

Peyton Brown

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### Nonfiction Narrative

The day I bought Schmidt, a used, red 2021 Kia Soul, I felt like I had finally claimed a piece of the independence I had been chasing for years. The freedom to go anywhere, whenever I wanted, was suddenly mine, and it felt like a milestone. With Schmidt, I imagined spontaneous road trips, late-night drives, and the ability to navigate life on my terms. But that feeling of liberation didn't last as long as I expected. In reality, Schmidt had other plans, and two breakdowns later, I found myself stranded on the side of the road, realizing that the independence I had wanted was not as simple as owning a car.

I had only had Schmidt for two months when it first happened. I was sitting at a red-light, on my way home from an admissions event at my old high school, just two turns away from my house. My foot was pressed on the brake hard, meaning that the 'auto stop-start' feature of the car was engaged. Once the light turned green, I took my foot off the brake and pressed into the accelerator. To my surprise, nothing happened. There was no rev of the engine, no hum, no familiar push forward. Just silence. I pressed the pedal again, harder this time, as though the force might magically jolt Schmidt back to life. But we sat there, stalled, while cars began piling up behind me and horns started blaring. I turned the car off and on, off and on, each time hoping Schmidt would roar back to life. Nothing. I shifted into reverse, neutral, even tapped at the buttons and controls, trying anything that might get the engine to respond. Meanwhile, cars

began to veer around me, drivers tossing annoyed glances, some honking or flipping me off as they sped past.

In that moment, it was as if all the independence I had felt with my first car vanished. It was strange how quickly the excitement of car ownership turned to helplessness and frustration. Somehow the symbol of my new found freedom had left me stranded, helpless, and anything but free.

Two hours and a tow truck later, Schmidt was gone, hauled away to the shop. I was left driving my dad's old, clunker of a truck that was older than me and lacking any sense of the freedom I'd felt with Schmidt. I no longer felt independent. I was back to borrowing a vehicle, not able to hop into my car and go whenever I pleased. It was a long month and a half without Schmidt, but one day, a call came in from the mechanic. Schmidt was finally fixed, they said, and all it had taken was clicking some device back into place that had come loose. The mechanic assured me it was minor, just a random mishap. Schmidt should work fine now.

For a few weeks, he did. For a few, wonderful weeks, I was finally back in my car, back to feeling like myself. But then, one evening, about 40 minutes outside of San Antonio, Schmidt betrayed me again. I was driving back from an all-star basketball game practice. My parents had told me I should just take my dad's truck, that they did not want to risk anything happening with me so far away. I insisted that everything would be fine, that Schmidt was in working order and there was no need to be worried. I had just gotten off the phone with my mom when it happened. I pulled up to a stop light, the auto stop-start feature kicking in as I idled for a while. Once the light turned green, I went to press the gas and move forward, but Schmidt stayed dead silent, refusing to start. All I could do was grip the wheel and watch as that familiar frustration sank in. Yet again, cars began to zip past me as shame and panic kicked in. After what felt like an

eternity, I finally got out of the car. I opened the hood, though I had no idea what I was looking for. All I found was a confusing jumble of wires and parts that meant nothing to me. The reality settled in: I was utterly powerless in this moment, and it stung.

When my parents finally arrived, we were able to call a tow truck, and as we waited, I felt the weight of the moment settle heavily on my chest. I had envisioned driving as a gateway to freedom, yet here I was, stranded again, dependent on my parents to bail me out. The tow truck arrived, its flashing lights illuminating the dusk around us, and I felt a wave of embarrassment wash over me. This was not how I had imagined owning my first car—this wasn't freedom; it was a reminder of my vulnerability.

In those moments of waiting and frustration, I began to see how closely mobility is tied to our idea of independence. We often think that having a car means being free, but my experiences with Schmidt showed me how easily that feeling can fade. Cars can break down, plans can change, and what was once a source of freedom can quickly turn into a cause for anxiety and helplessness.

I miss Schmidt every day. My family hated him, my friends hated him, but he was my first car, and I will forever be grateful for the lessons he taught me. He reminded me that true independence is not just about being able to drive wherever I want, but also about learning to navigate the unexpected challenges life throws my way.

*I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not. /s/ Peyton Brown*