. The bliss of speed, the pure delight of the freedom of driving began to subside. The familiar sight of his hometown greeted him: the washed-out buildings and the washed-up people in them. From the driver's seat of a Camaro, Dana's neighborhood — his life — was a picture of defeat. Too bad that even a fast car couldn't take him away from it all. He was back. And not a tad cooler or happier than before he had driven a Camaro.

Dana parked the car where he found it, even remembering to turn off the radio and the heater. He kissed the steering wheel as tenderly as he might have kissed Kathy M. He opened the car door. Before he could step out, he heard the deafening sounds: sirens going off, tires screeching, doors slamming. *Cops!*

Three police cars swarmed the Camaro. Half a dozen officers jumped out of the cars. *What the hell?* Someone shouted something at Dana. His thoughts were racing as fast as his heart. He never meant to steal the car. All he did was take it for a spin. Was that a crime? Would he go to jail? What would they do to him? He was only 13, for Christ's sake! He got out of the Camaro, his hands up like he thought he was supposed to.

An officer who looked like he should have been an NBA player shoved Dana to the ground, then handcuffed him.

"I didn't mean to steal it! I swear I didn't mean to steal it!" said Dana, tears burning in his eyes.

Another officer, a shorter one, talked to Dana about his rights. But all the boy could think of was his Mom. Only a few minutes ago, he felt sorry for Uncle Joey because Dana's Mom was living with him for the sole reason of splitting the rent. Dana realized that he should have felt sorry for his Mom for being so poor. This little act of betrayal of his own mother came rushing to him like a tidal wave. And now this. She would be heart-broken. Dana was no better than his AWOL father. Suddenly he was drowning: choking in his tears, kicking like crazy, and struggling for his life under the pressure of two cops holding him down.

Through the fog of his tears, Dana saw the other policemen, their guns aimed at him. They would shoot him in a heartbeat. He was nothing but a stupid kid, about as important as a disposable cup. No use resisting.

Mr. NBA pulled him up by the collar and dragged him to the back of the Camaro, while the short cop unlocked the trunk. Both of them pushed the boy's face inside the trunk, so he was face to face with someone awfully familiar.

Dana's head jerked back. He let out an ear-splitting scream. Victor's eyes - as dark as the Camaro - were wide open. His lifeless body was curled like a fetus. His perennial tan had already turned bluish-gray.

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