

A CONTEST OF SPEED

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A small two-cycle engine whines and crackles, adding another high pitch note to the surrounding noise and excitement on the dusty go-cart track. But the thirteen year-old Ramon Bianco, born and raised in Detroit's working class, is oblivious. He's accustomed to noise, greasy dirt, and confusion. For him, all that matters is the technical perfection of his largely hand built go-cart: all he hears is the complaining of the engine as he revs it ever higher, and to Ray, the sound is music.

Home built motors and ramshackle go-cart bodies make way for massive Chevy fuel injected engines and acres of gleaming, hand-rubbed chrome as Ray grows up, but the boy's passion for racing—for the long grind of preparation and the short burst of elation once behind the wheel and poised for action— remains constant. By his last year of high school, Ray and his treasured “street machine” —a carefully customized Chevy Chevelle — are regulars on Detroit's drag strips, Woodward, and Gratiot Avenues. The other racers watch Ray warily, with caution and a grudging respect. Back home, Ray has come under more scrutiny.

Though racing has occupied most of Ray's attention, it hasn't claimed all, and as the summer progresses Ray's girlfriend of two years— Mary, from across the tracks with one year of high school left— is increasingly anxious. After an important race that ends badly — the Chevelle's engine blows and Ray loses a bet he can ill afford — the couple has a tense confrontation. Toying with the idea of leaving the car where it lies, Ray speaks again of going to college upstate. Using all the tools at her disposal, Mary tries to dissuade him. When that fails she simply tries to distract him.

Mary doesn't know why the prospect of Ray leaving bothers her so much, and she knows she shouldn't overreact — Ray always divided his time between his car and her, and his grades are nothing special — but she feels her clear picture of the future is fading. They sit silently, side by side, gazing at the few summer stars bright enough to pierce the industrial smog. Mary's vision of marriage, a house, a family, is uncertain, unstable; Ray's mind is clouded and troubled. Should he get a job or consider going to college. His vision of the future has just begun to form.

The summer ends, and Ray is notified at nearly the last moment that his application to college has been accepted and that he's to report within forty-eight hours. Ray's departure is made easier by its hastiness; nothing is resolved when Ray and Mary say their good-byes and promise to stay in touch. The family and neighborhood celebrate the affair and give Ray a send-off party. Although the family is excited as Ray is the first to attempt college, his mother is proud but privately sad as Ray makes the long trip from Detroit to Michigan's remote Upper Peninsula. As the gathering spreads from front yard to front yard, the entire neighborhood is part of an extended family. Ray is joined by Lloyd Johnson, going to college on an athletic scholarship; in his usual freewheeling manner, Lloyd has neglected to make travel plans even though he was accepted in the spring. And there is one more companion on the journey: Ray has his Chevelle in tow, although he knows freshmen are forbidden to have cars. Ray doesn't worry much about this infraction of the rules — since the car doesn't run, he rationalizes to himself, it isn't really a car, is it? — but his rebellion will have consequences sooner than he suspects.

Ray and Lloyd enjoy the scenic sojourn across Michigan and soak up the quiet and the brilliant color of the turning leaves as they drive north. The peacefulness ends abruptly: when the friends report to their prearranged dorm, they're startled to discover a third roommate in the two-bedroom suite. They're nowhere near as startled or alarmed as the mystery roommate. Due to a computer scheduling error, the third roommate is a young woman, Jennifer Ryan. Bright, attractive, and demonstrably independent — Jen has broken with tradition and chosen engineering as a major; she's also recently broken off with her long-time boyfriend and is nursing a mild case of heartbreak. Jen accepts the realities of the situation, at least until something else can be arranged.

College life begins in earnest. Constantly irritated by the boys' slovenly habits, and even more by their "so what" attitude, Jen works on getting a different roommate, and eventually finds one with Ellen. After a blow-up, things smoothed out between the trio, and when Jen moves in with Ellen, they remain friends. The two girls exchange confidences and Ellen finds Ray "cute," which starts Jen thinking: soon she recalls his sensitivity and understanding — and gradually, ex-roomies Ray and Jen become more than just friends.

Besides the stimulation and excitement they find through each other, Ray and Jen are excited by the unorthodox but extremely affective teaching techniques of Jim Mallory, a last-minute addition to the college English Department. Not much older than his students, Mallory has a spontaneity and immediacy that many others in the English Department envy. But Mallory's prowess as a teacher is of little interest to Dr. Frank Kepler, the Department Chairman: foremost on his list of faculty attributes is willingness to conform to a special Ph.D. program set up for new M.A. instructors. Mallory is disinterested. He's worked long and hard to secure his Master's degree, and though enjoys teaching and needs a job, he is determined to try and make it as a writer. Mallory's refusal to toe the line arouses Dr. Kepler ire, and Mallory is secretly marked for dismissal. A cloud settles over the English Department; when the storm breaks it brings surprises to everyone.

Ray finds himself drawn into the stormy politics of the English Department by accident. He's been storing and working on his car in a garage owned by Dr. Jonathan Boyd, an elder, long-tenured English professor with a battery of personal problems but a strong sense of ethics. Dr. Kepler is aware of Mallory's personal relationship with Ray and Jen and finds out about Ray's illegal car. He sends campus security to check on the car, hoping to harass Ray and Mallory, but Dr. Blye delivers a clever cloak, foiling Kepler's plans.

Though the car incident is trivial, it prompts Dr. Boyd to take a stand when Kepler reveals his plan to fire Mallory. At first it seems Kepler will have his way: Mallory is abruptly given notice, and is shaken by the extent of Kepler's plotting and hatred. But the tide turns when Mallory is voted "Teacher of the Year." Fearful of bad publicity that might affect the perception of the college, reputation, and government funding, the college administration pressures Kepler to bring Mallory back into the fold. Mallory is offered his job back, but after a taste of academic politics, he isn't sure whether to accept or not.

While Mallory has been grappling with one set of decisions, his student and friend, Ray, has been struggling with another. He's repaired the Chevelle with extra parts sent by his father, and has run a race with the local speed demons. In this small town and rural area he's not one of the regulars, and though he easily wins the race, the locals refuse to pay off on a bet and turn hostile. This violation of the unwritten racing code disturbs Ray, but he doesn't dwell on it. He's more interested in his classes ... and his deepening relationship with Jen. A wrench is thrown into that, too, when Mary makes an unannounced appearance. Ray is forced to admit to himself that he's outgrown Mary and that he wants something more than the typical domestic routines of life on the lower west side of Detroit.

Still, Ray has feelings for Mary, and she plays on those until he agrees to spend one last night with her. Their lovemaking in a motel on the outskirts of campus is touched with sadness; each knows it is their last time together. What Ray doesn't know is that Ellen, still smarting over Ray's failure to notice her and his choice of Jen, works at the motel. Ellen sees Ray with Mary and reports the scene to Jen. Feeling betrayed, furious and unforgiving, Jen breaks off with Ray. Ray finds out why and tries to explain to Jen. But she won't see him, won't listen, won't read his letters or take his calls. Time passes and Ray grows more despondent and in a rare moment he calls home and asks his mother for advice. She tells him to be honest and follow his heart. After visiting the local Catholic church alone for some soul searching, he forces himself on Jen while she's taking a solitary walk. She listens, reluctantly at first, afraid of more pain. But her cool logic gives way to her buried emotions; she and Ray take the big step and in moments of passion, admit their love for each other.

As the school year draws to a close, students and faculty prepare to depart. Most make their plans casually, knowing they'll return in the fall. Some are more uncertain. Jim Mallory makes his plans to leave for Europe; for his friend it's just a jaunt, but for Mallory it takes on the plan of deliberately refusing to inform the English department of his intentions. Only he knows if he'll return or not.

After heated debates and against their families' wishes, Ray and Jen have decided to travel aimlessly, maybe across Michigan, maybe across the country. They plan to return to college that next fall and continue their educations, but what's important to them is their plan to be together for the summer. They say their good-byes to their friends and head out of town in the Chevelle, pointing out the sites of good and bad times, cheerful but thoughtful: these battered campus bars and burger joints will be part of them forever. As they pull up to the last stoplight in town, a car full of hooting locals slides up next to them and begins to rev its engine tauntingly. Ray recognizes the racer he'd beaten last fall and reads the hostility in the driver's eyes, mixed with an unspoken challenge.

Jen wants only to get the trip underway, and pleads with Ray to ignore the car and the temptation to race one last time. But Ray reacts out of old habits mixed with instinct and starts to give his accelerator short jabs. The cars brace themselves as the engines roar and smoke fills the rear wheel wells. Both cars accelerate wildly, fishtailing across the mid line of the highway as exhaust pours from chrome pipes. It's a very close race for the first hundred feet, but as Ray speed shifts into second gear the Chevelle begins to pull ahead and by third gear, Ray blows the Mustang away by five car lengths and turns to Jen and never even looks back.