



# Crash

JENNIFER VIVEKANAND hits it big in her Star Cruiser

From its massive, black-leather interior to the braided, multi-colored rugs covering the springs sticking up from the seats, to the eight-track cassette player attached to the AM-only radio, it was everything I never wanted in a car.

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It was an enormous, turquoise monstrosity known as “The Star Cruiser.” It was my first car, a 1968 Delta ‘88. Its paint had long faded with each passing owner (most of my mother’s eight siblings), and it

had developed liver spots.

This beast got only 12 miles to the gallon, and there was a key to everything. And I do mean everything — the ignition, the

doors, the glove compartment, the trunk, and the gas tank. I had so many keys on my ring I sounded like a janitor in the halls at school.

Being only 5’2”, I could not see over the steering wheel; I had to wedge three couch pillows behind me so I could reach the pedals properly. Unlocking the passenger side door meant unbuckling my seat belt and crawling over to reach the lock. The car did have a V-8 engine, although I was too afraid of losing critical parts along the way to “open her up” on the road to “see what she could do.”

The worst thing about the car was the giant front bench seat; it required two people to move it. It would end up on an angle if I

tried to pull it up on my own. Also, while driving, if I braked too hard, the seat would suddenly spring back to its original position, leaving me scrambling frantically for a grip on the pedals.

"This baby was a mean ride back in its day," my Uncle Jack had told me. "It was a real chick magnet." Great. Somehow, I didn't think it would have the same effect on the hot guys at school. By the time the "chic magnet" got to me, it had no interior lights, no horn, and only one wiper worked — on the passenger side. It did, however, have fog lights and giant chrome bumpers with grills on them like police cars. Because I was so short, I had to line up the hood ornament through the steering wheel with the yellow line to make sure I was in my lane. It was hard to maneuver, and I could barely lift the gargantuan hood in order to check the oil. Everything connected to the car seemed an ordeal. Once I even managed to run over my own muffler. I opened the driver's side door to find it staring at me. The whole pipe was bent sideways.

"How in the hell did you manage to do this?" My father had asked, laughing.

"I don't know!" I remember wailing. "I think the car is possessed!" Five minutes later, a metal coat hanger fixed it right up.

I remember my father patting the hood, saying, "Driving a tank like this, I only have to worry about the other drivers."

In the early morning one day on my way to school, I stopped to pick up my friend Dawn. Dawn happened to live near the school bus stop. It was that twilight time of early morning or early evening, when everything appears gray. That's probably why I didn't notice the silver Trans Am that pulled up right behind me.

Dawn hopped in, and as I had no interior lights, I put the car into what I thought was drive, and we zoomed off — backwards — into the Trans Am idling behind

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me, with a sickening crunch of metal. Right in front of all the kids at the bus stop. Dazed, I turned to look at Dawn, whose mouth was a silent “O.”

A sudden banging on my driver’s-side window brought my attention to the red face of a young man with dark hair. He was screaming at me to roll down my window. I saw bits of spit fleck the

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glass, and decided it was in my best interest to just crack the window. “You hit my car, you idiot!” raged the young man, his face a mottled purple. I didn’t know what to say.

Drivers Training does not prepare you for this. I couldn’t remember any sections covering what to do when you’re an idiot and in danger of physical violence. Only a brief paragraph about how to “exchange insurance information,” and “filing an accident report.”

“I-I-I’m so sorry!” I stammered, “I didn’t see you.”

“Are you freaking blind, lady?” he fumed.

“I am only five-two,” I tried to explain, “I can’t see over the steering wheel.” He seemed momentarily agog at my explanation, which, in retrospect, I’ll admit was pretty lame. Well, I was only 16. He ran his hand through his hair in exasperation. “Well, I don’t think you did any damage,” he said finally, expelling a breath of air. “Just watch where the hell you’re going next time!” With that, he stomped off to his car.

Dimly, through the haze of



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my mortification, I heard cheers coming from the bus stop. Several boys were laughing and pointing in my direction. "Oh, God!" I muttered. Then Dawn cleared her throat.

"Uh, maybe we should leave now," she said.

Startled, I shook my head. I had forgotten she was in the car. "Uh ... oh, yeah!" I turned the key in the ignition, and — *ahhhh!* — restarted the car. "Nice," I muttered under my breath. "I *am* an idiot." The continuing cheers from the bus stop confirmed my sentiment. I jammed the car into drive and slammed on the gas. I just wanted to get the hell out of there and as far away from the bus stop as possible. Only, it wasn't in drive.

Witnesses from the bus stop later told me the guy was behind my car, still inspecting his bumper, when I shot backward like a cannonball. He apparently had just a moment to dive (yes, dive) out of the way before my car with its big-ass chrome bumpers and its giant grills gouged two ruts up his hood and through his windshield like Satan in a sleigh.

The moment it happened, my mind went into slow motion. I saw the bus-stop spectators cheering, doubled over with laughter. I saw Dawn's mouth as she yelled, "Lock the doors!" I saw the guy staring at me like I was a demented lunatic broken loose from an asylum. Then he was pounding on my window, yelling, "Get outta the car!" I hurriedly scribbled my name and number on a piece of paper, and opened my window a tiny crack and slipped the paper to him. Somebody called the cops, and the officer told the guy to just come to the station. He told me to go get one of my parents, as I was a minor, and then come to the station as well. Dawn got out of the car, and went to ride the approaching bus.

"I'll see you at school," she said.

"Don't count on it," I grimly

replied.

"Way to go, Crash!" yelled some kid out the window of the bus as they drove off.

Heading home, I found myself repeating over and over — "Oh, God, let mom be the one who hears it first!" Imagine, at 16, having to tell your father you just backed into someone twice, and not even a half-mile from home.

I opened the front door cautiously, peering around it to see who was in the kitchen. My father was sitting at the table, drinking a cup of coffee.

"What are you doing home?" he asked, surprised to see me. I cleared my throat, and told him what had happened. My father slapped a hand to his forehead and held it there for a few seconds. When he looked up, he had a smile on his face. "Wait till I tell your mother about this one."

My father didn't yell at me, for which I was grateful. He did, however, drive me to school, and every time he glanced over at me fuming in the corner, he would burst into laughter, tears running from his eyes.

The car died six months later, after emitting a loud belch that sounded like a lunar launch, sending up a thick black plume of smoke. I was never so happy as when the junk truck came and hauled it away — and the guy paid me \$50 for those great "vintage" bumpers and fog lights. •

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*A resident of Durham, Jennifer Vivekanand is an illustrator, author and graphic designer. She graduated from Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and has studied at the Accademia de bella Arti in Perugia, Italy, and the Royal College of Art in London. Her story "Cold Turkey" was published in the November 2002 Urban Hiker.*

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