driven by desire

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the first sharp pang of desire hit me in the parking lot of my daughter's preschool. It was a cold winter day in North Carolina, and as I buckled my seat belt, another mother maneuvered her gleaming new Volvo station wagon into the space beside my 1992 Honda Civic. She smiled and gestured for me to roll down my window so we could talk.

She was on my passenger side, so I unbuckled my seat belt, leaned across the seat, and groped for the handle to open the window. Once I found it, I rotated the crank, slowly and painfully, counterclockwise. The window jerked down in spurts, as stubborn and recalcitrant as my three-year-old in the back seat. Meanwhile the Volvo's window glided down in one smooth motion, as if melting into the door.

When I had finally worked my window into its slot, I sat up, brushing away the hair that had fallen in my face. The other mother cocked her head slightly and said, with a hint of awe, "Wow! I didn't even know they made cars like that anymore!"

If only I'd had power windows at that moment, I could have coolly drawn a barrier between us with a touch of my fingertip.

Later, at the bank drive-through, I admired how the other cars' windows slid gracefully open, like curtains before a performance. At night, I dreamed of windows that closed effortlessly, saving me at the last moment from attackers. I became convinced that my manual windows were giving me carpal tunnel syndrome. If only I had a car with power windows, my life would be good.

But how would I convince my husband that a new car was an urgent necessity? We had discussed purchasing one when our daughter was born. In the first raw weeks after her birth, when I was too scared even to carry my infant child downstairs for fear of falling, I'd insisted we needed a safer vehicle. But my husband — the same man who went to our daughter's crib throughout the night to check on her breathing and murmur a prayer over her sleeping body — balked at the suggestion that buying a big, expensive car was part of being a responsible parent.

My husband was raised in a mud hut on the coast of Libya, where families collected water from a common well and filtered it through empty flour sacks before giving it to their children to drink. By the time he was a teenager, the sound of his mother wailing in labor was as familiar to him as her haunting moans of grief. She gave birth to thirteen children, five of whom did not survive early childhood. Today three faint gray lines are visible at the center of my husband's chest — the last traces of a tattoo his mother gave him when he was a child, slicing his skin and filling the wounds with ash, to protect him from evil spirits. *That* was his health insurance.

I grew up on a cul-de-sac in southern California, where children didn't talk to strangers and we displayed "Neighborhood Watch" stickers in our windows. Though the names of the developments all around us were Spanish, the only Mexicans we children knew of were the ones our parents warned us roamed the canyons around our neighborhoods. We knew these Mexicans were real because when we ventured into the ravines, farther than our parents permitted us to go, we sometimes found their tattered blankets and the charred remains of their campfires. We feared these dark, dusty apparitions and made the same mistake our parents did: we confused poverty with evil.

During the early days of our relationship, my husband and I traded tales of our childhoods, captivating each other with descriptions of our "exotic" backgrounds. I described earning my pancake-flipping badge at summer camp; he recalled reciting the Koran to a blind imam at the local mosque after school. We reminisced about our first jobs: mine, at Baskin Robbins at age sixteen, to earn money to satisfy a voracious clothing appetite; his, at age five (for no money at all), stocking the shelves of his father's tiny shop in the village market. We thought we had escaped unscathed from the hazards of our childhoods and would build a new life together, one that combined the best of American freedom and Middle Eastern tradition. But the birth of our child brought to the fore the conflicting realities of our pasts.

Some aspects of American parenting thrilled my husband — such as the first-class university hospital, five minutes from our house, to which our health insurance gave us easy access. But most middle-class parenting rituals mystified him. He could not understand why I spent hours on the Internet, looking up recalls on baby cribs and car seats. He questioned my using hypoallergenic detergent on every cloth item that came in contact with our daughter. He refused to plug in the baby monitor I'd purchased for our small home. When I came back from the store with the entire series of *Baby Einstein* videos, he seemed skeptical of claims about the beneficial effects of classical music on developing minds. He was deeply suspicious of the idea that being a good parent means making the right purchases; that with enough money, we can protect our children from the pain and ugliness of the world.

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