

Hot Death on Wheels

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Cars today, they're nothing, kid; crappy little Detroit shitboxes stamped out of sheet-metal. A waste of your fuckin' money and so full of electronic crap that you can't even tune 'em up without a fuckin' computer.

You like that one? Pretty, you say? Let me tell you, you couldn't afford it, not that one. Not for sale, anyway.

Let me tell you about cars, kid, about real cars. I was a kid too, once. Yeah, that was a while back, more miles than I care to remember. Used to tag along behind the greasers. A grease-monkey wannabe, me, hair slicked back with Bryl Creem and snot dripping out my nose and thought I knew something about cars. Nah, I didn't know nothing back then, but Den Tolbert, he tolerated me trailing around behind him, sometimes even let me hold a wrench for him while he worked on his street-rod, let me feel like I was part of it, something special.

Never heard of him? Kid, I'm not surprised, you wouldn't. But believe you me, he was the best there was, maybe the best there ever was. He was a t-shirt grease-punk back when the word punk meant something, not like those fags today who think they're something because they got a staple through their face. Not that anybody--anybody--would have called him a punk to his face, no sir.

Den had a '57 Chevy, just like that one. The finest car ever made, my opinion. He'd crammed a Cadillac flathead V-8 in it, the one that, back then, they made special only for ambulances. He took it apart and rebuilt it, the engine bored and stroked and milled and ported and polished, every cam sanded and shined and rubbed and put back together the way he wanted it. He had damn near five hundred raging broncos chained under the hood, with fat racing slicks of Pirelli rubber two feet wide in back, and custom hand-tooled air shocks he took off an Italian racer that crashed and burned off Topanga Canyon one misty morning; some asshole who had the bright idea that 'cause he could afford a pretty car, he knew how to drive it.

Den's rod had chrome so bright your eyes hurt to look at it; rubber so hot it left sooty flames on the asphalt five hundred feet behind where he'd been, twin quad-barrel carbs and a tuned exhaust that let him do zero to one-eighty in nothing flat. He spent weeks fine-tuning just the aero, looking for that perfect edge that would keep the rear-end from floating right off the street at top speed. Other streetpunks had their cars all dolled up, with cherry-slick enamel and white-wall tires and fancy hi-fi radios. Except for the chrome, Den's rod was slick glossy black with only a white skull on the hood and the words Hot Death on Wheels. He didn't have nothing inside, not even a tach, because he knew every quaver of his engine and could always tell just exactly what he was doing by the sound.

He left behind everything on the road. He didn't even have a

rearview mirror because nobody ever came up behind him, no baby, not even once.

One summer night the hot wind was blowing out of the mountains, and he'd beat everything on the road, no contest. We'd gone to the drive-in, where all the streetpunks would hang out in the back row, smoking Luckies, making a great show of ignoring the girls, and arranging races. But nobody would race with Den; they'd all been beaten so bad that they wouldn't even look him in the eye, just stood there pretending they couldn't see him.

That night was hot, the wind blowing down from the desert like the devil had forgotten to close the gates of Hell. Den stared down the other drivers contemptuously, not saying a word, then he threw down his cigarette and just got in his car and gunned it. Rev up a car like his and you can feel it as much as you hear it, thunder like to shake you to pieces. He took off, out into the mountains, screeching wheels like a coyote gone mad and leaving us all behind in a cloud of burnt rubber and gas fumes.

I heard the story later, in bits and pieces. I believed it then, and, all these years and too many miles later, I goddamn still believe every word of it now.

He went through the mountains at about a hundred miles an hour, he told me, twisting and turning like a mountain-goat, but he'd built that car to hold onto the road no matter what, and by God it did, and he headed straight out through the desert, cactus and sagebrush and then a thousand miles of nothing but darkness and stars, nothing else, not even cows, not even cactus.

He'd left California so far behind in the night, with the hot wind razor-whipping past him, that he could be in Arizona, or even Kansas, but the roads were wide and straight and empty and just made for street racing.

And then-- this is the part you might not believe, kid, but I swear I heard it straight, and he wasn't smiling when he said it; so laugh and I'll goddamn knock your teeth in, I'm telling you.

He'd left everything behind, and there, in the last hour before dawn, he came on Death, waiting for him in the road; Death in a midnight black coupe, paint so flat black you had to look hard to see it was even there at all. Death had the face of a skull; grinning, of course, but there wasn't any humor in that grin, none, and wearing a dirty t-shirt with a pack of Camels rolled up in a sleeve that just hung there, flapping limp on the bones. Den recognized that gleaming skull instantly, he'd seen it a thousand times, seen it even in his dreams: it was painted on the hood of his rod. The car, though, the midnight coupe was a make that he couldn't quite recognize, and that right there was more than a little odd, 'cause Den knew the lines of every car ever built.

And when he saw Death waiting for him, just grinning and smoking and waiting by his car, he knew that he'd ridden so fast he'd left behind Nevada, and Wyoming, and even goddamn Iowa, and had left the roads of the living so far behind that the only way he would ever get back was to run this race, this last race, and by God win it.

But he'd been looking for a race, spoiling for one, and if it was Death, why then, he'd goddamn race Death, and win, too; he wasn't about to lose to anybody, not Death, not anybody.

And Death only grinned and beckoned with one finger.

He probably should have stopped and checked his car, let his oil cool a little, taken a look at the wedges he had on his springs, scoped things out. But that's something that you just don't do, kid, you never shut the motor when the adrenaline is pumping. And we'd had that car apart just last week tweaking it up--him tweaking it up, that is, me handing him wrenches--and it was running as sweet as we'd ever gotten it, smoother than twenty-dollar whisky and rattlesnake fast. And, besides, he was spoiling for a race.

So he waved Death on ahead of him, and old Skull-face pulled up and waited at a stoplight-- a stoplight right out in the middle of nowhere, not even at a cross-roads, just a light. Nothing there but road and starlight, and maybe in the way distance two tall buttes, with the road disappearing between them. So Den pulled up beside him, both of them racing their engines, both of them smiling like rabid 'coons, and then the light turned green, and he popped the clutch and they were gone.

And Death's car was fast, scary fast, faster than any car Den had ever seen, and in that first instant he knew that every other race he'd ever run was just chickenshit, but this was the real thing. They'd hit a hundred before you could spit, and Death was even with him, maybe even a little ahead, and then they both shifted into fourth, and Den put his foot down and hammered it with everything he had.

He was neck and neck with Death, but his engine was running way hot; it had been a hot night to start with and he'd picked up a lot of dirt from going too damn fast on some rotten unpaved desert road and the dirt was stopping up his radiator. And now his engine was overheating bad, flames licking out the side of the hood, and the road got narrow and went on a curve between the two looming buttes. He took the inside of the curve and right then he blew a sparkplug bam! like a rifle-shot, right through the side of the hood and he knew he wasn't going to make it. Death started to draw ahead, he could see the grinning skull in the window inches away, and as the midnight coupe pulled ahead he saw something he should have noticed right off, he realized that Death's car had no aero, it was all muscle with no finesse, and most particularly, with no down-force to hold the rear-end to the road. It was built for the straightaway. So Den, he just tapped the wheel, just a little bit, and holding his car in to the curve with all the force he could muster he nudged Death's rear end, and Death's midnight-black coupe broke free of the road and spun out. And behind him-- he took a quick look around as he passed-- behind him he saw a huge cloud of dust, and two wheels off that midnight coupe came flying through the air, bouncing and spinning, and one of them came right over his car, a few inches over his head, and spanged down in the road ahead of him, and he didn't stop, didn't even slow down, just dodged onto the dirt and held the car steady and ran. One thing he wasn't ever going to do was stop, not then, not until he was a thousand miles away. He knew, he just knew, that old Skull-face wasn't going to be too pleased about the race.

So he limped home, firing on seven cylinders, but he coddled it and nursed it and coasted when he could, the engine going pock! pock! pock!

with the air sucking into the cylinder where the spark-plug had blown, but he made it back.

After that the fire went out of him; he settled down, got married, sold the car and got a full-time job. Last I heard, he's selling insurance, and doing pretty well for himself at it, too. Says he doesn't regret getting out.

You can cheat Death once, he told me, and once is enough.

Me? Yeah, you're right, it was me bought the car off him. I had to scrap the engine; put in a Pontiac engine I got off a wreck and rebuilt damn near from scratch, but I could never make it run the way he did, though I won my share of street races and then some.

I'm on the NASCAR circuit now, doing engines mostly, sometimes suspensions, but the heart has gone out of it. It's all show-biz now, commercials for soft-drinks and Virginia Slims and last I heard even a goddamn cosmetics company. I think maybe it's time for me to settle down too.

Yeah, kid, that there's the car. Pretty, you say. I detailed it myself, wouldn't let anybody else touch this one. But no, I'm not about to sell. You couldn't afford it, kid, and I'm not talking about money, neither.

No, I don't race, myself. I never take that car out any more, except maybe once a year or so, and then only in mid-day; run it up and down the street once or twice to remember old times, to remember what a real car feels like. Because I know that Death is still out there, still cruising somewhere in a midnight coupe so black that you have to look hard to see it's even there at all, cruising and looking and looking and cruising, just looking to find that one car, the one that, long ago, had the hood that says Hot Death on Wheels

And this time, I don't reckon he's fixing to lose.

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