

PASSAGES AND LOSSES

Dogs loved to chase Scoter McNally's car. There seemed to be no particular reason, its fenders didn't flap more than many in town, and other cars rattled louder (though perhaps not as musically) but there was always a pack of dogs, ears flopping, tongues flapping, joyously baying around Scoter's car. Perhaps it was the stately speed with which the car moved — fast enough but not too fast — and it had a way of swaying along the road that lent variety to what otherwise might have been a simple straight dash. But a case might also be made for the modest way the tires screeched as the car waddled around a corner.

Scoter's car could be seen wandering about town nearly every day, stopping here and there to drop a few flakes of rust or let its driver run errands. The car had been around as long as most people could remember, following the same path — always on the move, but never very spry. No one knew where it stopped for gas or where it went at night, but it would reappear every morning, a plume of smoke to the rear, engine knocking gently, and perhaps even a few discreet backfires to announce its presence. Often, it would be stopped at the Akron Diner, parked politely in the rear part of the lot, where the big trucks were, yielding the choicest spots to more substantial vehicles.

In summer, Scoter's car could be seen stopped at the lushest yards and gardens in town, waiting for a load of grass clippings and leaves to haul to the town dump. When the weather was hottest, the car's tired chrome seemed to fade, but it would always brighten as the day cooled. In the evenings, the car would be parked outside Miller's Bar & Grill, sitting squarely under the dim streetlight, which was on the telephone pole in the middle of the block. Its engine would creak and pop quietly as it cooled down. Sometimes it would be there very late and only leave long after dark, meandering a bit more than usual, its headlights flaring and dimming as the engine raced and slowed. Not many dogs were about at such times, but the faithful few knew that these dark and semi-private chases were the best of all.

In autumn, the car could be seen outside fading gardens, wreathed in smoke as leaves acridly burned at the curb before and behind it. Sometimes, if the weather was too dry and the law forbade burning, the car would make endless round trips to the town dump, its back seat and trunk filled with the colorfully flecked detritus of summer. A few leaves would always stay in the car until spring, but they were never as bright as they had been in the fall.

Winter was a bad time. Scoter's car would ice up in the bitter snow and plod through the spreading drifts, its cheerful summer backfires and rattles changed to coughs and shudders. On the worst days, the car would wait long hours at the Akron Diner where the curbs were hidden by gritty piles of shoveled and plowed snow. The car's green paint would be as frosted and faded as the used Christmas trees waiting by the curb for the trash man. Bits of leftover tinsel glittered and blew as the car passed, and they waved a forlorn salute as its rear wheels skidded and slid randomly on bald tires. Hardy shepherds and huskies would be out, breath steaming as they barked. But the barks sounded hollow and spiritless, muffled by snow and echoed by ice. Sometimes the weather was so bad no dogs would chase Scoter's car and the streets were empty then. Night fell so early that it seemed always dark outside Miller's Bar and Grill, and the streetlight was dimmer than ever, and the car was often hard to start, and the headlights were dimmer than ever, even when they flared as wheels suddenly spun on ice. But the car was around nearly every day, crunching through ice or sloshing through thaw, picking up a little more rust each year.

Scoter's car was least often seen in the early spring. The flat white sunlight then made its

green paint look like dead moss, and icy rains didn't wash it as much as drench it. Windshield wipers huffed and puffed, slowing to a stop as the car plodded up the hill coming into town and flapping frantically as it went down the hill on the other side. The dogs were out in force in the spring, barks trumpeting even in the rain. The car went especially slowly then, some dogs had aged over the winter and could no longer keep up, but wanted one last chase before winter night returned forever. And there were fat puppies that hadn't gotten the hang of it and would stumble almost under the wheels, jostled by boisterous elders. But by late spring, the car had picked up speed and began making the rounds of the lush lawns and gardens again. It often left Miller's Bar & Grill in the sunlight then, and the dogs were happy.

Seasons turned. The car's odometer creaked in its orbit, and things changed. The speed limit on the road into town was increased, and a lot of folks complained, but it stayed, and life seemed to move faster and the dogs couldn't keep up on the main highway any more. Some people began jogging and Scoter's car began carrying a power mower tied down in the trunk during the summer. The Akron Diner burned to the ground, and a McDonalds was built on the site. The dim streetlight outside Miller's Bar & Grill was replaced with one of the new bright orange kind, and Scoter's car looked as black as dried blood.

There were fewer dogs about and the car often had to drive slowly when it got caught in funeral processions. New people who moved in had pedigreed dogs they kept on leashes and had lawn tractors and snow blowers and raked their own leaves.

Miller's Bar & Grill changed its name to The Feathered Frog and began featuring comedy acts on weekends.

Scoter's car was found parked by the road outside of town one day in early spring. The left rear tire was flat, and it wouldn't start. The constable always meant to have it towed away, but he never got around to it, and the car just got rustier and the other tires went flat and its windows were broken.

No one pays attention to it any more except stray dogs that love to pee on the wheels.