

This Is Where I'd Start Again

The car my brother drowned in was my dad's first. A 1989 Chevy Celebrity, with manual windows and a special key for the ignition. It was the car my dad left Meridian in, and the one he returned with, a few years later, Mom in the passenger seat, pregnant with me.

When I was big enough to reach the pedals, Dad would take me out on the empty back roads, talk me through the winding curves and hungry darkness. Sometimes I'd drive him to the bar and sit outside in the Chevy, reading comics in the streetlight until he stumbled out.

I'd always imagined I'd inherit the car. I'd drive it up to the abandoned mill with my buddies, where we'd drink and smoke thin joints and talk about girls. I imagined I'd take my first girl in the wide backseat. After a football game a county over, on a side road hidden by scuppernong and pines. We'd smoke a cigarette on the hood after the fact, she wrapped in my long button down, me in just my t-shirt and boxers, glowing white and new in the night air.

Obviously, after Trent died, none of that happened. The police brought the Celebrity back to us. It was mangled, hard to look at, but my father left it in the yard anyhow. Wisteria grew over the fenders, and animals rooted in the torn upholstery. Kids came and stole the hubcaps and anything else shiny. I didn't know what my father did with the key, if he lost it or kept it hidden in a secret place. He used to sit out on the front steps in the evenings and drink bourbon and watch the Celebrity, like it was a T.V. show

or a particularly good movie, like it was telling him stories. One day, after years of this, my mother decided it was time to get him up. My sister, Trinity, and I were sitting in the living room, watching a television show about aliens. My mother went out the door, letting the screen slam shut behind her. Through the window, I could see her.

“Get the fuck up, Clive,” she said. My father turned to her, his eyes bleary. He didn’t say anything. “Get up, and in the morning I’m calling the tow truck, and they’re going to take that thing to the dump. You understand? I’m tired of it messing up our yard.”

The neighbors were watching by now. They pretended that they weren’t, but you could almost see their ears perking up. Our whole street was one big jumble of run-down mail-order houses and trailers, dusty yards. Chickens pecking everywhere, scraggly oak trees holding the whole thing together. I could hear our neighbors when they fought and screwed and prayed. You knew who was gonna have the cops called on them, and you knew when. You knew who was dealing and buying, who was trying to quit drinking or smoking or cheating on their wife. You knew what everyone had for dinner. You knew when a kid was sick, or had nightmares, or made a good grade in school. So the neighbors knew about Trent, and what had happened. When my parents fought about getting rid of the car or each other, they paid attention but stayed out of the way.

My father stood, rocking on his feet. He pointed at my mother with a lit cigarette. “You don’t understand,” he said.

“What?” Mom asked. “What don’t I understand?”

He half fell, half stumbled, down the stairs and into the dusty clay yard. My mother followed him.

“I lost a son too,” she said. “You don’t get to act like a child.”

My father took a drag on his cigarette and spit the smoke out in her face. My mother waved it out of her eyes and looked at him with same look a dog gives you if you kick it. He sat in the dust, dropping the cigarette. My mother leaned down next to him. She took his thick arm in her hand.

“I’m just trying to help you get back on your feet,” she said.

He let her help him up and into the house. Bright lights and colors flashed across the television screen. Trinity’s eyes stayed focused on the television as my mother sat my father in his chair and handed him a glass of water. He wiped the sweat off his forehead. His shirt stuck in wet patches to his back and underarms, as if he’d been working in the hot sun, not just crying in the dust.

The television cut through the thick silence, but no one seemed to notice. I don’t even think my little sister was keeping up with the show. Looking back on it, I admire her, and her ability to hold steady.

When my father’s breath had steadied and he seemed to have relaxed into himself, I turned to him.

“Dad?” I asked.

“Pete?”

“Can we make a deal?”

My dad made a guttural sound in his throat. “What is it?”

“If I can fix up that old Celebrity and get her running, can I have her?”

My dad laughed. He shook his head slowly. I waited.

“Sure, son,” he said. “If you can get that pile of junk moving again, you can do whatever you want with her.”

I had just graduated high school. No college plans, just odd jobs around town over the summer. Maybe I’d go to tech school in the fall, learn mechanic work or HVAC or something like that. Come back to Meridian and work with my dad. But the idea of it felt like sinking. If I could get the Chevy running, I could get out, drive west through South Carolina and into the west beyond the Mississippi. The furthest I’d ever been away from home was to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, when I was eleven and my grandparents took us to the Great Smoky Mountains. The fog over the pines and the wild heap of the mountains made me want to run away from myself. I still carry that urge, deep in my chest, even now, decades later.

“I want it in writing,” I said, not looking at my father.

“You don’t need writing, son. You’ve got my word. A man’s word is better than any damn contract, any day.”

I went to the kitchen and found a yellow legal pad in my mom’s junk drawer. I wrote out my father’s promises to me and signed my name. My cursive looked like a fourth grader’s. My father sighed, but he took the pen when I handed it to him and scrawled his own name under mine.

Then he laughed again. “Good luck, kid.”

I tore the paper from the pad and folded it into a square and stuck it in my pocket. Then I got two beers from the fridge and handed one to my father. “Good luck,” I said. We clinked bottles and drank together. My mother called Trinity to bed. Before she left, she leaned into my father’s chest and laced her arms around him. My dad wrapped an arm around her and switched the T.V. show to a baseball game.

“Go to bed, Trinity,” I said.

My sister glared at me, and then left the room. I could hear the balls of her feet squeaking against the floor and the timber of her voice at the other end of the house. I felt an electric buzzing at the base of my spine and finished the beer with shaking hands.

In the morning I watched YouTube videos about reconstructing cars. My dad and I always did the basic mechanic work on his truck— changing the oil, rotating the tires, replacing drive shafts or serpentine belts. He ordered the parts off of Ebay or found them at a scrap yard. I’d never worked on something as old or as damaged as the Celebrity, but I figured I could learn as I went along.

My mother came into the kitchen in her housecoat, a ratty robe with frogs on it and crowns, like a fairy tale theme. Even now, years later, certain smells remind me of that robe. A butteriness, a familiar warmth. She set a pot of coffee on. “You’re up early,” she said, watching me.

I scrolled through a website on rebuilding old cars, for shows. “Where’s Dad?” I asked.

“What are you looking at, there?”

“Car stuff.”

“He’s got a job today. Fixing up some old woman’s porch. You want coffee?” She poured herself a cup and waved the pot at me.

I shook my head.

“You buying a car?” my mother asked me. My father hadn’t told her yet, about our deal. To me, that meant he didn’t think it was real.

I had a good amount of money saved up, from years of waiting tables and mowing lawns. Birthday and Christmas money, visits from a crazy uncle who liked to hand me twenty-dollar bills when he got drunk, telling me to take a girl out somewhere nice. I figured my mom had guessed as much, that I hadn’t spent much of it, and was sitting on the pile of cash.

“Not quite,” I said. “I’m fixing up the Celebrity.”

I waited for her to laugh, or tell me it was too dangerous, or would never work. Instead, she nodded.

“Well good,” she said. “It’s time someone does something with it.”

She came out to the yard with me and sat on the steps while I began clearing the kudzu and wisteria from the car. I scraped the weeds away and once I’d done that, I could better see the damage. The passenger side door was smashed and hanging on by a rivet, and two of the windows were broken. The windshield was spidered with cracks. All the tires had gone flat and seeded. But once the weeds were gone, it didn’t look quite as bad. It at least looked like a car, and not a wild thing from the woods.

I popped the hood and peered into the dusty interior. The mechanics looked untouched. A little rusted, with some dead weeds sewn between parts, but not completely unrecognizable. I touched the cold metal and almost felt like crying.

When my father got home, early to beat the heat of the day, we took the truck and a list of parts and went to the junkyard to find what I could scavenge. My father rode in the passenger seat, chain smoking.

“I bought that car when I was seventeen,” he said. “And it was old then. Got it from some Russian man with a thick accent. My dad went with me, to make sure I didn’t get scammed. The man had an old dog, named Plumber, and when we were ready to buy he asked us if we wanted the dog, too. I almost said yes. I only half think he was joking.”

My dad laughed, wheezing slightly, and ashed his cigarette in the wind. “A dog and a car. What more does a boy need?”

“A girl,” I said, and my dad laughed harder.

I grinned at him. The drive to the junkyard was long and hot. The truck didn’t have AC, but my father kept the window rolled down and the breeze felt better than any Freon.

“When your momma and I first started dating, I went to pick her up from her dormitory. She was still in undergraduate, for nursing. I showed up in that Celebrity and she laughed at me. She said no way was she getting in that heap of junk. She made me let her drive. The funniest part of it is that the Celebrity lasted way longer than her cheap-ass Honda. Stuff was just made better, way back when.”

“Way back when, like you bought a car from the 1800s and not 1980s?” I said.

My dad dropped his butt in the ashtray. “They didn’t have cars in the 1800s, jack ass.”

The junkyard was filled with men who fixed up cars for a living. They’d buy scrap parts and then put them in unsuspecting customer’s cars and charge them 1200 dollars for a radiator change. You paid two dollars to get in, and then five dollars a pound for anything you took out with you. No telling if a part worked or not. You just had to hope. My dad didn’t offer any advice as we walked around the hot and dusty yard, side stepping men in cowboy boots and coveralls who were way more prepared than I. I’d brought my tool set, a present from my sixteenth birthday. My dad carried it and that was the only assistance he offered.

You can’t find a 1989 Chevy in a junkyard anymore, but you can find enough parts for it to not matter. Anything else, I’d have to buy online. I figured I could buy a couple of different things and see what worked. As I was unscrewing the parts from a carburetor, I saw a man and a woman yelling at each other across the bed of a dented pickup truck.

“You gonna take all that, you might as well take the whole car,” the woman said.

“I don’t need the whole damn car. This is a scrap yard, not a grocery store. It’s first come, first serve. You should know how that works.”

My father looked up from his phone to watch the fight play out, as well.

“What in the hell do you mean by that?” the woman asked.

The man looked down into the hood of the pickup and didn’t answer.

The woman went over and pushed at him. “Talk to me. Come on. You started this. Now tell me what you mean.”

“Would you get off of me, woman?” The man pushed the woman away and she stood a few feet back in the dust, sulking. He lifted whatever he wanted out of the hood and carried it toward the loading deck at the front of the yard. The woman waited a minute, before following him.

“This isn’t even the right kind of car,” I heard her say, before they disappeared between the rows.

My father turned to me. “Son,” he said. “Get you a woman who will argue with you in the middle of a junk yard in June. Otherwise, I don’t want to hear about her.”

My dad was always giving me strange, specific advice about the woman I should marry. Someone who lets you cook her spaghetti. Someone who doesn’t like roses. Someone with green eyes. When I finally did bring the woman I would marry over to the house, I wondered if she was the type my father expected, the type he had raised me to want. She was from a northern state and said some of her vowels weird, in a way I thought was cute at first but grew to hate when we started fighting. I never took her to a junkyard, but sometimes I made her spaghetti, and she would taste it and say the sauce was too thin, or it needed more salt. She let me love her anyway. She said she loved that I could fillet a fish with one strike.

After we’d carried all the parts to the truck bed, my father stood back and wiped sweat from his eyes. I looked around the junkyard, at the half-scavenged cars sitting with their insides bare, the hoods up and glinting in the setting sun.

“You’re certainly getting creative with this,” my dad said, analyzing what I’d gathered.

“Do you want to drive home?” I asked.

He took the keys and led us home against the rich red sun. I felt like a bird, starting a new journey to the same old things.

On the Internet, I found spark plugs and headlights, new wiper blades. I kept my fingers crossed, as the packages came in, that I wouldn’t have to replace the transmission. The money was dwindling, and the Celebrity still looked like a dog left out in the weather. Some of the neighbors had started hanging closer to the yard. I ignored them, through June and into July, but I could feel their eyes on me as I slowly rebuilt the car. Sometimes I would replace parts, but put the new ones in wrong or backwards. Metal bit into my hands and grease coated the back of my neck and the corners of my eyes where I tried to rub sweat out of them.

I imagined driving the car into Arizona. I looked up photos of mesas and the Grand Canyon. I read about Pueblo Indians and tried to imagine living anywhere with that amount of immense, flat dryness. What would I do, out there, in that dry country? I asked myself. What wouldn’t I do? The car seemed to respond, as I set another spark plug into place and dried my hands on my shirt.

Trinity stayed out of the way while I worked, but she was always in my periphery. I wondered if she felt the same tugging in her chest, if as young as she was she understood why I had to get out of here. Leave Meridian now, or be here forever. When

she grew up, she went to college and moved to the city, so maybe she understood better than I thought.

When it rained in the afternoons, summer storms shattering the sky, I covered the Celebrity with a tarp and sat in the kitchen and rested my hands. When my mother got home from work, she sat down at the table across from me and I rubbed the heels of her feet.

My mother would ask how it was going. And I'd tell her, in detail, of what I'd done that day. How I took out the carburetor and replaced all the gears, or drained the fuel lines, or changed the oil and oil filters and break lines. She would nod, and smile, like she knew where this was all going.

My father was home the day I was ready to try starting the car. I'd done everything I could think to do without replacing the whole engine. I'd even found a new windshield and fixed the side door. I went into the house, where my father was on the computer.

“Where are the keys?” I asked.

“The what?” he asked.

“For the Celebrity,” I said.

He stared at me and then nodded, got up, and went to his bedroom. He pulled a shoebox off the top shelf of his closet and took out the keys—one to unlock and a special key for the ignition.

“I haven’t taken these out since the police brought them back,” he said. He held them. He wasn’t looking at me.

“Why do you think Trent took the car?” I asked.

My brother had been twelve when he drowned. It wasn’t a story I told. Even years later, I never mentioned my brother. My wife always felt that I should “talk about it,” but some things are better left scabbed over. My brother was big for his age. He stole the keys to the Celebrity and went out joyriding during the first great flood. I never saw him again.

When I did tell my wife this story, months after we’d first met, the first thing she said was “You can’t even get your permit till you’re like, fourteen, right?” But that wasn’t the point. That wasn’t how things worked in Meridian. You learned to drive when your parents taught you. It wasn’t unusual to see a four year old on a tractor, an adult pushing the pedals, the kid steering.

Trent took the car out, even though he knew it was too low to drive in the flood. Who knows where he was going. A bridge collapsed, and the car sank. The truck might have made it. I think Trent was born with that feeling like you’ve got to run away from yourself. Driving helps, swerving back roads, endless distance. Maybe he figured that one out too soon.

My father handed me the keys.

“Let’s get her started,” he said.

We went out into the yard, Trinity following. I got in the driver's side of the car and sat there for a minute, taking in the moldy air. The neighbors were gathering, at the periphery, to see if this would all work out.

I put the key in the ignition. My fingers were shaking so badly I could barely turn it. The car sputtered, coughed, but it wouldn't rev. I called to my dad. "She needs a jump."

We got out the cables and pulled the truck around. My father hooked the cables to the battery in the Celebrity. He revved his truck until the Celebrity caught. Together, we got her running. I felt the engine jumping under the hood and I started laughing. I could hear Trinity applauding and yelling from the steps. I looked up and saw my father's face in the truck across from me. He was smiling. I turned off the car and disconnected the cables. He met me in the middle.

"Well," he said. "You did some damn good mechanic work here, son. And I have to say, I'm a little surprised that after three years you could get her going again. But then, maybe something's watching out for this old car." He moved to clap me on the back but then pulled me into a hug, tight and warm. I could smell his shampoo and his cigarettes and the musty scent of sweat.

"It'll be okay, Dad," I said, but I didn't really know why.

I wish I could say I drove out of Meridian and never turned back, found myself in the wide starry deserts of Utah and Nevada, made it to the Pacific, to see the crest of ocean in front of me, the only real border I had. A few weeks after I'd fixed up the

Celebrity and taken care of the smaller things, my mother kissed me goodbye and gave me many instructions on self care, and my father told me the last bit of advice he could think of, and Trinity made me a good-bye card with colored pencils and dinosaur stickers and cried a lot. Then I got into the Celebrity and started driving west.

I got as far as Spartanburg, pulled over in a gas station parking lot, and sat for a long time. I watched people get out of their cars and pump their gas under the cold light. I watched the men smoking under the awning of the station. I watched a woman crowding her children into the automatic doors and between the aisles of candy and chips. After a while, I got out of the car and bought a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Sitting on the curb, I looked at the Celebrity, its rusted fenders and dingy white paint. The passenger door didn't match the rest of the car.

I spent the night in a dingy College Inn. In the morning, I found the number of a man who bought vintage cars and sold him the Celebrity at a loss and bought a bus ticket home. Coming back felt like settling into myself. It was almost September, and soon the floods would start again. I'd help my mother patch the leaks in the ceiling. I'd drive the truck through the streets and pick up stranded travelers. I'd watch the waters rise and feel myself sinking with my hometown, until the day the rains would dry.