

Goin' Nowhere

In January 1979, I found her.

A Midnight blue,
1969
Mercury Cougar.

Black vinyl top.
351 Windsor.
Automatic on the floor.

She was su-wheat.

I was 17 and not working. I conned my dad into paying \$995.00 for her, making promises I'd never keep to pay him back.

The kids at school bent over laughing when I drove her into the senior lot that snowy winter day.

Assholes.

She did lean to the left. Her back shock on the driver's side was blown. Plus, winter in Kansas put a thick mix of sand and salt on the roads—because a four-inch snowfall shut Wichita down even today—she was so salty, she looked whitewashed.

April rolled around, and I washed and wiped and waxed every inch of metal until she shined like she'd just rolled off the Detroit line. Me and my bad-assed cat were purring up and down the road cranking Steve Miller "Mercury Blues" as I backed out of the drive.

*"I'm gone-na buy me a Merc-Rie
I'm gone-na buy me a Merc-Rie
Cruise ... cru-u-u-u-ise
up and down that road.*

Up and down that road."

Oh yeah.

May rolled around, and my Momma (lovely woman, but oh-so-easy) (merits her own story at a later date), one Saturday afternoon, gave me her JCPenney credit card and told me: "Go pick out your graduation gift." Never one to turn down a freebie, and with what I considered carte

blanch, I smiled at my Momma, hopped in the car, cranked up the stereo, and headed toward Towne East Square and Penneys Automotive.

I cost my Daddy an unexpected \$775.00 dollars that day.

I picked out
 Four ScatTrac70
 Raised white letter tires;
 Four Cragar SST aluminum mag wheels;
 Chrome lug nuts
 Chrome air stem covers
 A bitchin set of air shocks.

I waited in their lobby, shuffling my feet, and anxious to sign Mom's card.

Mounted, balanced, tightened, aired-up and delivered, that seven hundred and seventy five dollars made my day. Dad, however, flipped a gourd.

"That's almost the price of the car, for Godssake! What were you thinking, Sue? Are you fucking crazy? Oh hell," he yelled as he shrugged, threw up his hands, and stomped off.

After that, Dad put Mom on an allowance and Mom and Dad were done with joint checking and credit cards. I just smiled my Cheshire-like grin and disappeared into the car. I cranked up the stereo, and rolled down the windows. Off to downtown.

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Back then, in Wichita, Kansas, for something to do, we'd drag Douglas. Douglas Avenue is Wichita's 0-block, running east to west. Though it runs through the whole city, downtown, Douglas was special. Thousands of young Wichitans dragged Douglas—rarely racing, just cruising and killing time.

Dragging Douglas was practically the *only* thing to do on Friday and Saturday nights in Wichita. From around 8:00 to midnight, every Friday and Saturday night, Wichitans cruised west from Hardee's, at the corner of Douglas and Grove, under the train bridge, by the winos passed out on the hill after their Mad-Dog 20/20 or Brass Monkey had run out, past St. Francis, Emporia, Topeka, Broadway, across Market, to Main, and left.

South one block, a right, veer round the round, turquoise Century II, and then left into Stone Park.

Aaahhh. Stone Park.

More officially—A. Price Woodard Park—but Stone because it was made of stone fountains, and Stone because we got stoned back there. Stone Park was behind Century II, and we could park there and party, for up to 45 minutes at a time, without getting arrested. The parking lot

wrapped around three-quarters of Century II, and the whole thing was built on the banks of the Arkansas River, and on Friday and Saturday nights, it was packed full. Hundreds of carousing kids. And their cars.

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Back then, the Big 3 and the American public were smitten with each other.

Back then, America loved her cars.

We'd wash 'em and wipe 'em and wax 'em down. And then we'd head downtown. We wanted to find our friends and show off our cars.

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We'd find a parking spot back along the banks of the Arkansas River (Kansans pronounce that river's name the R-Kan-zus. Which is probably not how the Arkansawyers say it.), crank up some tunes, hop out of our cars, and gather around someone's trunk lid. We'd keep our bottles of Annie Green Springs or Tyrolia on the down-low, and fire up a doobie to pass around. City lots were open till eleven. The cops would cruise through and run us off every half-hour or so. Truth is, we only needed 20 or 30 minutes to shoot the shit, down a bottle of something cheap, and smoke a couple numbers. Then, we'd hop back in our cars, start the loop again, and see who we could run into for the next session back at the park.

Generally, in the summer, the Arkansas River, through downtown Wichita, was nothing more than a 20-foot-wide sandbarge. Maybe 10-12 inches deep, creeping along, barely progressing, and occasionally turning green in the 100-degree summer heat. Just north of Stone Park, Near Black Bear Bosin's Keeper of the Plains, city managers dammed the Arkansas, so it could look pretty—for a mile or so—as it meandered down and around their landmark. The water did kinda sparkle in the downtown city lights—especially once we had our buzz on.

When the cops came through on patrol, we'd hop back in the cars and head onto Waco, go north one block to First Street, take a right onto Main. Left on Douglas and east. The whole strip wasn't more than two miles, but if we didn't smoke up at the park, it took a good 45 minutes to make the circuit. On Douglas, the cars moved like snails in procession.

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I don't remember exactly when I started liking cars, but I guess it goes back 1971 when I was ten. On our annual vacation to Virginia to see the family, Uncle Roy had just bought a 1970 Mustang Mach I. Roy sat me up front in his

Midnight-blue
Bad-boy with two
Big ten-inch-wide
White racing stripes

Started at the front bumper,
 Came up, along the lines of the hood,
 Stopped at the windshield.
 Picked up at the roofline,
 Skipped the back window, then
 Stretched, lengthwise down the trunk of the car.
 The Mach I had
 Tall, wide 60s with
 Raised white letters.
 Boy was it sweet.

Roy volunteered for the Gordonsville Fire Department, and while we were out for our little drive, he got a call about a grass fire. We hauled ass down some old country road only to find that it was a controlled burn. The important thing was, we hauled ass.



Wichita, Kansas.

The name of the city comes from the indigenous peoples to the area, the Wichita. The real Wichitans. We called it Do Dah. We meant no disrespect; we just found it so damn boring. Downtown, Do Dah, each block on the weekend packed with cars, and long after the light turned red, two or three rear ends would hang out, stopped in cross-traffic.

Wichita, incorporated in 1870, sported the typical city block for that era. Narrow red brick buildings, butted up on each other, 3 or 4 or 5 stories high. The brick storefronts housed Woolworth's, Rector's Books, Brick's Menswear. All gone now.

Carrie Nation once busted up the bar in the Eaton Hotel at the corner of Douglas and Emporia. She was protesting, well, the bar. The only building that stood out in a progressive sort of way was the black glass Bank IV building at Douglas and Broadway. Most city blocks hadn't changed much in a hundred years. The blocks weren't very long, but it still took two or three cycles of the spotlight to make it through each one on the weekends.

We draggers always assumed the right of way—proud as hell when it was our rear-end hanging out there. Everyone's windows were down—A/C's on in the summer. Windows down—heater's on in the winter. Regardless of the season—stereos cranked to the max. People held signs out their windows: "Trying to score a half?" Guys picked up girls, girls looked for guys, drug deals went down, a sporadic Chinese fire drill, and, further east, by the train bridge where the traffic began to flow, an occasional, actual, drag race.



I might not remember exactly when I started liking cars, but I certainly remember falling for the Mercury Cougar. Sophomore year in high school, 1977, I got a crush on this skinny guy in my geometry class. On the days he came to school (never on a Monday), he drove a 1971 Mercury

Cougar. It was badass. It was chartreuse green with a white vinyl top. With 351-Cleveland engine—it roared.

An engine that size has this deep, guttural, rumble. The dual exhaust and headers helped, too. His trunk lid had a sticker that read “Evil, Mean, Cruel and Nasty” – Man, that Cat was dangerous.



The best thing about first-generation Cougars were their taillights. They were synchronized. Three of them on each side of the car, and when you’d signal, they’d go blink-blink-blink;

Blink-blink-blink.

The definitive blinker.

And you knew people by their cars.

Eldon’s 70 Cutlass

Doug R’s 71 Cougar

Doug K’s 57 Chevy

Dean’s 1970 Nova

Tammy’s Pontiac LeMans

Sheri’s 71 Mustang

Rob’s 69 Mach I

Robbie’s ‘70½ Camaro with the 396 (He let me drive it once, but made me promise I’d never tell anyone).

In the 60s and 70s, the Big 3 made cars to be loved. And nurtured. And they’d purr with a deep appreciation for our love.



I cruised west from Hardee’s down Douglas to Stone Park, stopped and had a toke (I don’t remember now if it was Robbie or Doug or Doug or Tammy. It didn’t matter; I’d spot a buddy’s car, zig zag on and off Douglas till I could catch up to them, and we’d go get stoned. That was always the plan. “Find me down on Douglas and we’ll smoke one!” Then I’d hop back in the Cougar and get back on Douglas.

Blink-blink- blink.

As I turned, I glimpsed her reflection in Brick’s Men’s Wear’s window. She was sleek.

Her dark blue body.

Her black vinyl top.

Those four black tires.

Those shiny
Five-hundred-dollar
Chrome rims.

Mmmmmhmmm. Sparkly-sleek.

I was almost back to the train bridge, and traffic was thinning out some, when I saw Cougar taillights ahead of me.

Blink-blink-blink.

The Cougar got into the right lane.
I was in the left.
I hit the gas pedal and
Pulled up beside it
At the corner of Douglas and Emporia.

It was turquoise, 1967. I could always tell, because there weren't any running lights on the side of a '67. Ford didn't add those till '68.

The guy driving looked over my way and smiled. Big smile. Big guy.

I yelled over at him. "Hey, what's that thing got in it, a 289?"

That was my best guess as the 289 was standard in '67 and '68, except for an occasional 428. 351s weren't standard till '68. This guy had the biggest, most impish grin.

"It's the baddest 289 you ever saw," he roared.

Engines revving.
Green light!

He left me in his dust.

That wasn't easy to do with that 351 of mine. I caught up to him at Hardee's, already parked, long and lean, and leaning against his car.

"Geeze, dude, what *does* that thing got in it?" I asked.

"A 428 Cobra Jet," he sneered. This was not a cat to be messin' with.

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Hangin' with friends, drinkin' a cold one, smokin' a number and cruisin'. That was the life. I loved that life. It lasted till the cops started barricading the ends of Douglas on the weekends.

They'd park two patrol cars at each end of the strip and divert traffic off Douglas. This, rather effectively, put a stop to our downtown lifestyle.

We didn't care. We hopped in our cars and revved our engines and met in the outskirts of town in the cul de sacs where the roads had been paved but the builders hadn't started putting up homes. We partied out on the dirt roads just south of town. We partied in each other's back yards. We loved each other. We loved our partying. We loved our cars.



In those years, The Big 3 ruled. But, something changed. They lost their grip. Their mantra became "a minivan for every soccer mom" and poof, the Big 3 basically broke up with America. Sure, gas prices were a factor. Big V-8 engines were a factor. But, they turned our friends into mere machines, redesigning the personality right out of them. It was the worst thing the Big 3 could have done.

Our cars were our friends. They went out with us on Friday and Saturday. We babied them. We took care of them. We smiled when we saw them. Mini vans had the opposite effect.



Detroit is flirting with us again. It feels good too. I like to be flirted with. The Mustang, the Camaro, the Challenger, the Charger—these guys are back; they're retro; they look good on the road. They look loved.

I can't help but smile when I see them.