

Cars Standing Still

William Halm

I have never been particularly loyal to my gender. I was dressing up in Cinderella dresses with my sister before I learned that was The Wrong Thing to do. I was quitting soccer and quitting golf and any other sport they threw my way (as if I would ever give up ballet). But the one masculine thing I clung to quite willingly as a child was a preoccupation with cars.

I had about two dozen toy cars. Black SUVs and sleek silver sedans, old station wagons and pastel pink Corvettes, all lined up on the blue carpet of my bedroom. And, of course, cars my favorite color: a bright yellow Bug, a yellow convertible; even a couple school buses because I didn't quite hate school yet. And I would build Lego sets of houses—whole cities, really—to drive my cars through, watching the carpets grow lighter as I dragged my cars over them for hours and hours on countless afternoons.

I collected so many that my dad had to install two shelves on either side of my bed to contain them all. He painted them blue and nailed them into place and I watched, completely uninterested in the mechanics of construction and waiting for my chance to display my collection. I grouped them by color, I grouped them by size. I took them all down and put them back up again. And every night I went to sleep, my bed framed by cars standing still, waiting to be activated the next day.

Every night I lay in my bed, waiting. Waiting for when I could trace paths on my carpet with my cars again. Waiting for the next chance to ride in a Real Life Actual Car, one that actually takes people places. Waiting for the day that I would turn sixteen and become a stronger version of myself, confident and secure behind a wheel, sure of all my destinations and the routes to take me there. Waiting to actually drive somewhere myself.

I don't quite know when my obsession was lost. I guess that sometime between ages six and sixteen I heard too many guys gush over cars, or heard too many guys compare women to cars, or came to associate cars with men's' locker rooms and all of the stinging slaps they could bring. But I do know that by the time I was actually able to drive, by the time my father patiently coached me as I lurched forward in the parking lot of a local church, cars had lost their hold on me. Now I drive down back roads, down high ways, down main streets, down gravel driveways, staring at white lines and yellow lines and gray pavement, red lights and warning signs, green

arrows, headlights—my Lego cities all come to life—and feel none of the wonder I would have as a child. I'm bored, tracing the same routes over and over again with a consistency that would have tickled the right spot of a young me's brain when I knelt on that floor and played God with all my little cars—yet it is this consistency that bores me to no end as an adult.

But cars keep showing up in my writing. My narrators take long drives and contemplate the story's conflict, or sit in traffic so I can make some sort of vague parallel to them being stuck in a relationship, or simply hop in a car so I can transition from one scene to the next. I move these characters around, mapping their stories onto my pages.

Then they drive off into the sunset, the music crescendos, the scene fades—it's over. Boxed up and put on a shelf in my mind to collect dust. And in that box these characters keep on living, keep tracing their lives in their miniscule cars, keep returning to their homes each night, keep twisting their keys out of the ignition and taking care to turn off the headlights, keep walking into their homes and complaining to their loved ones about the traffic each day, their cars still standing—waiting—in the dark.