

Louise and the Fourth of July

Louise wiggled her bottom on the telephone book that raised her high enough to peer over the hood of Wayne's yellow 1968 Dodge Charger Super Bee and backed out of her driveway. She drove three miles up the steepest rise in Manayunk, downshifted, and stopped at the fourth house on Oak Lane. Louise shivered and nosed the car near the curb. She was not going to parallel-park, a doozy of a maneuver on the narrow street in the outskirts of Philadelphia. She rolled down her passenger window. "Surprise," she said and waved to her best friend, Jeannine who hopped down the steps, over the small lawn and leaned into the car through the open window.

"Yowza, Lou-Lou. You're in Wayne's car." Jeannine held her hand to her forehead like a heroine of silent films.

Louise tooted an exclamation point with the horn. "Hop in." Barely had Jeannine settled herself and her madras jumper in the bucket seat when Louise said, "Tomorrow's the Fourth of July," and pulled the car onto the avenue. "Let's do something fun."

Jeannine fiddled with the radio knob. "Like what?" She poked the dial to WIBG, to listen to Hi Lit, their favorite deejay. Bunny Sigler's song...let the good times roll, blasted in their ears.

Louise swung the wheel. "Let's go to Atlantic City."

Jeannine adjusted the volume so the good times tunes rolled down the street with the car.

Louise had been honest. Wayne's muscle car had frightened her. The stylized scoop blocked her vision; the angle of the stick shift was too sharp, and the seat never moved close enough for her foot to clutch comfortably.

According to him, the car was a bee because of the body style, not because of the black stripe on the yellow trunk. Fewer than one hundred hemi Chargers had been built. He was full of information about the make and the model.

In her mind, Louise saw metal parts on a table, developing like Frankenstein's monster. In every way, the car was un-Louise. She would rather drive her Mom's Rambler that fit her Pappagalo pumps with the fashionable stacked Mirsky heels.

In the dusky light, as usual, Wayne had driven to Louise's house and parked in her driveway. He tapped on

the screen door to the porch. She was standing inside, ready for him.

“Let’s sit on the glider before we go,” he said.

She had worn her pink vee-neck sweater set and rolled three-inch cuffs on her jeans. As they pushed the rocker swing, Louise stared at Wayne’s car, dreamed of her future, and envisioned the cut facets of a diamond ring on her finger. Maybe he would ask this winter. Wayne would care for her the way he cared for his automobile. “Ah, this is nice,” she said. “You’re nice. Wanna share a root beer float?” Then she wondered why they were not headed to the Lake House Grill for burgers.

Wayne took an envelope from the pocket of his poplin Eisenhower jacket. “I got mail today,” he said. He held it out.

Louise took it from his hand. “What’s this?”

“Open it.”

She read the notice, folded it along the same crease lines. “You need to report for a physical for the Army.”

Wayne shoved the envelope in his pocket, covered her hand with his. “Greetings from Uncle Sam. Basic training, then off to ‘Nam, that’s for sure.”

Louise pushed the glider harder and the pennies in her loafers signaled in the fading light. “So I folded all those cranes for nothing.” She referred to her peace project. She had been making Origami cranes with neighborhood women in hopes of ending the war in Vietnam.

Each evening the television news broadcast more footage of bombed villages, refugee women with cooking pots and possessions piled high. Close-up film enlarged worried faces and bony hands carrying frozen-faced children.

One thousand cranes. Louise heard her teacher’s voice, Mrs. Sakati, as clearly as she had that Saturday in January, when she first held the rice paper, thin as skin, cut in 3x3 sheets.

“Start by folding from the bottom.” Mrs. Sakati pointed to the carbon-copied directions. “Then fold over again, turn and do each side.”

Wayne chuffed her arms, pulling the fine hairs against themselves. “Hey, what are you thinking?”

“Now my cranes will be for you. When do you report?”

“Soon. You got to keep my car.”

She stood on the porch and brushed her hands along her body. “Oh no Wayne, I’m too short. I can’t drive a

stick shift.”

“Actually, it’s easy peasy, lemon squeezy,” he said.

“It’s a big responsibility.” She felt his calmness. She sensed he wanted to go. “What about Ron or Jack or Larry?”

“Nope.” The tick-tick of the glider hinges punctuated his checklist. Louise watched him touch his fingers as he eliminated his friends. “First, Ron drives the dog piss outta cars; second, Jacko’ll score in the back seat, third, Larry’ll spill his Burger King. Gary’s mom said she’d drive his Camaro. Gary doesn’t want the guys to touch his stuff, either.”

Louise understood she was Wayne’s stuff. This made her comfortable, in a squishy way, like porch cushions after a rain. “Maybe your Mom?” she asked.

Wayne shook his head side to side. “No way. With her cigarette ashes and hairspray? She’d set the car on fire.” Wayne smiled his gangly grin. “You’re the one, hon.”

Louise felt like Jell-O not yet set. “Cripes.”

He took her hands, kissed her knuckles one by one. “Babe, you got to.” He pressed her palm around a silver key chain. “I’ll get it engraved with your initials.”

Louise sat, leaned on his shoulder. “You’ll write every day?”

Wayne nibbled her ear. “Yup.”

She felt the heat of his beefy neck. “Alright, teach me to drive that car.” She stuck her mouth on his. “Zoom, zoom,” she pressed the noise from her throat onto Wayne’s lips.

The next afternoon Louise sat in the car and looked at the loading lot Wayne had chosen for her driving lessons. A chain link fence outlined the buckled pavement. Tin cans, bottles, and dry leaves rattled in corners. Sparrows flitted fast, like arrows, from cracked windows of the abandoned cement icehouse.

“Let’s get shifting down pat. Then we’ll hit Route 66,” he said.

She stalled three times. Driving that car was not easy, peasy, or squeezy. They practiced and practiced.

On the morning before he left for Texas they drove in the lot again. Wayne would be gone for infantry training for sixteen weeks. Already he’d cut his hair close, not yet shaved down, but he looked different.

“A last run through,” he said.

From the driver's seat, Louise looked through trumpet flowers that twined the metal fence. At the boys who slouched and hung with shirts open, with faces that smirked and lips that smoked. Louise blushed when she realized their eyes envied that she handled this muscular car.

She turned to give them a grin. Her foot forgot to depress the pedal and her hand forgot the gear. The car stuttered.

"Do it again." Wayne sighed.

She found the clutch plate and shifted without jerking the car.

"Good girl," he said in a voice a family uses with a puppy that wets on the paper.

After two laps, she accelerated smoothly.

Wayne said, "Keep the rpms under two thousand. Check the tach. She'll talk to you."

She looked at the dash to find the tachometer. Her foot let the clutch out fast. The car stalled. The boys stomped and whistled shrilly through their fingers.

"Dammit," she said and pushed against the steering wheel.

"It's not lady-like to curse." Wayne said.

It isn't lady-like for me to be driving this car either, she thought. She tugged at her denim mini-skirt.

Wayne touched her leg. "Once more."

She drove without mistake, parked near the loading dock and moved to the passenger seat. Wayne slid his seat back, clomped the accelerator, and pumped the clutch. "Hang on baby." When the car could come no closer to the fence, he twisted the wheel and they whirled in 360° turns. The scorch of burned tire tickled her nose. Then he headed to the Dutch elms, long dead from disease. Louise thought they might crash beneath the shriveled trees.

He downshifted. The rear of the Charger swooshed to a stop. The tires exhaled a smooth stream of gravel. "We call that a rooster; 'cause of the tail." he said. The boys clapped in unison. Wayne gave them a wave. He turned off the car. "Don't you ever."

"No siree. Not me." Louise breathed. Her pulse beat almost normal.

He leaned over the console. "You are so perfect, like a doll." He pressed her face into his chest, "I could smother you."

Clubman talc from the barbershop tickled her nose. "I am your baby-doll," she said.

He rested his chin on her head, nuzzled in her hair, whispered in her ear, "When I get back you'll never

have to drive again.”

Louise **ducked** under his arms. “What if I want to?”

Wayne **raised** his eyebrows. “Why would you? I’ll be here.”

She **could not** stop herself. “How can you be so certain? Aren’t you scared? I am.” She felt his steady heartbeat **against her** cheek. “What happens if you’re wounded?” she said.

Wayne **breathed** on her neck, tilted her head, and ran his tongue along her jawbone. “Hush. I’ll worry for both of us.”

“I’ll kiss **every** Origami crane I make for you.”

She **did not** remind him that by the time he returned she would be a certified court stenographer, that she would sit in mahogany paneled courtrooms; that her fingers would press the round keys for depositions and transcriptions **at trials**. She wanted the inside of this car to be their only world.

She **tippled** her fingers along the side of his face. “You’ll be gone a long time. The war is not going so good. You **have to be** careful.”

“**Nothing** will happen.” Wayne hugged her, moved his hands to her back, fiddled with her bra closure. “Unless you **want it** to.”

Louise **pulled** away, sat up, and smoothed the mother-of-pearl buttoned sweater set. Through the window, she saw a pimply face boy with two younger boys who trotted a few feet behind. Louise made a tssk. “Those kids,” she said.

Wayne cocked his head in their direction. “They want to see what I got. Wish they had a piece of what I got. Yeah baby. Boys will be boys,” he said.

“That’s disgusting.” Louise said, but liked the hint of the old Wayne. “You weren’t like that, were you?”

“Sure, we all were.” Wayne flexed his bicep. “Before we were men.” He turned the ignition. The engine roared, and then purred. They pulled into Smitty’s station.

While Smitty stood in the back of the car ready with the ethyl gasoline hose, she opened her purse for her compact with the face puff. She saw the boys again. “Wayne. They’re following us.”

Wayne shut the engine. “I’ll talk to them.” He walked to the group lolling at the Coca-Cola cooler near the junker cars. The boys with slick ducktails, stood unimpressed, jostling, and joking. Louise watched them bob their heads. She powdered her nose, thought the kids were not so much younger than Wayne, already though, he seemed