

EVERY CAR



5.0

THEO DOESN'T SLEEP through the night without assistance. He is going on six and still sleeps in bed with Christine each night. For his first two and a half years he woke up in between each two-hour sleep cycle and I was the bedmate helping him to connect them. After a time this gave me insomnia; I was awake most nights for two or three cycles and was so unhinged by the process that it drained my capacity for basic decency during the day, let alone kindness in overnight caregiving.

However, I may have caused his sleep dependencies. When he first came home with us from the hospital, Christine was recovering from the trauma of an unexpected cesarean birth and most comfortable sleeping alone on a small love seat to elevate her legs, which helped shift the iv-added fluids that settled in her feet following the surgery. In those first few weeks, I could only get Theo to sleep by curling him in a tight ball on my chest, where he rested until waking to breastfeed. Before long I had many other sleep-assist methods on rotation.

During his early toddler years, when he was primarily interested in automobiles, one of his favorite middle-of-the-night requests was a description, delivered in a monotone pitch, of every car that I've ever had.



MY FIRST CAR WAS A 1969 DODGE CHARGER WITH A CONFEDERATE FLAG AND WELDED-SHUT DOORS

A PHOTO PRINT OF THE GENERAL LEE was a takeaway from the regional rodeo my parents took me to every year until I was ten. For years it was pinned up on my bedroom wall and at the time I was allowed just one television show and one soda per week, often combining the two on Friday nights: off-brand orange with *The Dukes of Hazzard*.

“Sugar is not just a foodstuff,” writes Roland Barthes, “it is, if you will, an ‘attitude,’ bound to certain usages, certain ‘protocols’...it is also a means to experience the day, periods of rest, traveling, and leisure in a specific fashion that is certain to have its impact on the American...I remember an American hit song: ‘Sugar Time.’ Sugar is a time, a category of the world.”



Watching *The Dukes of Hazzard* isn't watching, it is repeatedly sliding over Dad's leather recliner as if it is the hood of a car. It is throwing the pillows off the loveseat into a pile on the floor and then bounding off it to jump them the way The General Lee launches over a police car blockade.

Years later, a doctor thinks I'm allergic to Red 40, the dye used to color the soda orange. Some studies say it can cause extreme hyperactivity and plenty of people have long thought that sugar gives children a kind of high. But as much as any chemistry, it is the attitude on screen—the outlaw, “good-ol’-boy-never-meanin’-no-harm” way of being that courses through me.





Camdenton, Missouri
July 27 - 31, 1982

"THE GENERAL LEE"

Courtesy of

CBS AFFILIATES

KOLR-TV
SPRINGFIELD, MO.

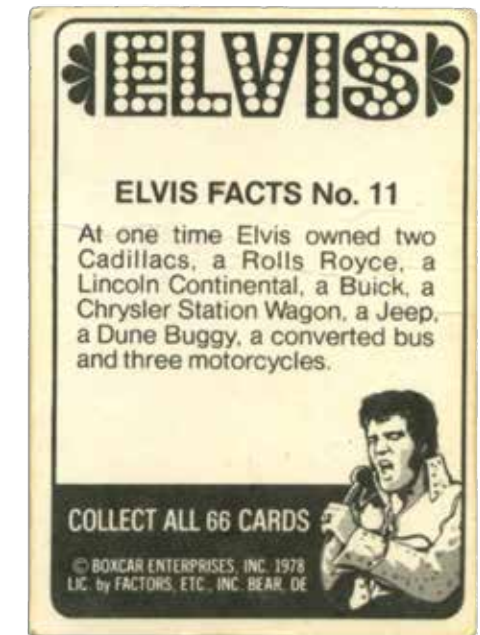
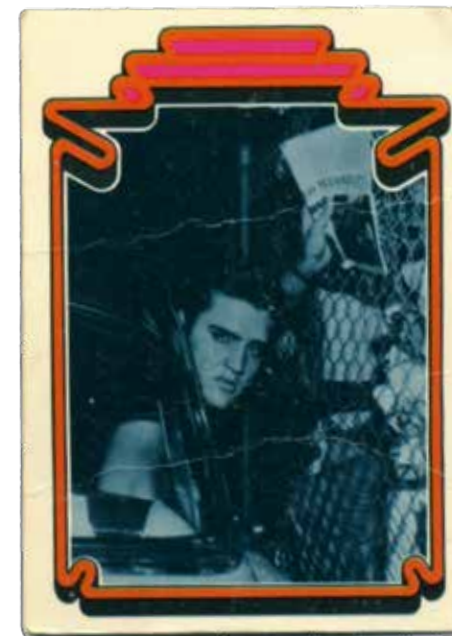
KRCG-TV
JEFFERSON CITY, MO.



MY NEXT CAR WAS A CARDBOARD 1957 CHEVROLET CONVERTIBLE

DAD HAS THE PLAN to make it out of scrap lumber and cardboard in his wood shop. I help him carry it to his truck bed in the morning before school. While we drive into town I periodically crane my neck to check on it through the cab's back window. We deliver it to the auditorium stage for the day's dress rehearsal where every kid takes a turn inside, each jostling or petting the fuzzy dice hanging from its cutout windshield. Every detail is Dad's idea. In 1957 he was eight, my age at the time.

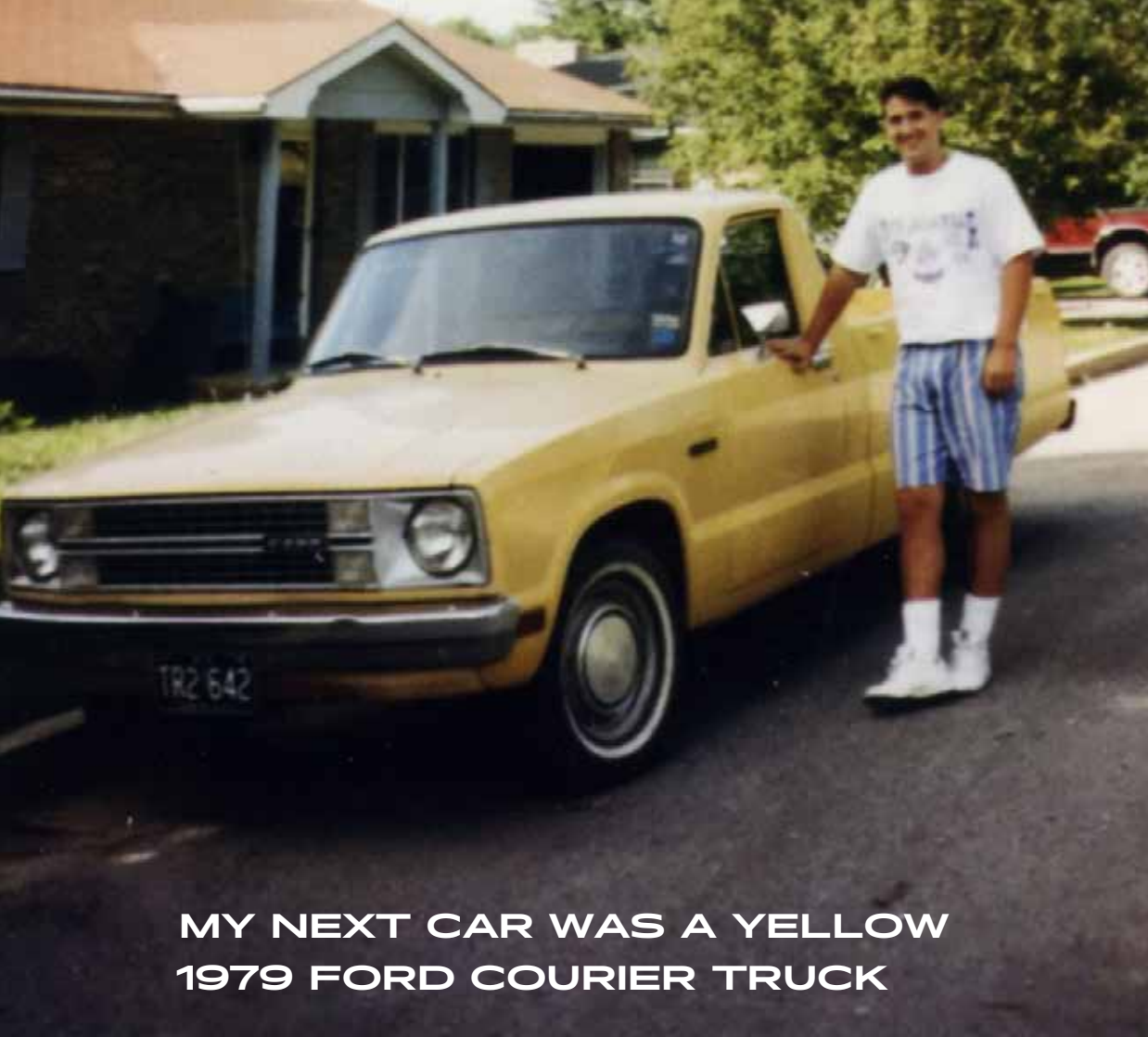
On the big night he dresses me full rockabilly—Levi's 501s cuffed over white socks and black loafers, white t-shirt and fake cigarette box rolled up in one sleeve to reveal an arrow-impaled, heart-with-Mom tattoo drawn in marker on my upper arm. He explains what a pompadour and ducktail are while pomading my hair and



slips a plastic comb in my back pants pocket. We arrive to teachers and some enthusiastic parents dressed in letter jackets and poodle skirts milling around the gym.

Impersonating Elvis doing “All Shook Up,” another eight-year old finishes his number in the 50s themed revue. My partner and I then push the cardboard car to the spotlight, and climb in.

The curtain opens and “Wake up Little Susie” by the Everly Brothers jangles out from the PA; I lip sync to it while forcefully shaking the little red-headed girl flopping lifelessly beside me for two-and-a-half minutes.



MY NEXT CAR WAS A YELLOW 1979 FORD COURIER TRUCK

BEHIND THE HOUSE WHERE DAD GREW UP in Wynne, Arkansas, the truck was parked beneath a pine tree, its bed full of brittle needles and its tires dry-rotted. My paternal grandfather, who we called Papaw, used it for hauling blacksmith and welding material after retiring as the county sheriff. I think I rode in it once with Papaw driving, his portable oxygen machine propped on the bench seat between us.

I'm fourteen when he dies of emphysema and Dad tells his siblings that, in addition to two service revolvers

and his father's ring, he'd like the truck—to fix up for me. It's what I learn to drive in, though I struggle at first with the two-footed timing on hills, nearly burning out the new clutch Dad installed. When I get my driver's license, friends and I call my ride The Big Chiquita.

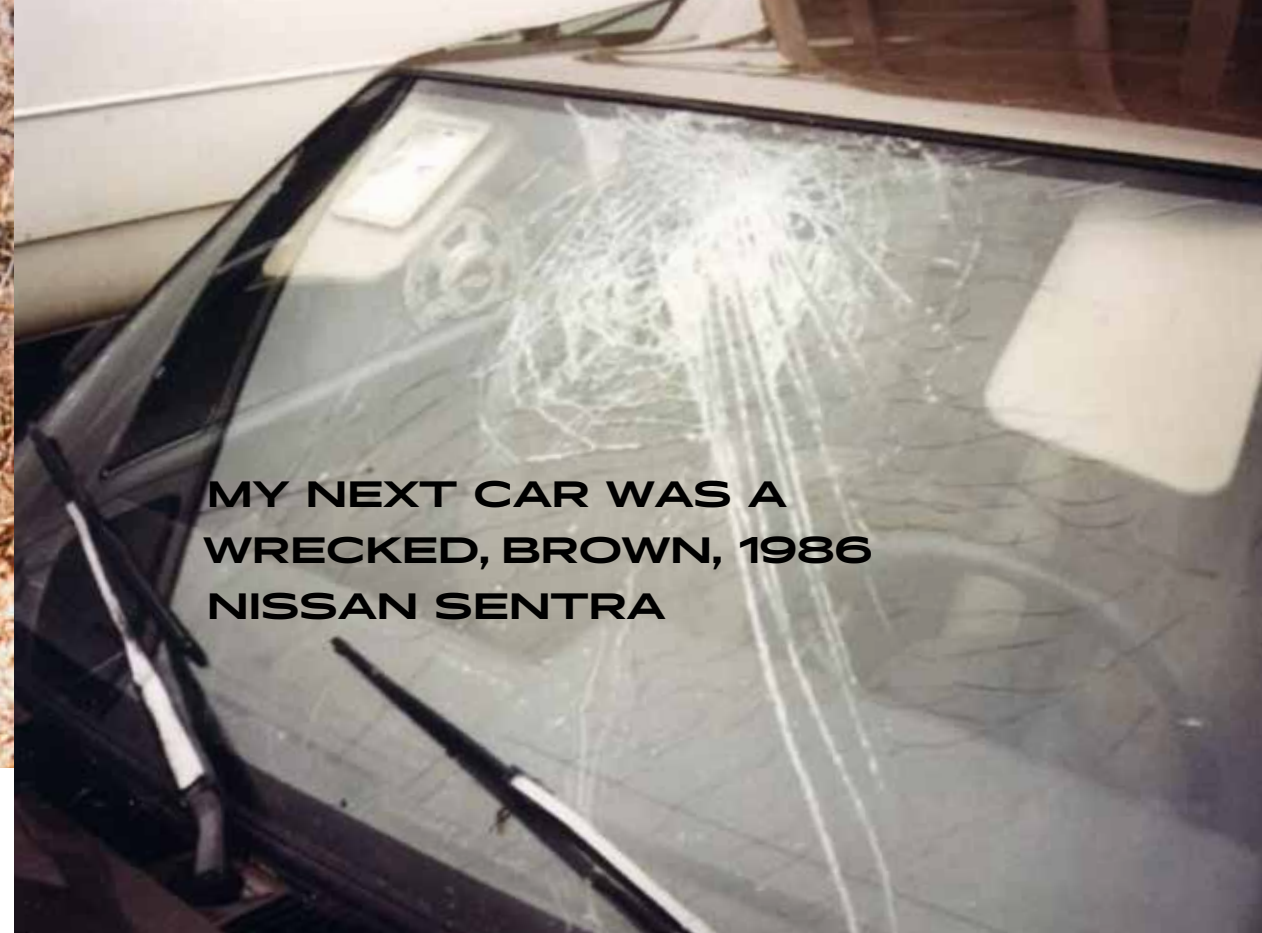
When Dad got the truck for me, his younger sister inherited Papaw's Sears Roebuck .22 rifle. Decades later, when her youngest son turns fourteen, she teaches him how to load and shoot it. One late summer morning, after a night of multiplayer gaming online with friends, he writes them a message to say good-bye, puts the .22 barrel in his mouth, and fires a bullet that chips his front tooth in the instant before it kills him. His mom, my aunt, hearing the pop from the kitchen, calls after him several times and when she gets no reply, checks his room where she finds her boy's body slumped in blood at the edge of his bed, her father's rifle on the floor. For months she denies the Little Rock police coroner's ruling of suicide, believing his death to be accidental and blaming herself for ever having shown the gun to her son.

I never met my fourteen-year-old cousin in person. I find one near-parodic, yet deeply saddening photo of him on a Tae Kwon Do studio's Facebook page. In the picture his round, baby-face mouth is yelling above the v-crossing of a pressed, white gi uniform cinched by a knotted, green belt. His stance is wide and stable, his thighs making thirty-five-degree angles over deeply bent knees. His clenched left fist points straight out at the viewer, in line with his foreshortened arm while his right fist is positioned above his hip with the elbow bent back to draw power like a spring compressed. A bald eagle is photoshopped into the background, the feathers of its outstretched wings colored red, white, and blue with stars to form symmetrical American flags. A fantastical purple-black atmosphere surrounds the eagle and white lighting bolts in ombrés of turquoise to azure electrically discharge all around it.



Following my cousin's death, I decide to buy a plane ticket to Missouri to visit my parents, younger sister, and four nieces. On the first evening there, I'm pushing the two youngest girls on a swing set in my parents' back yard. Behind me is the hillside against which Dad occasionally shoots his father's police pistols. In the past he has asked if I want to try shooting, but out of an abundance of caution and general aversion to guns, I have always refused. My sister, however, takes him up on his offers.

As her two young daughters sit in swings and fight for my attention to push them harder or higher than each other, I ask them to tell me about their kindergarten and first-grade days at school. Distracting me and ambient in the background is the tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat of semi-automatic gunfire from a nearby shooting range echoing throughout the countryside valley.



**MY NEXT CAR WAS A
WRECKED, BROWN, 1986
NISSAN SENTRA**

IT IS HARD TO SEE in the photograph but Dad swears that my likeness is visibly cast in the windshield's laminated glass. After the accident the car was towed to a garage in the middle of the night. As he approaches it in the light of day, he sees what could have been my death mask and it drops him to his knees. Once the cascade of hormonal processes subside, he says a prayer of thanksgiving, he tells me later.

After hitting the tree at forty miles an hour, the first thing I say—right before vomiting from the concussion while exiting the car, blood flowing from my right eye—is “My dad is going to kill me.” A friend, who had worn a seatbelt, comes to my aid, takes off his shirt to compress the bleeding and yells, “He is not going to care about the car!”



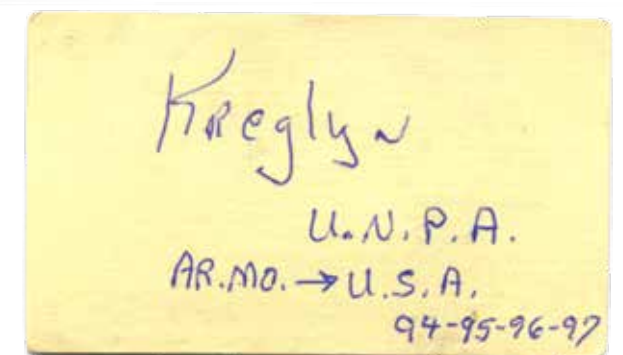
**MY NEXT CAR WAS A
1992 ISUZU TROOPER SUV**

IN COLLEGE, DAD HELPS ME buy a new used car that my roommate Nathan and I drive from our house outside Kansas City to around Nevada, Missouri where his parents are helping their friend, George, host a powwow. Beforehand we eat pot brownies and I down Mini Thins (aka trucker speed) with Sunkist and then drive out to the clearing in the woods for the gathering. The combination of weed, Ephedrine, and Red 40 on a humid summer evening places me squarely in a sling-back lawn chair outside the dancing circle for what seems like several mouth-breathing hours.



A middle-aged woman in a t-shirt and sandals introduces herself as Kreglyn or Little Wolf and purposefully sits in the chair right next to mine although many others are available. She is an artisan and often travels to powwows to sell her works. Pointing out the head dancers and the host drum singer, who started the songs and is now socializing in the circle beyond the seating area, but will come back periodically for different dances, she explains that there aren't traditional Northern Cherokee songs in the way we are experiencing the powwow tonight. Those dances were called stomps. In the gaps between the evening's visual and aural rhythms, I strain to listen and understand as Kreglyn fills in my perforated knowledge of the land and its people where I grew up.

For years I carry Little Wolf's card in my wallet as a reminder of her existence.





MY NEXT CAR WAS A 1998 FIAT PUNTO RENTED IN GERMANY

ANDREW, BEN, AND I RENT IT in Aachen then drive to Detmold, the village home of Ann Katrin Bicher, a German photographer and schoolmate of Andrew's on his year abroad. She goes with us the next morning to Berlin where her brother has a place, though he is often in the field as a kind of park ranger. He recently shot a wild boar that her parents cook and serve us with sage-seasoned pumpkin and a sauce the consistency of syrup comprising flavors of cinnamon, tomato, and bacon.

They open and liberally pour from bottles of sweet white wine. After dinner Ann Katrin suggests that



Andrew play an upright piano tucked away in a side room. Her father doesn't speak English but joyously sings every word to Bruce Springsteen's "Thunder Road" and Tom Waits' "Ol' '55," swaying as he does, a glass raised in one hand, while his other pats Andrew's shoulder in time with the music. Wistful, I note to memorize these songs' lyrics so I may one day entertain so effortlessly.

A few days later we go to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp outside Berlin where even the sound of feet crunching the pea gravel paths creates feelings of solemnity.

Afterward, by chance we come upon a countryside carnival where a ride emblazoned with a dozen US flags marks the first time I've seen it in several weeks. Ann Katrin makes the photo of us in front of it that I receive back home months later. It reminds me how strange it is that the flag is seemingly everywhere in the Midwest.

Coming up there, this carnival ride would likely be called the Scrambler, one that gyrates your car around a fixed center point while the whole thing whirls around like a demonic merry-go-round.

MY NEXT CAR WAS AN EMERALD GREEN, 1992 TOYOTA CAMRY MY PARENTS HAD DRIVEN 175,000 MILES

IT IS THE FIRST AND ONLY CAR Dad ever bought new. My parents gave it to me when I moved out of state for the first (and only) time.

It was Dad's sixteenth car, as documented in the small photo album that Mom made him. In the album is a drug store print, sleeved in chronological order, of every car he has owned. We look at it together, seated at their kitchen counter.

A crappy laser printout is as close as his memory and the internet can find to document his first car, of which there is no photo. He regrets the Confederate flag vanity plate and Dixie horn on the '64 Impala Supersport driven on his first dates with Mom.

"It was everywhere, we didn't know any better," he says.

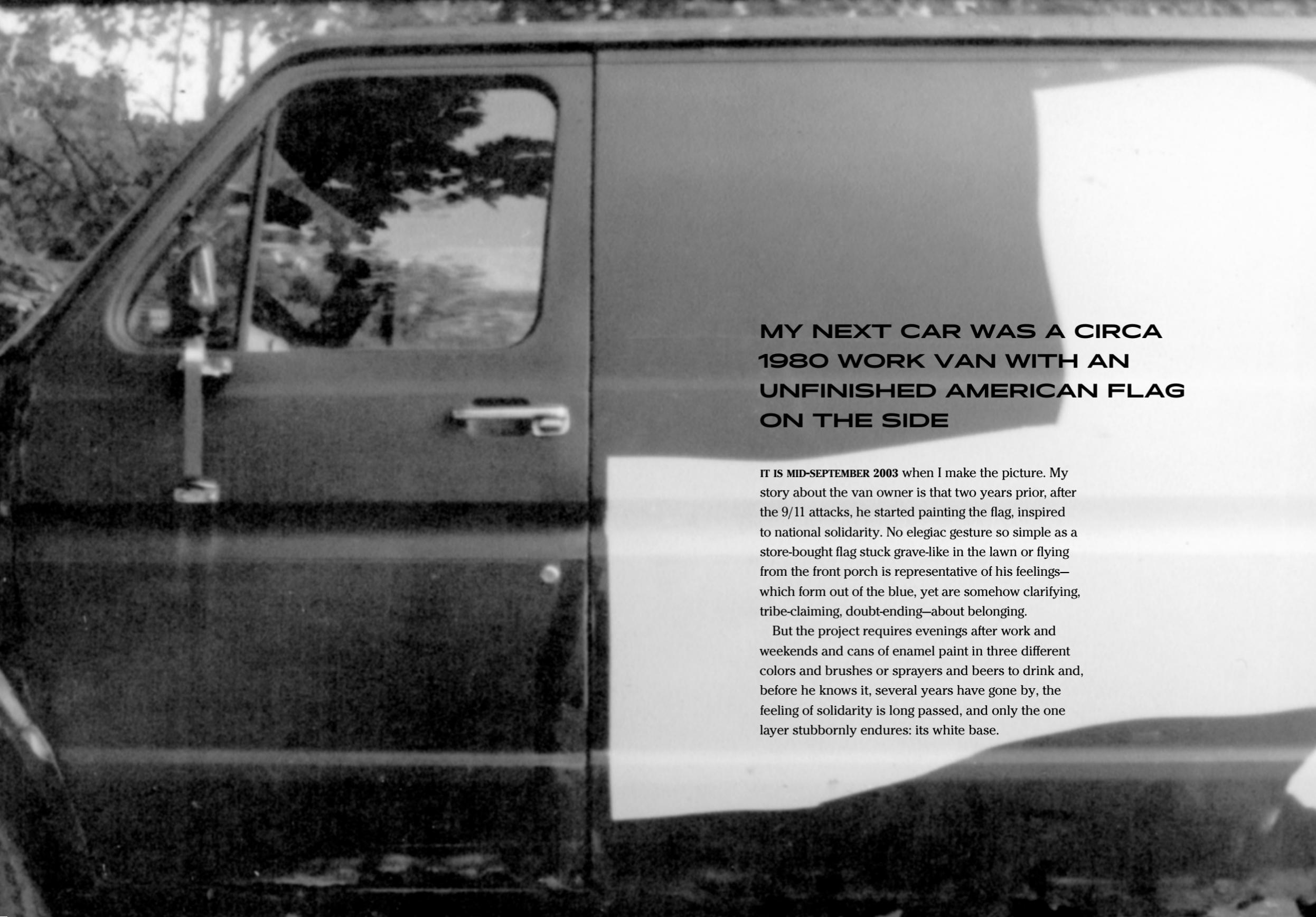
There is the oxidized green truck we took on Crusader camping trips where we church boys made pinewood derby cars and learned archery, whooping like a Western movie's Indians with the release of every nock firing an arrow missile from the bowstring.

There is the long white '86 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme he drove to pick up my friends and me from the mall on Friday nights. Dad slow-rolling up to the curb with his seat laid back and cap pulled down to mask his eyes, our town's HBCU radio station rattling the windows. My mortification and the mocking and yet uneasy laughter of my three friends, all Black, at Dad's performance, which he stopped once we neared their homes in neighborhoods where the men he mimicked slowly cruised.



In the album, car is time, a category of the world. Car is attitude, bought and sold and bought and traded in for a new time; new makes and models having long been exchanged for another. Yet the affective attitude of each still exists in us.

It is everywhere. We hardly know any better.



**MY NEXT CAR WAS A CIRCA
1980 WORK VAN WITH AN
UNFINISHED AMERICAN FLAG
ON THE SIDE**

IT IS MID-SEPTEMBER 2003 when I make the picture. My story about the van owner is that two years prior, after the 9/11 attacks, he started painting the flag, inspired to national solidarity. No elegiac gesture so simple as a store-bought flag stuck grave-like in the lawn or flying from the front porch is representative of his feelings—which form out of the blue, yet are somehow clarifying, tribe-claiming, doubt-ending—about belonging.

But the project requires evenings after work and weekends and cans of enamel paint in three different colors and brushes or sprayers and beers to drink and, before he knows it, several years have gone by, the feeling of solidarity is long passed, and only the one layer stubbornly endures: its white base.



MY NEXT CAR WAS A 2002 HYUNDAI ELANTRA

I AM ALMOST THIRTY YEARS OLD and it is the first car I buy completely on my own, though Dad is visiting me in Rochester, New York when I sign the loan papers.

It is the car I frequently take to book fairs with my best friend Kris, singing at top volume to the same few mix tapes and cds or iPod playlists, “Thunder Road” included.

Eventually, it is shared with my first-ever dog, Wallace, his greasy stains and dried slobber making the back seat unapproachable by anyone but him.

MY NEXT CAR WAS A 2004 HONDA CRV, WITH A CAR SEAT

THIS IS THE FIRST OF MY CARS you rode in, but won’t remember when you’re older. Once a week I took it from my work building, which you call the castle, north on Hudson Avenue through one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in Rochester, a city where over a third of children live in poverty—the third highest rate of any city in America.

Virtually everyone in the vicinity of Hudson is a person of color. People congregate on corners and unexpectedly spill off the sidewalk into the street in front of the House of Mercy shelter. Twenty five percent of people in Rochester don’t own a car compared to ten percent in the overall region. Cars on Hudson seem to dwell longer at lights and the rhythm of starting and stopping feels different than in the neighborhoods where I work and eat and drink and live. Examining how the driving in this neighborhood feels different makes me also consider why I don’t critically examine the other neighborhoods that I drive in. Physiologically, there are definite variants: a notable change in my heart and breath rates; the tightening of my grip on the wheel; more tension in my shoulders and thighs. Stereotypes enter my thoughts, seemingly from nowhere. Over time, through months of conscious effort, I learn that each racist thought and fear-filled sensation that arises must be recognized, acknowledged, investigated, and amended in order to chip away at their effects.

Weekly, I drove down Hudson because it connects to my then therapist’s office on an avenue in a wealthier suburb. When I wished to discuss the racist feelings I had while driving through this part of the city and the systemic racism that made and makes the neighborhood under-resourced, the therapist dismissed them, saying, “Take the highway around, that’s what I do.”



But avoiding half of the people here didn't shift my sense of our interdependence the way acknowledging them and my whiteness has, which I recognize I do in part to hopefully lessen the unjust attitude's effects on you.



I ASKED YOU TO MAKE THIS PICTURE of me leaning against my most recent car in the style of family snapshots that document people and their cars.

This one you might recall later. From its back seat, where you often sit amongst collected sticks and dried mud footprints, LEGO pieces, and the decomposing cores of fruits, you used to call for me to play “screen door slams,” your shorthand reference to the first line of “Thunder Road,” which I sang to you nearly every night for three years to get you to sleep. Now you’re more likely to call out “punk rock” and I know that to mean hardcore bands with Cookie Monster style vocals, because you find it hilarious, and their big energy makes you lift your leg and play it like an air guitar, because you know that is hilarious to me.

In this car, or being pushed by me on a swing, is where you wish to share what I know of your most complex feelings like concern over death; sadness about missing your grandparents, your cousins, and friends; and the loneliness you sometimes experience at school.

Rather than lying and looking at one another face-to-face the way your mom and you talk in bed most nights, we look out and share our mix of feelings into a blurry, moving distance.

DOMINANCE DIARIES

PAMPHLET
SERIES NO. 5

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Preacher's Biscuit Books

