

RED CAR

Look, said Dick.
See the red wagon.
See it go.
Jane said, Oh, look!
It goes fast.

Just like that it comes to me, a flashback to gramps reading *Dick and Jane* out loud to my little sister, about a red wagon—a red wagon so unlike the red VW red wagon transfixing me as I stare at it, parked on a red-brick street in front of this red-brick house with a yard sign that reads, ‘Black Lives Matter.’ It’s autumn and color’s everywhere. The street’s lined with maples and their leaves are peaking—canary, caramel, crimson—and falling in heaps I’m dragging my salmon sneakers through. The sun, gleaming off the brilliant red body paint of the auto, does a dappled dance. Trapped in wonder, standing, I observe a woman on the porch swing, in her 30s, with a high-top buzz cut and wide-eyed reading glasses. I gesture with an open hand, then ask, “Is that your red car?”

“Yes,” she says, and turns back to her story. She’s reading a book, Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*, I think.

I can’t help myself. “It’s beautiful,” I say.

“What my mom said. That’s why I bought it.”

“In Italy, at least in Torino where they make Fiats, they believe cars can be beautiful. My car’s not beautiful.”

“Get rid of it,” she says, and turns another page.

“Bellissima, la macchina,” I offer, before giving a farewell wave.

I drive my ugly car to the Volkswagon dealer and trade it in as down payment on a new Jetta GLI 2.0, with a turbo-charged fuel-injection 228 horsepower engine. It's equipped with a 7-speed stick shift, does 0-60 mph in less than 6 seconds and—what's more— it's candy apple red. I steer my beautiful car, road-ready, to I-85 and race back and forth between Coralville and Cedar Rapids until five o'clock traffic breaks my stride. I turn off at the North Liberty exit and meander crooked county roads, avoiding the mud ones with their splatter. When I change gears, I embrace the engine surge, reaching sonic speeds in record time. Sometimes I become Captain Chuck Yeager breaking the sound barrier in his Bell X-1. Other times I just enjoy the blood rush that zips through me when I punch down the pedal and the car leaps forward, like a red roan mare. In-town driving's a hoot, threading through all the gears, 1-2-3, sometimes 4-5-6, with a steady Zorro-Z twist of the wrist. The obsidian dashboard radiates a cardinal color line from the interior lighting bands surrounding the instruments, a tonic to the eye. At stop lights, the glow of the go-light makes me feel celestial, as if I were Hermes waiting before a heavenly gate to speed-deliver a message. That's when a honk from a disgruntled Wonder Bread driver causes me to shift into first and bust into another reverie.

My lady friend likes the car. Why not? It's bright, sporty, and you can roll back the top. Carmine and I are going for a country drive today to enjoy this native summer October afternoon. As I fire up the motor in her parking lot, she's bouncing in the front passenger seat, ogling all the buttons, searching. "Halford! There it is," she exclaims, depressing a maroon knob that opens the roof. Immediately, she shouts out the window, "See you, Julie!" waving her left-

hand, then her right-, out the roof. Julie gives us a high five from the balcony, hunkered behind her laptop.

“Too bad Julie can’t join us. I ‘ve got two quarts of ice cream, hand-made, from Haines Dairy, for our taste treat.” I give Carmine a pat and imagine the creamy velvet textures and full fruit flavors we have in store.

“Julie’s cramming for her Comps. I should, too, but your ride calls. Plus, the ice cream. You get my Cherry Jerry?”

“Yeah, and Raspberry Ripple for me. In the back seat, double-bagged. Let’s roll!”

It’s sixty degrees and the sun’s pouring in from all sides, warming the car, despite the scattered clouds and the steady breeze that marks the edge of the prairie. Carmine has her red bandana tied to the rearview mirror, letting it flap in the air like a team flag. “You ever been to the River Junction Access?” I ask.

“Float your boat, right?” As Carmine says this, she gives a swing to the big red dice dangling over the dashboard.

“A ramp to the Iowa River—fishing and a campground. A walk along the bank we can take.” Carmine snuggles in her seat, lets loose a big smile, and begins to doze as I begin to chatter, sometimes to myself, since she’s headed for Slumber City.

“I’m taking Sand Road to the Hills turnoff, hanging a left at Lone Tree, right before the access. This scenery—a picture postcard—red barns, and black angus eating grass. That corn’s straw-gray, ready to harvest. These fields are flipping by, like a kid’s snap book—you look asleep. What the hay?” I slap the steering wheel, with its elliptical shape. “Halloween’s coming and my car’s not even been scared. Time to dare-devil. Like Takuma Sato said, ‘no attack, no

chance.’ How else did Taku win the Indy 500 twice? I ask you that!” Carmine says nothing, just emits a little burble. “At the next four-way I’m ramming my foot to floor, flying through the crossing—*The Big Engine That Could*. Ha! Here goes.... Rocketing through another intersection....And another. Piece of cake. Its’s a chariot ride, another world record, one for the Guinness book. This next crossroad’s a kidney punch, tall corn on all sides, up to the stop signs. Dammit! I’m zooming through.... Oink! That hay wagon dinged me, round bales hitting the ditch. Tractor’s a Red! An old Massey-Ferguson. Farmer’s OK except his seed cap’s snagged on my antenna. DeKalb, it says. He’s in my mirror, shaking a shoe...”

Carmine startles awake. “Why you babbling? What banged us?”

“Nothing. Tamu got a red flag at the Indianapolis 500.” I grip the steering wheel and do some quick isometrics.

“Huh?” she says and rubs her eyes.

“Hay wagon lost some bales. Farmer had to retire the track. See the feeder road up ahead and the campground sign? That’s the entrance to the access.”

Halford avoids the lumpy gravel parking area, instead settling his new red car on a patch of cut green grass, dry and away from the river. But, he thinks, too close to the squash-shaped camper trailers and the heavy semi-size RVs ringing the pit toilet sheds that perfume the air. He realizes he has no wish to exclaim with his fellow travelers about their fabulous catch or their incredible gas mileage. He just wants to down ice cream at a picnic table with Carmine and watch his new red car. He hopes that all the others, gathered as they are at the access, turn from their weenie roasts and tiny TVs to study his bella macchina. When they compliment him, he

will say, “Golly, thanks. Yup, fresh off the lot. Runs like a red coyote.” He can’t, though, because it starts to rain.

“What about the hike along the river? What about our ice cream?” Carmine pouts.

“It’s pouring. No walk. Still, we can ‘gobble the glace,’ to coin a French phrase.”

“How? That picnic table’s soaking. There’s no shelter.” Her lower lip pushes out more.

“No worries. We nest like two hungry robin redbreasts in my abiding back seat.”

“Halford, that’s a yummy idea.” With that, she manages to climb over and between the front seats, always avoiding the gear shift and the I-phone cable. At the apex of her mount, she goes loose, dropping her bottom on the carpeted axle bar. “Ouch!” I do the same. It’s a squeeze, since both of us show the effects of our ongoing addiction to butter fat. We become entwined, looking like a multi-armed, multi-legged—plump—Hindi Durga.

“We can’t move,” I announce. “Out of the rain, though.”

“You’re squishing my lap.” Carmine starts to make ringlets of my scraggly hair with her far hand, as the wind gently sways the car. Without warning, she rotates my head and plants a rainy kiss on my eyebrows. I try to move next to her, like on a davenport. But there’s no wiggle room. Her palm brushes my Johnson but there’s no wiggle there, either.

“We’re hard-packed, like the gelato,” I say.

“Ice cream, you scream...let’s gorge!” says Carmine. I pass the tout bag to her. She pops the lid of the Cherry Jerry. It’s melting, really melting. She jams the plastic spoon into the center, scoops out a soft ball and begins to lick, holding the carton as it leaks all over the red-trimmed faux leather seat, finally slipping from her hold and onto the leather, all over.

I scream: “You are fucking ruining my beautiful car!” Carmine stops gobbling but continues to smack her lips. I grab my quart of Raspberry Ripple, throw it out the window, take

off my Big Lebowski sweater and mop the sopping mess. Then, wriggling away, from Carmine and between the seats, I tumble forward, smacking my nose on the horn, which gives a sharp honk. Some campers stick their faces out of their tents, risking the rain to catch the tableau vivant. They see me wrestling in the driver's seat.

Still in back, Carmine sits, watching the downpour disintegrate my Raspberry Ripple, sending it in rivulets to the river. She says, touching my shoulder: "Hal, it's just ice cream."

"Carmine, hon, I'm sorry. For me it's about more than ice cream, it's about an esthetic." I watch the sky pushing the clouds together, squeezing them dry. That song comes to me, the one that goes something like, "I'm in the desert on a horse with no name but it's good to be out of the rain." That's true, about being out of the rain. I start the car, ooze out of the lot, weave back into town. The Cherry Jerry smash on the back seat has caught my tongue, like a cat. I know I should make up to Carmine, tell her it's OK, promise we'll go on another ice cream binge after I install plastic seat covers. I will. But for now I need some self-care. My bright and shiny car, so young and carefree, besmirched.

It's Sunday afternoon and I've got the end-of-week-start-of-work blues times two. Where's the joy? It's coming back, as I ease my car in the co-op parking lot, then stand at attention to admire again this red roadster—jaunty, smart and fast. I'm wearing my Irish flat cap, something that seems right for a late fall drive. I fold the cap into the pocket of my Donegal before strolling into the co-op for some liquid essentials. Perhaps a Beaujolais Nouveau, for my 6:30 aperitive, I'm thinking, when I suddenly see, in the space one over, the red car of my porch friend, the one who changed my life, led me to the Volkswagen dealer. Bliss gobsmarks me. I say to the owner, who's opening her door, "It's me. Remember?"

“You’re the nutty guy who said my car’s bellissima. Not anymore.” As she speaks I see the front left fender, the whole left side, deeply dented with white scars. I blush and get a bad flutter.

“Your fender...” I trail off, pointing. “That will cost several thousand.”

“Yup. Money I don’t have.” She snaps her fingers.

I suddenly feel so selfish. A big baby, whining over a quart of melted Cherry Jerry—and being mean to Carmine.

“You got a new ride,” she says, looking at my Jetta.

“Took your wise counsel,” I say.

“What are the specs?”

“GLI 2.0, turbo-charged fuel-injection, 7-speed stick.”

“Fast?”

“0 to 60 in less than 6.”

“I love fast. Yesterday I took mine out on a backroad near Solon, a two-lane blacktop. Got it to over 100. So sweet.” With that, she socked my shoulder.

“Want to go for a spin? I know some fantastic criss-cross lanes just outside of Hills.”

“Sure!”

“By the way, you speak Italian?”

