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D/Altered

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JAMES MCKEAN

D/Altered

The red light means you're ready to go. It's on top of the starter's Christmas tree. Ominous and ironic. In this world, red means you're staged, your front wheels having entered the timing lights. If you ask what drove you here or if you'll drive away, consider it a bad joke. On second thought, maybe it's a good question. How did you get into this—strapped in and petrified? Think about it. You're straddling three hundred cubic inches of six-cylinder in-line Hudson Hornet engine and its two speed dynaflo transmission bolted to a chrome moly tubing heliarc welded shortened sling shot dragster frame with a fiberglass roadster body. If you're knocking your helmet-encased head against the Kandi blue metal-flake roll bar, it's because the lights on the Christmas tree have fallen to yellow; you've got the engine revved to stall speed against the brakes, and in the pits and on the sidelines Steve Henshaw and all your dubious partners expect you to smoke the slicks the whole quarter mile in your very own, hand-crafted, scavenged and jury-rigged, D/Altered dragster.

The Puyallup Raceway in the summer of 1965. I'm nineteen. I should be shooting baskets at the "Y." Instead I've shoveled half my asphalt laborer's summer wages into a machine the purpose of which is simply hormonal—all adrenalin and acceleration, all held breath and grunting and explosion, all noise and smoking tires. It's fireworks you can ride. It's impatient and absolutely self-centered sex, the point of which is to get it over with as quickly and with as much enthusiasm as possible. It's testosterone renamed alcohol or high-test injected or nitromethane supercharged and blown so that ten-foot acetylene hot flames rocket from those sling-shot top-fuelers four out each zoomie header like brilliant blue-white diabolic candelabrum. Cover your ears it hurts that much. Even fifty feet away the sound whaps your body like a broom against a carpet.

Another yellow. Admit it. Come on. Think. It's more than a twelve-second ride. It's more than my weight tripled in Gs or the redundant maniac with his starter's flag down on his knees, ready to swat flies. I don't need his OK. Fess up. There's something to

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love in the language of all this, though I'd never tell my crew that—Henshaw up to his elbows in oil, knuckles busted, or Billy with his grinding tools, near tears at the prospect of dismantling the largest six-cylinder flathead cast after World War II, the 1953 Hudson Hornet 5,047 cc behemoth that Henshaw found in a junk yard and convinced me to haul in my father's Ford station wagon—its leaf springs were never the same—back to Billy's shop so he could stroke and bore and port and polish. The assonance and alliteration sold me, as if the engine would breathe again, as if the very words themselves greased the bearings.

Or how the holy catalogs turned my head, their gospel the text I pored over column after column. Salvation lay somewhere in the Moon Equipment Co. inventory, its stock of manifolds and magnetos. And Honest Charley, the graffiti man and car parts huckster "hissself" pointing in his ads like Uncle Sam or Elmer Gantry, freed you from the conventions of grammar in his "Honest Price Catalog." As long as I kept turning the page, a litany of names and parts echoed in my ears like a roll call of saints: Iskenderian the cam grinder, Mallory and his magnetos, Edlebrock of the manifold, Jahns forged pistons, Hurst of the spring-loaded four-on-the-floor, Hedman Hedders, Halibrand of the rear end and mag wheels, Hilborn the fuel injector. Offenhauser and Eelco, Grant rings and Getz gears. Traction Master and Calcustom. Oh, how they moved me, these names all sibilance and repetition, a revving of consonants and chrome. Headlong, full speed, bustin' loose, the euphony wound you clear to imagination's red line.

And it cost nothing to say these names, as if speaking would qualify me to stand before drag racing's pantheon, a kind of incantatory pit-pass so that I might enter into the presence of "Big Daddy" Don Garlits and Don "The Snake" Prudhomme and Rick "The Iceman" Stewart, drivers so fast only their nicknames kept up with them. Mickey Thompson, Brooks and Rapp, the Northwest's own Jerry Ruth, the Baromas brothers, Danny Ongais, the Sandoval brothers, and Warren, Ferguson, Jackson, and Faust. Said all at once, they sound like latter-day gunslingers who listen to rock & roll and make pacts with the nitro devil.

Piece by piece, however, our D/Altered cost plenty. Woops. Another yellow light for the heart. We painted Henshaw and McKean on the back of our catalog-special, Acme Freight-delivered

model "A" ersatz fiberglass coupe body, because we wanted to drive our names as fast as we could into hot rod recognition. We asked Tacoma's Thane Porlier to build the frame. Who else? Sculptor Thane. An artist in chrome-moly. Baron Thane. Thane of Cawdor. Holder of the welding torch. Who sat me on his workbench to measure me butt to brow for the enormous roll bar. The frame all steel tubing and heliarc welds, the junkyard Olds rear end and axle chopped and narrowed, as if this car were a tailored suit of armor. Thane cut and welded the steel headers. He built the axles and radius rods and kingpins and set the spindles and caster and bolted in the drag link and steering box.

The steering wheel we lifted from Billy's go-cart. We ordered a two-gallon polished aluminum gas tank from Moon auto, round chrome filter caps to sparkle atop the dual single choke "Twin-H Power" Hudson carburetors, and a pair of steel rims to fit the used ten-inch slicks that Henshaw found at a hot rodder's yard sale, and a new aluminum head and gaskets for the Hudson that Billy had ported and polished to perfection. A new cam, valves, plugs, metal-flake paint job, junkyard front rims and on-sale six-dollar black-walled tires. Fasteners and tubes and fittings and firewalls. Scavenge and search and toil and trouble.

Yellow. There's someone in the lane next to me but I haven't got the nerve to look. Too late to turn my head, sitting in my purloined plastic lawn chair bolted to the frame and bound by shoulder straps and seat belts over my borrowed aluminum and asbestos-lined safety jacket, my helmet full of sweat, the visor fogged, the Hudson six spasmodic, epileptic, groaning against the brakes, the brake lever tight in my right hand, my left on the wheel. Hold it. Hold it. Too late to add a Moon foot-shaped gas pedal. Too late to add spoke wheels. Too late and no money to add a magneto—a Rube Goldberg Ray-o-Vac tied-to-the-Hudson-with-hemp-rope ignition system standing in, a spark from the profane for the finely tuned and chrome-plated sublime....

Green. Oh, god. Brake off. Foot down. Hands on the wheel. The Hudson sucks the air blue, growling like a diesel, the whole D/Altered hunching as if jabbed in the rear, smoke billowing from the tires, your head popped back, helmet clanking against the roll bar. Whining. Point it straight. Higher. The RPMs vibrating your teeth, the crowd left behind, the track before you all vanishing point, trees

a green blur. Wait, wait. Shift once. Left hand down. Right on the wheel. The dynaflo thumps into drive and the big six settles into its shoulders and back muscles and growls and stuffs you into the seat, wind filling your collar and flattening the face shield, the finish line, the timing booth, the black and white finish banner growing larger faster, faster and faster. Heart thumping, mouth open, you think you're a driver, that you'll make one small steering adjustment, the car drifting, the run still accelerating, just a little turn on the wheel back toward the middle of your lane and clank.

Then nothing.

How suddenly the world goes metaphoric. How curious and calm such moments seem. My first thought is sentimental—the little red car on its pedestal outside the Safeway store. How my mother stood next to me and plugged dimes in the slot so the car rocked back and forth and I could steer frantically nowhere—I knew even then—the wheel turning round and round and round. And then I remember the awful wreck of the Baromas brothers' supercharged hemi Anglia, so overpowered and souped up it looked like a Jerry Roth "Rat Fink" hyperbolic cartoon, how the driver goosed the car sideways, let off, goosed it again twice as hard and the car leaped straight up, pitched onto its nose and dove into the asphalt, disintegrating half-way up the track right in front of you. Remember the ambulances and red lights, the engine broken loose, upside-down and leaking its oil, the driver lying next to it, moaning, his helmet ripped off, still alive though his right leg bent under him four different ways. Oh, man, Jim, think about this—your steering is gone.

Next week, Thane Porlier will admit that he should have sleeved the rod connecting the steering box and the lever gears. That butt weld just couldn't stand the torque. But I don't know this yet. All I know is that the wheel spins free. All I see is the finish line here and gone. All they see in the booth is a D/Altered flashing by, its crazy driver with both hands on the brake lever bending it by his right ear, the engine sighing and backfiring and decompressing.

No one seems worried, although Henshaw and Billy in the tow-car had to search to find me. I have rolled far past the finish area down a dirt road and into the pine woods, both of my hands still yanking on the brake. But I have a new understanding. Shut off, the engine steams and tinkers, heat waffling the air. Henshaw unbuckles

me and slaps my shoulder for the time and speed. "Twelve point nine," he says. "Terrific. And 124 miles per hour."

"Well, I didn't have a hand in it," I say but no one gets it. My knees wobble the rest of the day. My thinking wobbles a lot longer than that.

When Thane asks what's the worry and says, "Hey, we designed it to go straight," and explains the physics behind fifteen-degree axle tilt and kingpins and the gyroscope effect and wheel flop, all I hear are the puns. I need to think about this and beg off drag racing for the next few weeks. Then I beg off for good, playing basketball instead three nights a week at the "Y" and lifting weights, my sophomore season at Washington State University only months away. I reread poems from my English classes, the language now more poignant than ever. Grasping the obvious, I discover words really mean something. Roethke says, "I learn by going where I have to go," and Stafford negotiates the dark, his exhaust red. Words such as "headlong," "steering," "acceleration," "full speed," "brakes," and "deep woods" spark and roll and rumble.

And when I rediscover Robert Creeley's poem "I Knew a Man," the summer compresses itself into his lines

... the darkness sur-
rounds us, what

can we do against
it, or else, shall we &
why not, buy a goddamn big car,

drive, he sd, for
christ's sake, look
out where yr going.

I copy the poem and carry it in my wallet, admonished by word and circumstances—and my father, who mentions my dangerous quarter mile in passing, eyebrow raised, just once.

It's 1965. I try to look where I'm going in an impetuous time accelerating way too fast. Rock music. Riots. Vietnam. I go to school. I play ball. I read and love words and try to write poems with speed and rhythm. There are language wrecks galore but each is survivable.

And when I look over my shoulder, it's to be thankful again that I made it through my wild run—twenty odd seconds with no steering—and to see what kind of times Henshaw and Billy are posting, to write them letters, and then to wonder what they'll do after the Hudson throws a rod and Henshaw gets drafted and Billy joins up. And for months, I hope they make it back from their over-revved, fully blown and flat-out tours in Vietnam—Steve Henshaw, race car driver and welder, who does, and Billy—I hear one day—sweet Billy, artist of the port and polish, who doesn't.