Hot Box

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Ron followed the same routine after work each night. He always went to the batting cages to hit some balls and then to Larry's Bar to drink and watch T.V. Tonight was no different. Ron carried his bat into the 90-mph cage, dropped two quarters into the coin slot, and waited at the plate for the first pitch. The ball screamed towards the plate. He waited on it until he could sense the direction in which the ball's seams were spinning. Ron rocked his weight away from the ball and calculated the ball's break before his entire body exploded forward. His level bat, at the end of his fully extended arms, sent the ball cruising for a hundred and fifty feet until the batting cage's net knocked the ball out of the air. He wished he could see how far the ball would go in a stadium, a stadium with no nets like the ones at the batting cages, but he knew he wouldn't get that chance again.

He left his cage, walked into the parking lot, and put his key into one of the few things he liked about his life, his 1974 GTO. His car looked like the one the Dukes of Hazzard used to drive, except it didn't have the flag of a loser painted across its hood. Ron pampered the GTO. He took better care of the car than himself. He fed it the best gasoline and oil, always let it warm up for a few minutes after he started it, and he hand-washed it at least once a week, twice a week in the winter. He loved to hear the engine start because each piston fired in beat. And when he drove
down the street the engine hummed. His car didn’t roar or rip; he wasn’t like those yuppies who cut holes in their car’s mufflers. As far as Ron was concerned his engine broadcast an ideal tone.

It was dark when Ron pulled the GTO in front of the alley that led to Larry’s. He parked the GTO between a Ford Taurus resting on cinderblocks and a brand new Porsche. The Ford Taurus had been there the night before, but now it was missing its tires. The Porsche was in perfect condition, and its dark paint reflected the cigarette butts and empty bottles that littered the pavement. Ron figured that this had to be Kurt Mason’s car. Kurt was the only person that possessed a desire to visit this neighborhood who had enough money to buy a Porsche. Ron looked down the street. Most shopkeepers had already drawn their steel curtains shut. An image of himself keying the Porsche flashed through his mind, but that wasn’t right, even if he did hate Kurt.

Ron suddenly remembered he was going to Larry’s and looked up and down the street again. He had not seen anybody on the corner when he drove up, but Jones was now sitting at the corner on an upside-down milk crate. Jones’s palms were resting on the top of his white cane. Out-of-style sunglasses covered his eyes. A Styrofoam cup half full of dollar bills and change sat between Jones’s feet. Ron yanked the nickels and dimes out of his pocket—coins that wouldn’t make the batting cages work—and started to take quiet steps towards Jones.

“How’z you feelin’ tonight, Ron?” Jones said, turning his head in the direction of Ron’s feet.

“Jones, you sure you’re blind?” Ron answered back, “cause every night I see you here I try and sneak up on you and every night you know it’s me? How come?”

Jones turned his head towards Ron and said, “’Cause of your car, there ain’t no car that sounds like that no where.”

“I can understand you hearin’ my car, but how do you know I’m walkin’ towards you?”

“Because I can hear your feet drag when you pick ’em up and put ’em down. You got a limp in your legs, not just one leg, but both your legs,” Jones said. He sat very still.

“That makes sense,” Ron admitted as he dropped nickels and dimes in the cup.

“You still bathin’ in hot water?” Jones asked. “You remember how I told you to stay away from hot water? It’s dirty and bad for the heart.”
“Yes Jones, I remember,” Ron said as he turned to walk down the alley. Jones always had strange advice and Ron wanted to get to Larry’s.

“Ron,” Jones called out, “I heard the strangest soundin’ car pull up a little bit go, you see any fancy lookin’ cars parked on the street?”

“No.”

“Why does everyone think they can lie to me just ‘cause I’m blind? I bet I can name every car parked on this block. The Taurus hasn’t moved in days. Now I ain’t heard the fancy car pull away yet, it’s still here, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s a Porsche.”

“Sound to me like you don’t like the Porsche, how come?”

“Cause I don’t like the person who drives it. He only comes here this time of year after the season has ended.”

“That car must really be somethin’,” Jones replied, still seated on the milk crate.

“Hummmm,” Ron spoke through tight lips. He wanted to talk about anything else, and Jones correctly interpreted Ron’s lack of enthusiasm about the car. Besides, Jones had wanted to talk with Ron about a particular topic for a few days now.

“You goin’ to drive in the Harvest Fair’s demolition derby again this year?” Jones asked.

“Of course,” Ron answered, but Jones was still talking.

“Now every night since I been here, whenever you come, you always help me out with a little spare change, but tonight I’m a goin’ to return the favor and help you out some.”

“What do you mean?” Ron said with a ‘here we go again’ tone to his voice. “Last week you told me to stop using hot water, wash my face with strawberry shampoo, and drink vinegar before I go to bed. Where do you come up with this stuff, Jones?”

“Maybe you ought to think about sittin’ this year’s derby out. Don’t leave base with the ball in the infield, don’t get caught in a pickle. It don’t feel right. That derby, it’s like a livin’ person and that person is holding your eyes in his hands, and them eyes are meltin’ like ice cream in the sun.”

“Yeah, I, uh, know what you mean.” Ron moved towards the alley.

“Hey, ain’t nobody ever listen to me, but this would be a good time for you to start.” Jones was angry, “Ain’t nobody listen to me just ‘cause I can’t see, but let me tell you somethin’, a lot a things I see better than you.”

With that Jones scooped up the cup, kicked the crate into the air, caught
it with his hand, and bolted down the street behind his probing white cane. "I warned you, mind the pickle and stay out of the derby." Jones disappeared around the corner, but Ron could still hear his cane slapping the sidewalk.

Ron thought about passing on Larry's tonight because he knew Kurt would be there. "He hates me as much as I hate him. He'll probably leave when he sees me anyway," Ron thought as he entered the bar. Ron walked through the door and half a dozen familiar faces turned to look at him including Kurt Mason's.

"Yo, Hop-along," Kurt said stupidly, "pull up a chair and join us."

"Sounds like you're still sore I broke up your no-hitter," Ron said calmly as he sat down and reached for the bottle Larry knew to put in front of him.

"You mean the no-hitter I had going in the state high school championship?" Kurt laughed. "Hop-along, that was ten years ago and you think I'm sore about that? I'm in the majors now. How are things at the tire factory? That game—"

Ron interrupted him, "Pretend you don't care if it makes you feel better about yourself, but if you're goin' to make us all listen to your explanation of the whole thing then you're going to have to buy us a round."

Kurt glanced around at the other men in the bar and nodded to Larry. The bartender dropped six more bottles on the bar. Kurt only came back to visit his home town during the off-season, and all of his visits had a few things in common—some free beer, Kurt and Ron both presenting their side of the 1992 Michigan High School 3-A baseball championship, and Kurt and Ron cursing at each other shortly before physically assaulting one another. In the minds of the other men at the bar, it was a shame Kurt only visited once a year.

After Larry distributed the beer, Kurt began to talk again. "That game is what made us what we are. We both knew that there was a major league scout there ready to sign one player. I pitched nine perfect innings, in fact, so perfect I was afraid the scout might think that the batters I was pitching to were no good. You got that hit off me because . . . ."

Ron cut Kurt's sentence short, "I got that hit off you because you were trying to show off. You were trying to throw that fancy knuckleball of yours and it hung over the plate."

"Look Hop-along, any way you want to look at it," Kurt's words cut through the alcohol in his breath as he spoke, "all you did by getting a hit off me was make me look like I was pitching to guys that could hit.
You made me legitimate. The scout offered me the contract; I played half a season of triple-A and got called up to the Bigs. He signed you to play single-A ball, paid you peanuts, and you blew out both of your knees sliding into a fence after a fly-ball.” Ron sat silent as he stared into the giant jar of pickles marinating among jalapeño peppers that was always on the bar. With his eyes fixed on the pickles, his mind began to replay the day and events that ended his baseball career. Kurt was still shooting his mouth off, “Fate makes some men great and other men just live to make the great men look good. So I guess you could say I’m sore about the no-hitter, but you only went one for three that day. All that one hit did was make me look good.” The other men in the bar looked at the men anxiously, the room was tense and a fight seemed inevitable.

“Well, we’re honored to drink in the presence of the major league hotshot,” Ron said gripping the jar of pickles and peppers in front of him. “Give our ears a break and let’s see you down one of these peppers,” Ron said sliding the jar down the bar. Kurt opened the jar, grabbed a dark red pepper and bit down on it. He dropped the bare stem on the bar and slid the jar back. Ron caught the jar with his hand, grabbed a tiny orange-red pepper, put it in his mouth and started to chew. He felt the oil spill from the pepper onto his tongue. The liquid floated around in his mouth. The juice stung every pore on his tongue. He believed hot vapors were escaping out of his ears. His tongue and the inside of his cheeks felt raw, as if someone had placed a burning coal in his mouth. He looked at Kurt, his face was turning red but he hadn’t reached for his drink yet.

Ron, instead of reaching for his drink, slid the jar back to Kurt, who placed another pepper in his mouth and sent the jar gliding back. The other men taunted them. They had hoped for a fight, but the pepper eating was interesting. Ron started to chew another pepper, this one bright green. Terrific pain filled his entire mouth and throat. Snot ran cool out of his nose and over his lips. His eyes wanted to fill with tears, but he fought them back and hurled the jar down the bar back at Kurt, who put another pepper in his mouth and sent the jar back. The other men in the bar erupted in laughter and backslapping, and Larry regretted that there was only one pepper still floating among the pickles.

Ron picked up the round pepper near the top of the jar and threw it in his mouth. Both men’s faces turned purple-red and tears poured down their faces and skipped off their chins. Ron wiped the salty tears and sticky snot from his face and slapped the bar with his other hand. Kurt stretched
out his hand like he was reaching for his beer, but hit the bar with his fist in agony. The men in the bar began to guess who would be the first to take a drink. Ron swore his eyes were melting, he could barely see. He strained to look through his teary eyes to see if Kurt had taken a drink. Both men could feel the peppers' acid searing the soft tissue behind their cheeks and both men desperately wanted to dilute the pepper juice in their mouths with beer. Everyone in the bar knew Ron and Kurt were suffering, even though both men tried to convince the other that they felt nothing. Neither man wanted to be the first to drink. Ron hoped to think of something insulting to say to Kurt, and the hotness in his mouth helped him think fast. “You know, Kurt, whenever I see you in town, I always know it’s the first of October, you sure hurry home fast.”

“Yeah, whatever, Hop-along. I didn’t want to miss the derby,” Kurt said as he rolled his eyes.

“You mean watch me win the derby,” Ron rebutted.

“Look, genius, I didn’t say I was going to watch the derby. I’m gonna drive in it this year. I already got myself an old Caddy that’ll knock the engine block out of whatever you dug up to drive.”

The other men in the bar turned their heads towards Ron to see how he would react. The renewed slander-filled dialogue, in the shadow of the pepper eating, once again had the men hopeful that they would see Ron and Kurt fight.

“If you get into the demolition derby I’ll mess you up,” Ron answered. The men, ready to witness unlawful physical violence, looked longingly at Kurt.

“Well you sound pretty certain about that, Hop-along, why don’t we make a little bet on it. As long as you’ve made enough money at the factory to keep the repo-man away from that GTO you drive then we can make that the prize. If I win, then I win the car, what do you say, Hop-along?” Kurt asked almost reaching for his beer.

“Sounds all right, but when I win, I want your Porsche.” As Ron said ‘Porsche’ Kurt’s face tightened. Ron could tell that Kurt hadn’t planned on including his Porsche in the bet, but Kurt couldn’t back out now.

“You got yourself a deal, Hop-along,” and with those words Kurt took his beer off the bar and walked towards the door.

The next morning was Friday, two days before the derby. It was time to prepare his car. Ron called into work sick and walked onto his front lawn.
to inspect his would-be derby car parked next to the GTO. This year’s derby car was a 1975 Ford station wagon. The engine delivered power to only one of the car’s tires, the radiator was damaged, and it had trouble starting. It was not the ideal derby car. The old woman had sold it to him for 50 dollars just to rid her garage of the old clunker. Kurt’s Cadillac would be in much better shape. Ron kicked the station wagon’s passenger door. If he drove this station wagon in the derby he would lose. Ron’s mouth still felt raw from the peppers he’d eaten. As he stood on his front lawn licking the sides of his mouth he made a decision. To beat Kurt he must drive the GTO in the demolition derby. If he won, he’d get Kurt’s Porsche. If he lost, Kurt could have the demolished GTO. Ron figured either way things turned out, he would better Kurt.

Ron pulled the GTO into the garage and got to work. He cut the insulation around each window, removed each panel of glass and leaned them neatly against the garage’s back wall. He removed the headlights and taillights off the car next, then the back seat. By the time Ron took the car’s hood off the hinges he was no longer placing the discarded parts neatly against the wall, he just dropped them on the floor where he stood. He drained the gas tank and filled it with an alcohol blend, and he wrapped chains through the naked windows of the car doors so they would stay closed during the collisions. He took a can of black spray paint off the shelf and painted a large but crooked “7” on the car’s driver and passenger doors. When he stripped the car’s original vinyl interior he crossed the point of no return, the GTO was dead. The GTO had always pleased Ron, and the sight of his mutilated car hurt him. He wanted to fight the hurtful feeling. He wanted to kick and beat the car. The GTO represented a rare success in his life, and he had been forced to sacrifice it just to have a hope of beating Kurt.

Hours before the demolition derby started, crowds filled the grandstands. Earlier that day a tractor had plowed the field to soften the dirt, and a bulldozer had heaped dirt in a thick mound six feet high around the field’s perimeter. Parked along the perimeter of the arena were twelve cars positioned like the numbers on a clock face with the rear end of each car pointing to the center. For the past hour, the crowd had an opportunity to carefully inspect each car. All of the cars were old clunkers on their way to the junkyard except for two: a large Cadillac and a GTO with sloppy 7’s painted on its sides. A voice came over the loudspeaker
and announced the name of the drivers as they walked into the arena towards their cars. Between introductions, the loudspeaker reminded the crowd of the derby's rules. "The rules are simple folks, last car running wins. When a car goes 45 seconds without moving, we will assume it's no longer running, we will call out its number, and that car will be out. If a car goes 45 seconds without making contact with another car, then that driver is eliminated." Nobody in the crowd was listening. Everyone in the crowd had seen the derby before. The loudspeaker continued, "driving car number 7, Ron Gallbasini . . . driving car number 13, David Hadfield . . . and driving the Cadillac, car number 1, Oakdale's own, welcome home Kuuuurt Mason!" As Kurt walked across the grounds he waved to the crowd with both hands. Ron stared at him when their eyes met. Kurt recognized the GTO, and Ron could tell by the expression on his face that Kurt was furious.

"Drivers start your engines," the loudspeaker called. Kurt raced to his Cadillac, and Ron fired up the GTO. With the car's hood missing, Ron was able to watch the engine vibrate to life as he turned the key. The engine sang far smoother than the eleven other cars that had just started, and Ron gave it some more gas to make it hum. "Driver's get ready and . . . Go!"

Every driver shifted his car into reverse and flew towards the center of the arena. Rear ends collided with rear ends as twelve cars met in the epicenter of the crash. Car 13 rolled over onto its topside, and as the drivers shifted their cars into drive to pull out of the center of the arena, the engines of cars 34 and 67 died. Tires in the loose dirt sprayed clods and dust into the crowd. The nine remaining each sought to attack the others. They reeled their cars around the arena in reverse, so that they could ram other cars with their trunks, sparing the more sensitive front ends that housed the engine blocks. Soon there were only six cars running, then five. Moments later, only four banged up cars remained running.

Ron and Kurt had collided a few times but were now on opposite ends of the arena. Cars 33 and 88 streaked towards the center of the arena and collided head-on, killing both of their engines. As the two drivers frantically tried to restart their cars, Kurt drove to ram them with his Cadillac. The crowd rose to their feet in anticipation of the collision. Ron shifted the GTO into reverse, weaved in-between two other dead cars, and T-boned the passenger side of the fast moving Cadillac. The crowd cheered as the rear end of the GTO sent the Cadillac sliding into the piled dirt.
Cars 33 and 88 remained stalled at the field’s center, and the Cadillac buried deep in the dirt pile was going nowhere.

Ron slapped the ceiling of the GTO with sheer delight as he realized that the next 45 seconds were his to ram the immobile Cadillac at will and then he would go home the derby’s champion. Ron pulled away from the Cadillac and pointed the GTO’s rear end at the driver’s side panel shielding the Cadillac’s engine block. He stretched his left hand out his window playing to the crowd, asking them if they would like him to ram the crippled Cadillac. The crowd cheered madly and many of them threw their fists into the air with their thumbs down. Ron stepped on the gas, sped towards the Cadillac and hit it hard. At impact he watched Kurt’s body jerk against the seatbelt and twist around in the cab. Ron laughed and pulled away from the Cadillac once more. This time he pointed the front of his car at the front of the Cadillac. He wanted to commit the full weight of the GTO’s engine into this collision. He floored the gas pedal and roared towards the Cadillac. In the short second he closed on the Cadillac he noticed it was moving towards him. His last collision with the Cadillac freed it up from the dirt pile. Ron didn’t have time to react before the GTO and the Cadillac struck one another head-on in the most violent collision of the evening. Both drivers were thrown forward against their seat belts and their seat belts slung them back into their seats again. Flames shot across each car’s engine. Ron’s immediate instinct was to jump out of his car, but in the same instant he moved towards the door, he also realized that both he and Kurt had initiated the last collision. Ron knew that if he exited his car before Kurt did, then Kurt would win. Kurt must have realized the same thing because when Ron looked into the Cadillac he noticed that Kurt wasn’t budging. Small flames still burned above each car’s engine block. Men with fire extinguishers ran towards both cars. The GTO’s engine no longer hummed, all Ron could hear from the engine was a hissing, and then a loud pop! A fireball shot out of the GTO’s front end, the crowd roared. In an instant both cars were engulfed in vapor and heat. The men running towards the cars with the fire extinguishers turned their heads and shielded their faces from the intense heat with their forearms. Their fire extinguishers did not cool the flames. The intense heat licked Ron’s cheeks and he looked towards the Cadillac to see if Kurt had moved yet. Kurt sat, still staring at Ron through the flames. Both Ron and Kurt knew that the first man to leave his car would lose. The men with the fire extinguishers yelled for the drivers to get out just as a second fireball, larger than the first, shot
out from the GTO’s engine. Ron’s clothing snagged the flames and burnt like a giant match head. He felt an intense burning pain over his entire body, but only for an instant. The flames singed every nerve in his extremities, and soon his arms and legs felt nothing. Flames leaped down his throat, chasing the oxygen in his lungs. His dry eyes filled with water. All he could smell was grease and burning hair. Through the vapor he could see a flame shaped like Kurt stiffened inside the Cadillac. That was the last thing Ron saw as the heat melted his eyeballs and extinguished his life.