

## Driving Thunder Road

THERE'S A POETRY to life that's easy to miss. You get busy, there are bills to pay, changes to navigate, sudden tragedies, the minute details of keeping yourself on the straight and true. But the poetry is there nonetheless. You just have to live some to learn to see it.

My first car was a 1964 Rambler. It was the Typhoon model, with a 232 in-line six motor and the word "Typhoon" in script along the side. When I got the car in 1976 it was not wearing its age well. The original solar yellow was faded, and the black roof was spotty and easing to dull grey.

The car was rusty, and its seats were torn. It smelled a little funny. The exhaust kicked up smoke, one bumper rattled, and that classic engine took forever to get up to highway speed. The Typhoon sat low on its suspension, causing it to resemble those clown cars you see in the circus. Turning corners I sometimes expected the doors to fall off. But it was my first car and I loved it.

I worked at a place called Seneca Steel in St. Catharines, as a labourer on the foundry floor. My job was to push carts filled with metal plates over to the punch press

operators for fabrication, then empty the discarded metal into bins. It was hard, heavy work, with a lot of overtime, and I slept in that car a lot of nights. Truth was, it was my first job in quite a while, and I lived in that old Rambler until I could afford a room.

There was an eight-track cassette deck in the car, and I splurged on music. I drove around the streets of town with The Who, Led Zeppelin, the Stones, Muddy Waters and Buddy Guy pouring out the window. I was twenty-one, working in a steel plant for minimum wage, with no roof over my head and no real direction in my life. But I had a car. That made all the difference.

Summer evenings seemed to last forever back then. Friends and I would cruise for hours, as long as I could afford the gas. We'd lean out the windows shouting at girls or drive to Port Dalhousie beach, where there was an antique carousel, and lean against the hood, drink beer, smoke and listen to music. That car was our clubhouse. Every night we went somewhere.

When everyone had tired out and there was only me and the car and the road, I found an exotic, irreplaceable freedom, a mix of asphalt, headlights and music. I drove into the heart of those deep summer nights, cruising secondary highways and back roads with the windows rolled down and the music washing over me.

There was no desperation in my life then, no anxiety, no worry. There was only the road twisting away into the

night, and Bruce Springsteen and his classic song "Thunder Road." I'd drive and play it again and again until the early morning, when I'd find a place to pull over, get my blankets from the trunk and fall asleep.

That song seemed to come from where I lived, a land of yearning and loneliness with redemption teasingly out of reach. "Thunder Road" was about cars and girls and the way you sometimes find yourself alone on a charcoal stretch of highway wanting nothing else but to drive and drive and drive.

My job bottomed out about the same time the car did. The exhaust system fell off one day, and the drivetrain started making horrendous noises. I sold the car for parts, for about fifty dollars. I tapped it on the hood one last time to say goodbye.

I hitchhiked some after that, explored the country, found whatever work I could. I was a dishwasher in the Salvation Army hostel in Regina, Saskatchewan, when I finally stopped, living in the basement of a rooming house with just my clothes and a stereo. It would be a few years before I had a car again, but I was never without a copy of "Thunder Road."

There was something in the whine and wail of the harmonica at the start of it that touched me. It was as if a resonant chord lived within me, unresponsive until I heard that sound. It filled my chest, made me want to carry on, made me happy and sad and lonesome all at the same time.

Whether I was driving or not, the song recalled old cars, carousels, buddies and shiny, beautiful girls forever out of reach. The nights busting open, those two lanes that can take you anywhere: that's what Bruce sang. That's what called to me. The idea of hope, of answers, of salvation just beyond the horizon.

Sometimes now, when the night is long and deep and quiet, I'll remember an old Rambler and a kid playing a song called "Thunder Road." Life is filled with poetry. It may not be pretty all the time, but it's there nonetheless. Our job is to find it for ourselves.