

Out
Past
the Wires

Short Stories

by

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Primer Gray

So I been getting the old Pontiac ready for my kid lately. That's a good ride, a Pontiac. Been trying to find the original color even, but the code they give me don't look right. So I'm just gonna shoot a coat of primer for now. If I find that great old Pontiac green someday, I'll paint it up.

My kid? All his friends have those rodded-up Hondas. They sound like damn chainsaws. Drives me crazy. They're fast, yeah, but they got no power, you know? I mean real power. Now that old LeMans has got eight big pistons just banging away under that hood. That's what a car oughta sound like right there. So anyways, like I said, I been gettin' the Pontiac all fixed up for Charles.

I bought her new back in 71. Took every dime I had but I wanted it so damn bad. There was a bunch of good Pontiacs back then. I've always been a Pontiac man anyways. Coulda had a GTO. Coulda had a Ventura, but I like the LeMans best. My old man used to race, I guess that's what got me into cars. He was a hard man, my dad, and showy, you know? He was the kinda guy liked to make fun of

everyone but couldn't take a joke about himself. He used to make fun of me in front of people. And he was a big guy, my old man, and tough too. Sometimes he'd smack me up side the head, "just on principle," he'd say. I never understood that. But it made me jumpy as hell around him, which I think was the point. "On principle" don't make any sense. He was just like that. That was his way. Kept my mom on her back foot too, but she was more careful than me I guess. He only smacked her a coupla times that I can remember.

Anyway, that's what got me into cars, my old man racing. He'd let me go with him on Sundays sometimes. I loved being around all those great cars. Loved the smell of it even. It gets in your blood. And my old man would win, too. He won quite a bit – now this is just regionals but still he got himself a trophy case and by god, he filled it up over the years. He was a Chevy guy, my old man. When I brought the LeMans home, he boxed me upside the head. Said I shoulda got a Chevelle and laughed. That was the last time he hit me. Said Pontiacs are for pussies. He never said nothing about how I saved all that money myself.

But I liked the Pontiacs, always did. Me and Lamere, we ran all over the place in that car. We

went up to the mountains and even a couple times down to Boston. Got lost as all hell down there. Those Boston streets are confusing. Somebody told me it's because the roads follow old cow paths or something, but anyway, we didn't care. We had a great time in that car, me and Lemere. First time I went out with Arlene was in that car and you'd think that'd be a nice memory and maybe it is, but she's been on me for years to sell it, but I ain't gonna sell it.

Like I said, I been gettin' it all ready for Charles when he turns seventeen. New clutch plate, new shocks, the whole bit. Been finding what I need over at Emery's junkyard. They got a couple over there that I can pull from. They're way in back so it's a pain in the ass, but I take my time. One of 'em smells like skunk juice so I know the transmission is gone on it, but I got a decent flywheel and some other stuff from it. Arlene goes crazy when I come home with another part 'cause she knows I'll be on the creeper most of the weekend and won't go anywhere with her, but I wanna get it all back in good shape 'cause Charles turns seventeen soon, right? So I keep on with it.

Back when me and Lemere was running round, it was brand new. Had that great smell. I can close

my eyes and remember that smell like it was today. I even had an eight-track under the dash and we'd listen to Foghat and Bad Company and I had almost all the Led Zeppelin tapes, too. We'd smoke a joint, not all the time, just once in awhile, you know, and have the best time. I raced it a few times too, 'cause later on I put a blower on it. It was fast. I never won in it but I didn't like driving it that hard anyways, so I stopped racing it.

The old man gave me some lip about that too, but I didn't care. I didn't want to take the chance of burning out the motor. He burned out motors all the time. It's like even though he was a Chevy man, he raced like he hated the car and wanted to burn it up. He was fast, my old man. Like I said, he filled that trophy case even if he never got past the regionals. He was a big talker too. It used to make me embarrassed. He always had to be the big man everywhere he went. I'd go to the races with him when he'd let me, but I'd run off and look at the Pontiacs as soon as I could get out of his sight. He was always telling everyone how he was gonna win and picking fights with the other drivers. Seemed to me you win bigger by not saying nothing about it then having a good race, but that's not how he was. And man, he'd get pissed when he lost, too. If he

lost big, I knew I was in for it, almost like I was the one who raced him, you know? But this was way, way back when I was just a kid.

The car is starting to run real good. It's all tuned up and new brakes. Clutch is short and tight like it oughta be. Arelene, she's about had enough of me not going with her on the weekends and I tell her why I'm working so hard on it, for Charles, and she lightens up a little bit 'cause she thinks that's great too – how Charles is gonna have the Pontiac. I remind her about how our first date was in this car and she kind of gets a weird look in her eye like she's some place far off and I can tell she's thinking about something she don't want to say, so I just leave it there.

Like I was saying, Charles's friends all have those Hondas that they drop down. They get the suspension so tight you can hear 'em creak when they take a corner. And they can corner fast, that's true, but they ain't got the power like an old Pontiac. This one here is the 455 V8. That's some horsepower there and even though it's no good in the winter around here 'cause of the rear wheel drive, it's got the 4-speed manual trans so you can rock it if you get stuck. It's just a little squirrely on ice. So the day keeps getting nearer and Charles is gonna be

seventeen and it's a big deal, of course, 'cause he'll be able to drive by himself. That's state law. You gotta be seventeen to drive by yourself. You can drive when you're sixteen but you gotta have someone with you. Me, I always liked driving alone, 'specially after I found out about Arlene and Lemere. But that's a long time ago.

So it gets to be Charles's birthday and I'm all excited. Arlene's pretty happy with Charles these days. He's doing better in school and he gets decent grades and overall he's a pretty good kid even though I know he's smoking dope, which I don't like, but he's doing better in school so I try to be grateful, you know? He's a good kid, never gave us much trouble. So Arlene, she gets him these gift cards 'cause she says Charles knows more about what he likes than we do and this way he can get all the things he likes at the stores he likes, even though he has to go all the way over to Indianapolis to the mall there. I guess she's smart that way – thinks things through.

So we have a nice morning and Charles likes the gift cards just like Arlene thought and it's all good and I say now I got a big surprise and I take him outside. I had put a red ribbon on the steering wheel the night before. So I say come with me, and he follows me around to the slab, and the car is there

and all finished except for the paint job cause I can't find the right Pontiac green. And I hand him the keys and he's got this blank look on his face. And I tell him it's all his. Know what he says to me? I see him looking at it and something ain't right and then he says "How much you think I can get for it on a trade-in?" And for some weird reason all I can see is my old man's face, even though I'm looking right at Charles.

