

GEARS SLIPPING

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Forgive me. Behind the casket is a blue, white, and red flag, but I can't look at it. I can't look at anything, so I stare at the floor. I can feel his wife's gaze locked on me. Why are you here? Why am I here?

The cellphone in my father's pocket keeps buzzing. Sponsors, I guess, with good news.

My first accident came when I was nine years old. Despite being told the kart we'd rented slipped sometimes between second and third gear, my father insisted I race. "You can handle it," he said, strapping me in, "Be ready for it, and you'll react accordingly." But into the third turn the gear slipped and the engine went dead. Another driver plowed into my rear, and I skittered across the track into a wall of tires. My father hauled me out of the wreckage and asked, "Will you ever be ready?"

I wanted to say yes, but I didn't.

In the French racing world, we have this thing called, "the American solution." Picture: a hot young French Formula 1 racer out of Cannes, booming around hairpin curves like an oiled snake on meth, breaking junior circuit records as if they were icicles during spring thaw. He's got the looks: thin frame, smoldering eyes, wild up-all-night hair, and a young liver to handle the drinking the life requires. His connections are good: his father's side comes from a racer family, passing along the tradition through the generations. This was French racing legacy in action.

But if the connections don't connect, when the sponsors don't want to give in to a hard-luck case with a stained track record, you go to America. They have Formula 1 there too, they just call it, "Indy car."

I practice on a threadbare track on the outskirts of Indianapolis. My father barks in my ear radio, guiding my hands as I wrench the car into

turns – left, right, jab, dart, be quick, and hook. Some people ride the road. I fight it, careening into the last turn, a flash of white and red, exploding out of the bend to finish. I let up on the gas pedal, and feel a shudder at my right rear. A car is flipping above me, the driver looking down on me, but I blink and it vanishes; I almost sideswipe a guard rail, and my father rains down curses in my ear.

There was no need for him to come here. There are many coaches in America. There was no need except to fill the empty spaces on his shelf.

I don't realize the weather turned ugly until I step outside the parlor for a cigarette. I can barely get the damn thing lit in all the rain and wind, and when I do, I stand in a corner under the awning, my collar cinched around my face, my scarf wrapped around my neck so tight I hope it chokes me.

Footsteps behind me. "Hello." The mortician. "I am sorry for your loss."

I smile, but it comes out all wrong. He squints at me.

"You are a family member?" I shake my head. His shoulders slouch a little and his face darkens. "You are the other racer."

I look at the ground. He walks away. A few minutes later, a hand claps me on the shoulder. "Let's go," my father says, "We're done here. I don't know why you insisted on coming anyway."

That night, I dream of blood from a silver cup spilling over his body.

Tell people you're a race car driver and they will look incredulous for a moment, wanting to take you at your word but skeptical of the truth. How do you prove you're a race car driver while standing at a bar or sitting in a classroom learning English? You can't – not with words. So you prove it by action. Talk faster, think faster. Get the correct answer before the others do. Be charming; be racy with the girls. Order shots at the bar, dance to the music and look into her eyes when she dances too, touch her hips gently, fold your fingers at the small of her back, let her arms do the rest.

Take your time back at her place. Show her that tonight, she is the race, and the first few laps just establish the pace.

I've ignored my cellphone for a few hours and now there are many messages from my father, wondering where the hell I am. I want to tell him I'm still on that track in Cannes, but I don't. He only remembers me crossing the finish line, winning—not the other part: screaming.

Some things slip through. *Time, too much time*, my father mumbles in his sleep, passed out in the armchair, his gray hair thin and wispy like the TV static, the station long dead. My father, old, older than the dusty shelf above his head, in that cold, dark corner of his study: empty spaces for trophies. And mama's old pearls and perfume just aren't anywhere on these nights.

When you cross the finish line, there is a calm breeze that will drift across your face, and the tension you've felt for days will evaporate. You will be tempted to lift your foot from the gas pedal to coast into the next turn so you can enjoy feeling de-stressed. Resist this temptation, for if you don't, the racer behind you will collide with your rear tire, sending him end-over-end above you, the chassis passing close to your car's spoiler.

And you will shear the driver's head clean off.