

Lars Stannard

Stopping Slamming Standing Crashing
My Kingdom for a Horse(less Carriage)!

It's hard not having a car when the closest town to you is a two-and-a-half-hour walk from the end of your driveway. Sure, taking the bus is always an option, but the stop is at the megachurch two miles away, and it only comes once every other day. Once I got the job at Revé ("French", *supposed to be the noun rêve* but uses the incorrect accent, meaning 'to dream'), I had no way to get there. Being downtown, it would've taken me three hours to walk one way.

I entered my barn. It served as a giant shed which housed a museum of my entire extended family's earthly belongings. The magic MacGuffin to every problem could be found in the barn if you searched long and hard enough, as long as you didn't get too much dust caked in your lungs. Surely enough, there was a car in there — a full-sized one, not just one of my dad's old Hotwheels.

The C.I.B.

I am Elijah, and this is my four-wheel-drive flaming chariot to heaven.

The CIB, or, more lovingly, the Cast Iron Bastard was a 1997 Mercedes ML 320 used by my Grandparents to do farmwork (American, verb, meaning loading a bunch of shit into something, hauling it elsewhere, and unloading it). It laid near-desolate underneath a tomb of several layers of tarps.

The CIB was not a nice car by any means, despite having a luxury branding. It was, however, voted to be the 1998 North American Truck of the Year, which was impressive considering it isn't a pickup.

Imagine a minivan, but more rectangular and no sliding doors. The CIB was black, grey, and brown if you counted the rust spots towards the colour. One of the seatbelts didn't buckle, the cassette player was bust, the gear shifter stuck, the back wiper wouldn't move, but most importantly: *it drove and it stopped.*

That, and I could shoot out a stream of wiper fluid out of my back window onto whoever was driving behind me.

The CIB shuttled me safely from school, work, home, and everywhere in-between. I was the captain of this perfect vessel — God and the machine free to do near anything as long as I obeyed traffic laws. Driving became a hobby for me as walking or hiking does. I would run all the errands in my family because it gave me an excuse to drive into town.

A car means mobility in North America. The major Michigan car manufacturers gutted our transport systems after decades of lobbying at every government level. Minneapolis and St. Paul once had one of the largest, best-functioning, and most expansive tram networks on the continent. In the 1930s and 40s, I would've been able to take a tram from where the Megachurch now stands and go into Stillwater for school and my job, Bayport for band practice, then into Minneapolis for a day out, down Lake St. to see my family, and everywhere in-between. I could've even stopped at the state prison outside of Stillwater to see how Gavin and Connor were getting on.

All the tracks were paved over by roads. Occasionally a pothole would form over one of the buried tracks, and it will jostle your car like mad. I drove over the old tram line every day when I went into work.

When I was home from college for winter or summer break, I was reunited with my bartending job at Revé and the CIB. I was on my way home after a shift in January 2017, speeding down MN-36 desperate to get home after a 12-hour shift, flurries whizzing past my windshield light I was going into warp drive. I was approaching the stoplight at the intersection of the Walmart and the long-abandoned Herbergers.

Red light means stop.

Brain says: Okay, time to stop.

All the cars came to a slow and steady halt, despite the snow.

Except for mine.

Brain says: Okay, *time to stop!*

My foot was on the brakes, so I kept pushing it further and further down — why wasn't this thing stopping? The brake pedal was on the floor, the red taillights of the sedans in front of me were getting closer and closer. I punched the red button to put my hazards on.

Brain says: *OKAY! Time to stop!!*

I wasn't sliding on the snow; the wheels were still spinning.

I was slamming, swearing, blaspheming, praying, and then I swerved.

Into the lefthand turn lane, barreling through the red stoplight, everyone honking at me as my runaway chariot thundered into the intersection. The oncoming traffic was bewildered as I was nearly t-boned on both sides, some dude I knew from high school sliding on the fresh snow as he tried to avoid me.

Brain says: *Sorrysorrysorrysorry!msosorrysorrysorry sorry!*

My hands choked the steering wheel tighter than I've ever held onto anything.

Brain says: Remember, don't have your thumbs wrapped around the wheel if the airbag goes off — unless you want to break both your thumbs.

Brain also says: why are you remembering this *now*?

The speedometer started to slow as the CIB lost its steam and my lead foot from the accelerator. I went underneath the Stillwater Boulevard overpass, speeding out into the darkness. The cars I was once behind were now approaching on me, and then they could be in the same position I was in a moment ago. I was still going too fast to go into the ditch, and my brake pedal was nearly through the floor. The headlights were getting brighter in my rearview, and the horns were honking again.

I turned into the snowbank guarding the centre strip of lawn in the middle of the highway. Dirty snow exploded over my windshield as I took out the protective fence and went plummeting downhill. I threw my hands off, letting Jesus take the wheel of my chariot, screaming, and the CIB spun around probably as much as my wheels did.

But I didn't flip.

I came to a sliding stop nearly a half-mile from where I entered the ditch. Exhaling the heftiest sigh I could muster, I made sure that I hadn't entered the Kingdom of Heaven. I watched the lines of lights pass by me on both sides as everyone else made their way to wherever. The snow was drifting gently down, although it had picked up a bit.

Brain says: Now what?

Brain also says: Eat that jar of peanut butter you have stored in the back for when you're stranded like this!

Okay.

I clambered into the backseat, and then into the trunk, put on my emergency snow boots (American, noun, meaning boots you keep in your car all year *just in case*) and began devouring my jar of emergency peanut butter with my hands. I called up my friend Charlie, asking if he could pull me out of the ditch. When he arrived, I was still hunkered in my trunk, peanut butter all over my beard. I took some back roads home, driving the CIB on the shoulder with my hazards on hardly going fifteen miles per hour.

When I pulled up the driveway to the farm, I didn't park in the barn, like I usually would. I pulled around back, nearly taking out another fence when I couldn't stop and drove up to where the old pole barn used to be. It had stopped snowing by the time I put the CIB in park, and I sat a moment watching the snowy fields and the stars that were just poking out.

I switched the car off, tying my boots before finally stepping out, quite literally putting my first car to pasture.