

# Back When *Ford* Made a Decent Car ∞ ∞ ∞

By Zachary Hay

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## **WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...**

Zachary Hay's, "Back When Ford Made a Decent Car," is one hell of a story.

*Biasedly, it is my kind of style. Denis Johnson meets Etgar Keret. Charles Bukowski meets Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Edward Albee meets Philip Ó Ceallaigh.*

*This piece is absurdly realistic and all too pleasantly dingy – it is a piece of juxtaposition.*

*Freedom vs. trapped.*

*Sick vs. health.*

*The need to live vs. the care of not dying.*

*Hatred vs. love.*

*Humor vs. reality.*

*What Hay does exceptionally well is to capture the moment when beauty slams up against grime and creates a character that can only navigate the line where they both mash together.*

*The speaker is perpetually stuck in his own wallow, as if his story has always been written this way, and always will be, so it gives him the nihilistic ability to say "fuck it" and tow the line.*

*As equally impressive, is how Hay hearkens back to a dilapidation of time, place, and people. You can feel the destitution that is inherent throughout each line:*

*"I'll give you a hundred dollars if you drive me but I don't have any money on me."*

*"Give me half your cigarettes."*

*"I pulled nine cigarettes out of my pack of Pall Malls and put them in my pocket. I handed over the rest."*

*Poetry in dialogue.*

*You immediately know who these two are, that they're going nowhere because they came from nowhere, that they have no care because no one has ever cared about them.*

*There is something spectacular within dialogue that cuts you to your core.*

*The ability to say everything without ever having really said anything.*

*The characters cast off their words and thoughts to no one but the wind, yet we get to hear them and realize that they're broken whispers from people that have no meaning but can impart wisdom to us:*

*Losing everything does not need to give us hope; the possibility of dying does not need to inspire us; sometimes a pack of cigarettes and a good car are enough to get you down the road.*

*What does give me hope, what does inspire me, what does remind me about standing in a cold garage in Illinois, smoking Pall Malls, memorizing Shakespeare, and wondering if I'd ever be good enough, is this story.*

*Good work, Hay.*

*Five Stars.*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language)...**

The girl lay on the bed fully clothed. We used to fuck fully clothed, she pulling her pants down just past her ass and treating the whole thing very cool, very businesslike, talking during, small talk, chit-chat kind of shit, polite, and other times talking the larger topics, What do you think happens when you die? Have you ever been in love? Was your mother a good mother?

### **Back When Ford Made a Decent Car**

The bus stopped in Inkster because some schizophrenic black girl faked a seizure and her boyfriend slapped her across the face a dozen times. That was my stop – I never get involved in a boy and girl fight: the last time I did the girl stomped on my foot and I developed gangrene on the toe. Walking was difficult but I walked the three miles to Karl and Palmer. This is where the girl lived, the girl that stomped my foot.

The left foot had no sensation but I still stood two or three times on the right foot to rest. To rest and to contemplate my mission. I spoke aloud:

“I’m going to break into the girl’s house. I’m going to steal her wedding ring for stomping my toe. If I can get \$700 I’ll call it even. This girl thinks she’s hot hot hot shit in crystal. Thinks she can afford to turn down every invitation. We’ll see which end of the hog the apple goes.”

But I shut up when I got to the house because the woman next door was a retired witch with her long ear to the window, a lonely alcoholic desperate to read tarot. Back when, she gave me the Seven of Shrubs. *This is the Phoenix. Fear renewal.* I need that like I need a hole in my head. She's dead now I'm sure but in case she isn't, I entered the house through the back quiet-like, sticking the key in like I still belonged.

The house was darked out with blankets over the windows and none of the lights working. *The girl must have moved on to bigger and better things. Alright, man, I can dig it.*

I walked down the hallway and shouted. "Hello hello hello ... Amazon man! Amazon man!" and nobody called back.

The girl lay on the bed fully clothed. We used to fuck fully clothed, she pulling her pants down just past her ass and treating the whole thing very cool, very businesslike, talking during, small talk, chit-chat kind of shit, polite, and other times talking the larger topics, What do you think happens when you die? Have you ever been in love? Was your mother a good mother? Once after fucking she told me the story of the ring. It was a long story and I couldn't remember it except for the boyfriend dying of complications from a gunshot wound. Sad kind of shit.

The ring still sat on her left ring finger, but now it was half covered in swollen finger meat.

*Organs must be sick. Shouldn't swell when you're skin and bones skinny.*

I picked up her hand and pulled the ring. No luck. I pulled twice more. No luck, but a pop like I broke something.

"Whadda I got for grease?" I asked and came up with nothing for an answer.

So what did I do? I wet my lips and wrapped them around the finger. Not long – I did not want her waking up and thinking she died and went to hell and this was the worst that it got. So I

went quick wrapping my tongue around twice and wetting the ring best I could. And then I took the finger out and grabbed hold with my hand and pulled again. The finger popped again and the ring came off, falling me backward on my ass as it did.

“*Fuck!*” I said and pulled myself up, pocketing the ring.

The girl woke up then, pissing and moaning, in a lot of pain.

“Oh, shut up you bitch,” I said, “You deserve it.”

But she said nothing back. Her mouth did not open.

So I said, “That’s not you. Who’s there?”

“*Ohhhhhhh!*” a voice said. It was a man’s voice coming from another room.

“Who’s there?” I said again.

“I’m in a lot of pain ... ”

“That doesn’t help. Who are you?”

No answer. I left the room, going down the hallway and expecting a crackhead with a boxcutter but getting a naked kid on a livingroom floor in genuine pain. He lay with his ass facing me.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Please ... *Please* ... ”

“I’m not a cop and I’m not going to fuck you so go ahead and tell me who you are.”

The kid rolled over and I saw the problem: gangrene on his dick. It had eaten away most of the dick leaving just a black nub sitting on a wasted pelvis, hip bones exposed and everything else, testicals hanging bare with no sack. Hard to look at.

The kid looked up at me. “Can you help me?”

“That’s beyond help,” I said. “You’re gonna die.”

The kid shivered. “You medical?”

“No. But it doesn’t take a doctor. How the hell’d it happen?”

The kid shivered again and his eyes rolled up and down. “She stepped on it ... ”

I shook my head. Crying shame what some people will do to you.

“Crying shame,” I said and put my right foot over my left heel to pull off my shoe. I raised up my gangrenous toe. The boy looked at it, sighed, and looked away. I put my foot back in my shoe. “There’s nothing I can do for you,” I said.

The kid shivered again, eyes back and forth, coming in and out. “You medical?” Kid was losing it.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Christ.”

Feeling bad, I went a little closer to the kid and sat down beside him. I wanted to give him some advice, but what do you say? Everything feels like cold bullshit when you’re dying, I guess.

“I can’t look,” the kid said. “Is my dick gone?”

I hadn’t the heart to tell him so I changed the subject.

“Hold out your hand,” I said.

He did. I reached into my pocket, pulled out the ring, and put it in his palm.

“Take this.”

He brought it up and looked at it.

“How’d you get it?” he asked.

“A little spit.”

He nodded like he tried everything but.

“That’s yours now,” I said.

“What do I do with it?”

“It’s gotta be worth something, I’m sure.”

He looked at me to let me know I was full of shit.

“Or you could wear it,” I said.

He offered the ring back and I picked it up, then he put his fingers out and I slid the ring on his pinky, the only finger that would fit, and we looked over the thing together a minute. A light escaped the blanket over the front window and the diamond sparkled.

“Beautiful,” I said and we both laughed. We laughed half a minute before the kid put his ringed hand over his chest and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was gone.

“You medical?” he asked.

I got off the ground and began to walk away backward. If this kid dies I don’t want to be there to see it. Some people think that gives you fodder for stories. But it doesn’t. It gives you *baggage*.

“Yeah, I’m medical,” I said. “Hey, you’ll be alright.”

“Am I dying?”

“Dying? No, you’ll be alright.”

“Is my dick gone?”

“No ... not all the way.”

“I don’t feel very good.”

“Just relax, kid. That’s the first thing they taught us in medical school. You gotta learn to *be level*.”

I ran down the hallway and out the back door and down the street careless if the old witch saw me or not. I ran as fast as the toe would allow, knowing that it carried poison, that if it burst it would carry poison up my leg and kill me, but not caring too much.

That kid's dick would give me nightmares.

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My toe busted. And I had to walk two miles to Mitch's Liquor to get some relief. Two Natty Daddies in the parking lot then two more and a pack of Pall Malls and that was the rest of my money. When I was supposed to have \$700 dollars in my pocket, I was busted by four beers and a pack of cigarettes. Well, I was depressed.

"I bet that kid was a fucking scam artist," I said to myself as I drank Natty number three. "Has a crusty little nothing dick and waves it around at traffic. Got me good. Fucking kid."

There was a cigarette in my hand that I did not remember lighting. I took a good drag from it and said, "I thought I'd be dead by now anyway," when a woman answered.

"Dead of what?"

She was not attractive but she had big red lips and bulbous breasts with one of her nipples coming out of the top of her blouse which interested me deeply.

"Gangrene of the foot."

"Does that kill you?"

"If you wait on it it will. As of now I just can't walk."

She made a face like she was thinking and popped her hips out.

"Where you going?" she asked.

“Hamtramck. Half hour east. I’ll give you a hundred dollars if you drive me but I don’t have any money on me.”

“Give me half your cigarettes.”

I pulled nine cigarettes out of my pack of Pall Malls and put them in my pocket. I handed over the rest.

The woman drove a Lincoln Town Car. It was twenty years old but everything worked and it had a 4.6 liter engine that got us to speed *fast*: East Michigan Ave, south on Merriman and East 94, the thing hummed at 90. They don’t make cars this good anymore.

I tried not to overthink it but this felt like the beginning of something, rebirth and all that. Ancient Egyptian kind of shit.

The woman turned to me with one hand on the wheel.

“I do favors for people,” she said.

“This must be how the better half lives,” I said.

The woman agreed.

#### **AUTHOR’S NOTE:**

*True story. In 2017 a guy threatened to shoot himself outside the library I work in. Police had the place on lockdown for hours and I couldn’t leave until well past midnight. After, I walked home in the rain.*

*I had this funny feeling walking home. I thought a lot about dying and how little time there is and how meaningless and uneventful my life is. Breakthrough kind of stuff. At that point a car pulled up alongside me and a woman asked if I was going anywhere. She was young and good looking and when I asked if I knew her she laughed and said no. I got in the car.*

*The woman said her name was Rose and when I asked where she was going she said, “Nowhere.”*

*“Just being helpful?”*

*“I like to do favors for people.”*

*I know from experience that nobody actually likes to do favors for people and in that moment my breakthrough was replaced with a sudden fear that I was going to be*

*robbed or killed or arrested. I asked the girl to drop me off at the bar a block up. She did and I thanked her and said something about her having a beautiful soul.*

*The moral of the story is that I am naïve, and have read too many books, and believe that sometimes pretty girls will pick you up on a rainy night just to show you that the world is still a beautiful place and life will always be worth living.*

*I've tried a few times to turn this into a short story, but the closest I've gotten is *Back When Ford Made a Decent Car*.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Hay was born in Detroit, MI in 1994. His fiction has appeared in the ArLiJo Journal, Crab Fat Magazine, the No Extra Words podcast, Fleas on the Dog, and the anthology Apocalyptic Monsters. He currently serves as a prose reader for The MacGuffin.