Internal Combustion

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EDGE. Vol. 9 (2015): 89-91.

My dad spent his earliest years hanging out at an auto repair shop next to his family's apartment on Lenhossek utca in Budapest. A stray, dark-haired, wiry seven-year-old, he watched the men work on cars. They changed oil, fixed transmissions, held cigarettes with free hands while peering under hoods.

My dad's Jewish father hid in that apartment next door, while Nazis roamed the city streets. But despite the heavy thunk of boots in the streets, despite the air raid sirens, despite the bombs falling and the gunshots ricocheting against the grand nineteenth-century buildings of the city – despite everything, cars needed to be fixed. And my dad watched, waited, learned. A skinny boy, barely reaching up to the edge of the shiny cars in the garage. A boy eager to figure things out, to see what made things go.

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In the photo, my dad's on a 1949 Indian Scout. The tank is flat black, and the bike has three headlights, parallel twin cylinders, studded leather saddlebags, skinny pipes, a crash bar, a bicycle horn attached to the handlebars. The chrome looks dingy, slightly blackened, not shined up. The motorcycle might have come out of a barn where it had sat for a few years, a

farmer's youthful transgression parked in the hay when marriage and children and farm work pressed in, sold to the first teenager to come along with a few fresh bills.

My dad is skinny, with dark slicked-back hair, and strangely rosy, colorized cheeks. He's sitting on the bike on the thin, cowfield grass, wearing pointy leather dress shoes, his feet up on the pegs. He's wearing a two-tone lightweight brown jacket and stiff dark jeans rolled up at the bottom. It's a muddy Alabama field, with willows in the background just leafing out on a chilly early spring day. In the distance a faint ridge rises and falls below a pale blue-white sky.

This is my dad assimilating, becoming a skinny Jewish Hungarian James Dean. This is my dad learning what it meant to be a man. And this is my dad looking vulnerable -- thin, uncertain, overdressed, without the money to buy a real leather jacket or gloves.

His mother was proud of him and his motorcycle, and he pulled the bike out onto the field so she could snap the shot. She sent the film to a photography shop where they touched it up, colorized his face, made the whole scene prettier than it had been for real.

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Internal combustion engines have four stages: drawing in a mixture of air and fuel, compressing it, igniting it, and releasing exhaust.

Intake, compression, ignition, exhaust.

At the heart of this process lies combustion, which creates movement. Combustion released the force stored in the fuel, creating a controlled explosion that propels a vehicle into the future.

It's a process of pressure and explosion, change and transfiguration.

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My parents bought sixty acres in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains in 1971. They bought an old green Caterpillar tractor and hauled it up to the property. My dad greased its gears, brought it back to life, and used it to carve out a sandy road and a building spot. Land doesn't start out livable. It needs to be cleaned, prepared, flattened, smoothed, shaped, contoured. The tractor gave my father the power to create our space. It got things started.

A few years into the project, though, my father lost it. He started drinking on weekends, fighting horrors only he could remember, remnants of the Holocaust still raging in his neurons. One day, he brought the loud, rumbling Caterpillar to life. While my sister and I cowered on the porch, he called out to my mom. He wanted to give her a ride in the bucket. She looked at him exasperatedly but climbed in. He pulled the levers to lift her up, high. At first it was a game, but then it wasn't.

"Stop, Stanley," she called, "Let me down." He lowered the metal bucket to the ground, but just as it touched the sandy soil of the driveway, he lifted her up, again. High, higher, higher.

"Stanley," she screamed. "That's enough."

He didn't let her out, not at first. He laughed. He kept laughing.

"Let me down!" she shouted. I could see her up there, leaning against the rusty, dirty metal of the bucket, trying not to fall out. After long seconds, my dad pushed some levers, and the metal bucket screeched to the ground. She climbed out, looking back at him with hot, bewildered anger.

My father's laughter rose above the gristly roar of the machine.

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My kids and I visited my parents' graves in the desert. I wandered through the rows, trying to remember where we'd stood when first my mom, and then my dad seven years later, were buried. Everything seemed different now, turned around. When I finally found them, I left a few small pieces of quartz and obsidian I'd picked up in the mountains that morning.

But then I saw my son had something in his hand – a little black wheel from a toy car.

"I found it back there," he said, pointing behind him at the cemetery grass. "Grandpa always liked cars. Maybe he'd like this."

My son never saw his grandpa's drunken rages. He didn't know his grandpa's frightening instability. He wasn't yet alive that day with the tractor. He knew of the Holocaust only as an abstract concept. He just remembered grandpa liked cars and trucks, planes and motorcycles. Machines that roared to life, burned fuel, clanked into gear, and finally, despite inertia and all the other forces working against them, moved forward.

And so my son placed the little wheel on my dad's grave, a token of what he knew, of what he understood, of what made the most sense to remember.