

This is how it started

When it was over, Carrie figured it had all started with that minivan. Her parents bought it to haul her baby sister around, and it was loaded: fully reclining captain's chairs, individually controlled heat and air, side-curtain air bags to keep the kid extra safe. A DVD player that permanently ran *Baby Juno's Rhythm Adventure*. And in front, a top-of-the-line sound system that they utterly wasted on Hootie and the Blowfish. Except when they went old school with the Eagles. *Life in the Fast Lane*. Her mother butt dancing and screeching along. Which made her want to grab that classic iPod and smash it into tiny particles.

And of course they never let her drive. Not even when she had to baby sit, which was every night practically because they couldn't stay away from the bars and the smoke and the blow.

She was halfway to chucking it all and getting the hell out of Dodge when she met him.

It was the kind of spring afternoon that made you feel dizzy, like all your molecules were rushing and pushing through your skin to get out and mix with the air.

He was outside the 7-Eleven she always went to because they never carded for cigs -- leaning against a green '81 Impala, all long, skinny legs and a grin. From that day, all she wanted to do was hang out with him in that big-as-a-house car.

He didn't even care about the baby sitting. That first night they tucked her baby sister on top of a pile of old sleeping bags inside his big trunk, gave her a bottle of Pedialyte laced with vodka, and she was a happy camper. They grabbed some weed from her mom's stash and tooled over to

Peewaukee Lake to drink and smoke and mess around. They were back home, the baby all safe and sleeping like a tiny drunk, a little smile on her face, before her parents rolled in from wherever.

Before they took off, he traded the Impala for a '72 red and white VW microbus with a fold-out bed. One night in a campsite outside Mendocino, she pressed herself against his back and listened to the Pacific Ocean moving in the dark. Not 300 feet away. About as far as she could get from Wisconsin.

They were trying to get to Humboldt, where he thought they could get jobs trimming dope – weed wacking, he called it – when the VW's brakes failed. She broke her nose when they plowed into a guard rail on U.S. One. The nose set wrong, a slight crook to the left that made her look a little drunk. A little off.

He bought a '73 Mercedes that pretty much cost him the rest of their money. It burned oil, so the seller threw in a case of 10W30 as part of the deal. To get it started, they had to park it on top of an incline so she could push it while he popped the clutch. All that burning oil billowing up in her face. She screamed at him and called him a dickless motherfucker, but he just laughed and fired up a blunt and said he couldn't very well be both. And that made her so mad she spit at him, and then he got mad and slapped her.

She should have left right then. Except it was sort of her fault. Provocation and all that.

The trimming jobs didn't pan out. No surprise there.

Some sideburned creepster in Redway gave him twenty thousand cash for Mercedes. A classic, the guy said. They used some of it for security and a couple months' rent on a one-bedroom off the freeway in Oakland, even leased some furniture. He surprised her with a good mattress.

They got all comfy in the apartment, ordered a bunch of take-out Indian and threw away five thousand on blow. Worth every penny, too, except she got a little paranoid late on the third night and threatened him with a box cutter somebody had left in a kitchen drawer. She kept swiping it at him until he sang "All the Single Ladies" and danced like Beyoncé in his underwear. Funniest thing ever.

The next morning, her box cutter was gone, and so was the blow.

Then he spent three grand on a '79 Volvo wagon with a rusted-through floorboard on the passenger side. She was pregnant by then, and watching the road spin by underneath her feet made her sick. She kept plastic grocery bags in the glove compartment. She'd puke into a bag and toss the bag out the window. Which got them a two-fifty ticket for littering. She cursed the cop, which almost landed them in jail but he talked their way through it, blaming it on the pregnancy. The cop added another four hundred in various tickets – missing tail light, hole in the floor board, expired inspection -- before he let them go.

The Volvo's driver side door broke and they had to open it with a hammer. He kept the hammer in his backpack. Said he didn't trust her with it.

The car got them to the hospital on time. They named the baby Otto, coolest name ever, and while she was high on a little extra Demerol she begged off the obstetrician, they toyed with the idea of giving him Mobile for a middle name. Then she said Didact, but he didn't know what that

meant. Then she fell asleep, and when she saw the birth certificate it said Otto Daniel. Fuck. Missed opportunity for the best baby name ever.

They borrowed a car seat from the nice auxiliary lady in the pink smock and paid the bill from a checkbook he stole from her slutty little roommate's purse while she was in the labor room. They squealed out of the hospital parking lot like Bonnie and Clyde and Clyde, Jr., laughing their heads off, and figured they better leave California behind.

The Volvo got them as far as Manhattan, Kansas before the transmission conked out. By then they'd run through most of the money and her nipples were raw and Otto cried that red-faced, angry cry all the time except when she dosed him with the Benadryl. They fought about the Benadryl. "No son of mine..." he kept saying. "No son of mine." He sounded like some fat old guy in a Packers cap from back in Milwaukee. Worse.

Every day he hitched into town to look for work and every afternoon he hitched back, usually with diapers and a pizza. She stayed in the motel all day, eating from the crappy vending machine, watching TV and trying to nurse. Her skin itched. Her nipples would not stop hurting. The hot little room smelled like baby pee. Sometimes she took Otto outside and sat with him next to the pool, and once she stripped down to her underwear and went for a swim until the motel lady came out and yelled at her.

At night they lay on the bed, the baby between them like some evil dwarf from a fairy tale, ready to lay a curse on her if she didn't attend to his every whim.

One night she lay there and listened to the trucks on their way to California and thought about all the ways it could get worse. There were a lot of ways it could get worse.

There was about fifteen hundred left. She wasn't greedy. Or a thief. She took a third of it. The rest she left on top of the warped dresser where he would see it when the baby woke him in the morning. On her way out the door, she grabbed the hammer.