The Wheel

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long; you might as well do it the way you want, you know? I mean, why knock yourself out when you will be the same person no matter what?

Uh-oh . . . looks like big Reggie comin’ outta the stockroom. Well, I will go in the back way. Listen, come over some night. What is today, Tuesday? You can come by an’ dig Richard Kimball on the tube with us. That show is mellow, man. There is nobody I dig more than B. Dylan, except maybe the Fugitive.

The Wheel

by George Christensen

English and Speech, Jr.

When the first call to line up for the feature race crackled over the loudspeaker, Don pulled on the helmet and climbed through the glassless window of the red ’58 Ford. He fastened the harness rooted to the floor and roll bar around his shoulders and across his lap. He turned the key and the car awoke like a dragon, popping and spitting flame from its open manifolds. He waved away the caustic fumes floating back toward him and made a circle to us with his fingers as he pulled away from the pit and went to wait in his position for the big race of the evening.

Our stock car. Don had been the main support of the idea. We would have probably forgotten about it like a dozen other projects. He hadn’t brought up the idea but he’d kept it going until finally we decided to do it.

He hadn’t worked as hard as some of us when we worked on the car every night for two weeks but we forgave him. He supplied the morale and the beer, ran around doing the odd jobs, and found the red paint for us. He spent most of the time walking around the car making sure everything was going right.
It was Don’s idea that we take turns driving instead of finding someone else to drive. We accepted that idea quickly. But no one had as much enthusiasm as Don. We all agreed that Don should drive for the feature at least the first time. He’d drive for all of them unless one of us did better than he and we were sure we wouldn’t.

Everyone who had taken his turn driving in the smaller elimination heats had been excited. But not nearly as much as Don. During the heats he had never stopped moving; while the car went around the track with thirty more — little different except in color and bump collections — Don walked around in little circles with his eyes glued to it and called out encouragements. Though ours was always one of the last half dozen in, Don would run to the car and congratulate the driver.

The drivers had felt shaky and tired when they came in and weren’t as enthused as they were when they went out. One didn’t want to try it again. Don didn’t show many feelings about it; he said he understood.

He drove a few practice laps between the last heat and the feature. They were too simple. They fed his compulsion and made him want more. While he waited with us for the race to begin he just couldn’t stand still. He made sure everything was checked just once more and absorbed our encouragement with joy.

Waiting on the track, he settled some but still shook a little and his armpits were dark with sweat. Still, he had more confidence than the others had while they were waiting. Soon the biggest moment of Don’s life would begin and we all shared that feeling with him as we waited quietly.

The crowd in the grandstand came to life now. The cold evening air had kept them from moving around much but now they went after their last drinks and food. They made quick little conversations with their neighbors and pointed out cars. They moved their hands in broad sweeps and fast little circles. When the p.a. was turned on and its buzzing noticed by the crowd, people tipped cups high to finish lukewarm coffee and stuffed down the last handfuls of ketchup-covered hot dogs. Coats and blankets loosened as they drew to the edges of their seats and forgot about the cold.
The announcer's voice silenced all else, "Last call to the starting line, the race will begin in two minutes." For a few moments the weight of the silence carried it on. Then engines fired into life as guys who are late wherever they go managed to make it to the track where Don and the other drivers had been waiting several minutes.

The flag fluttered over the starter's head only moments later. Then, in a single motion, the starter brought the flag down and ran off the track. Released, the cars accelerated out and melted into a hurtling mass of sheet metal.

The pack of cars elongated and began to pour into the first turn. Like a curved spillway, the corner guided the mass around until it came out in the other direction and on the other side of the field. Gaining momentum along the back side of the track, the mass of cars stretched out and began to pulsate with actions around the sides as cars began to push toward better positions. We picked out the bit of red that caged Don and carried him down the track with the thundering mass. It was between several others and it would be a while before he could break loose and do what we hoped he would. The cars bent around the turn near us and Don went by with thirty others pounding the ground under our feet.

We followed him around the track, just as he had followed the others. Then we saw him moving against the mass. He began to drop back though the other cars tried to force him on. We wondered what had gone wrong. As he came around our corner slowly and headed across the field toward us, each of us bit his lip and bunched his shoulders against the cold. "Oh man, is he going to blow."

He stopped in our midst and we slowly closed around the car with the question on our minds. Nobody looked at his face, some stared at his helmet, slightly turned down and away, or his white hands joined to the steering wheel. There was no anger in his voice, it was a quiet monotone. "Nothing's wrong, I just can't do it."