205 Horsepower

He was eighteen when he met her, having driven six hours just to do so and barking at traffic all the while -- it was, after all, a good way to distract himself from all the worry in his head. He was in a vaguely familiar car (his mother’s smoke and trash filled early 2000’s Subaru), his old one sold for just five hundred bucks when electric gremlins (he assumed it was the alternator, but had no proof) made it a very unlikely roulette spin as to whether or not the car would start, driving through an even less vaguely-familiar city (he’d driven to Milwaukee’s airport twice before, but that was the extent of his familiarity with driving in that city). His dad could likely feel his nervousness, because at least once or twice, he said, “Michael, could you please stop bitching about traffic?”

Michael tried his best to do so.

It wasn’t long, though, before they were finally out of the faded-green, rusting-away Subaru. His nervousness hadn’t faded a bit, though. What if he wasn’t ready? What if he wasn’t good enough? He had the confidence of a college freshman, sure -- but he still had all of the anxiety he’d ever worn in his system: he was slouching, with a gaze darting around like a skittish cat in an unfamiliar house after being recently adopted. The fact that they’d arrived early -- they’d left early in case of bad traffic and were pleasantly surprised -- didn’t help calm him at all, it just gave Michael more time to stew in his thoughts.

Even as he saw her for the first time, he was still nervous: after all, she was beautiful, and he’d never driven manual transmission in his life, and he was scared if he’d be able to do it right. Even as he stared at the grey, metal-flake paint (he’s pretty sure he just heard his dad do a wolf whistle unsarcastically at the car) on the over-styled coupe that he’d fallen in love with from just pictures and video reviews online, he was nervous as to if he would be able to treat this car right.

The test drive definitely didn’t help. “You have to push in the clutch more, and let out the throttle slower.” The advice his dad was giving made perfect sense, and pragmatically, Michael *knew* the skills required to drive stick -- the problem lied in putting them into action. There’s a feeling to it, finding the friction point of the clutch and the sensation that happens as it starts to grab and the car starts to slide forward, that Michael was just struggling to get a grip on, and the thick hiking boots he was wearing didn’t help.

Surprisingly, it didn’t fetter him. They left that day from the dealership with that car, and he named her Elly -- a name he stole from a story he was writing at the time, as he’d done with his car before. He loved Elly almost more than he loved any of the people in his life: he loved the way her engine roared, even with just four cylinders and even with how muffled a modern car is. He loved the responsive steering, with just a twist of his wrist, he could be two lanes over in a moment and still feel in complete control. He loved how all of his friends reacted to all of the gadgets and gizmos and just how *nice* the car seemed, the murmurs of “wows” and “this is a nice car” always tempered with “but why only two doors?” or “why a stick shift? An automatic is faster and more fuel efficient”. He had answers: “I like the way it looks better, and a stick shift is just more fun to drive” and left it at that.

When he took her back up to college, his best friend up there loved that car almost as much as he did, it seemed. They drove around a fair bit, usually to Walmart and back, and Michael enjoyed having a little bit of company besides just that of Elly, to be not alone with just his own thoughts on the road. “I like hearing you sing,” she told him once in response to the songs that Michael was singing along with through Elly’s head unit.

But then she left him and Elly.

Then, too, did his grandmother, just a month later.

It was all happening too fast, and Michael felt out of control. Everything was bearing down on him -- his college classes, his job, the societal expectations of him, all of it -- and every day was a struggle to get through. He didn’t really have time to ever get on the road, to get back in control of the one aspect of his life that he’d loved most: Elly.

Spring break finally gave him the relief he needed, and he immediately spent six hours on the road, late at night, driving southbound. Deer proved no issue, not with Elly’s brakes, and the speed he was able to feel was thrilling. Not even the two hundred dollar speeding ticket dampened his spirits -- annoyed him a bit, sure -- but the speed that he was able to experience yet again, the control that he felt in the firm bucket seats that were still somehow more comfortable than the plusher seats in his old car, it brought a smile to his tired face even as he struggled silently with Milwaukee traffic once more.

She gave him control. The six speed transmission, with gears rowed through with the precision of a well-made rifle bolt, the well-tuned electric steering, the roar of the turbocharged engine. It provided a breeding ground for where he could think, he could be alone -- but in control of that loneliness. An escape to the stir crazy feelings of lingering in one place for too long, with the teasing temptations of every curve in the road to just go a little bit faster, to push a little bit further, to find the limit.

Even as he struggled when he looked in the mirror, realizing he didn’t want to be like him anymore, Elly didn’t care. When the girl who came back from a hospital trip one day cracked Elly’s bumper a few months later, she didn’t care.

She had just a few desires: to see new places, to feel in control, to go fast and to go far.

And Elly felt the exact same way, even with her scratched paint from the pebbles she knew she’d face on the road.