

Matters addressed in a 2011 Dodge Caliber

My father and I sit inside his 2011 Dodge Caliber. Its trim level is titled SXT, according to the rear badge, and the official name of its colour is Brilliant Black Crystal Pearl, although my father usually calls it black graphite. I have come to my hometown for my grandmother's birthday; it is my second day here, and we are waiting for my mother at the back door of her office. The birthday dinner is taking place at a seafood restaurant, and we are already a bit late for the reservation. To my left is a gift box wrapped in silver paper, topped with a red stick-on bow. A robotic vacuum cleaner is inside the box.

I usually occupy the back seat of the car, despite my father suggesting that I sit in the front, which I refuse to do primarily because I like having the entirety of the back seat to myself, yet on repeated occasions he called this custom of mine terribly bourgeois. A black dress with a rhinestone flower covered in cellophane hangs on the left grab handle; my mother asked us to bring it so she can change clothes before the birthday dinner.

We sit in silence, he sometimes thrusts out his lower lip until it gets dry and shrivelled, which I notice as I take sporadic glances at the rearview mirror. Something is clearly bothering him; probably the fact that every time I visit, he asks about any updates in my personal life, and my answer remains disturbingly unsatisfying, for I do not have a significant other, which reinforces his long-standing suspicions.

On this day last year, he assured me that I could rely on his sponsorship in any matters of the heart. The seating configuration, along with him pouting his lower lip every so often, was the same as today, although we occupied a different parking space and there was no dress on the grab handle, as my grandmother was celebrating her birthday at home. I didn't specify the kind of sponsorship he was offering. Throughout that conversation I was carried away by a fascinating discovery: I noticed something shiny in a gap between the seats, stuck my fingers inside, and pulled a small coin with a portrait of Elizabeth II. I flipped it and there was a picture of a sailboat with the word Canada engraved on it — the Canadian dime. I had surmised previously that the car was imported from North America due to the complications my father faced during the vehicle registration process, because the rear turn signals of the car are red, which is not compliant with European regulations. My finding also explained the naming of the trim level, as Dodge had renamed the trim levels for the 2011 production year, and the SXT should have been

called Heat instead. However, these changes were only applied to the US market models, so if this car was bought by its previous owner in Canada, then there should not be any discrepancy regarding its trim level name. Furthermore, the dime explained why the front grille is not chromed, since it was supposed to match the body colour only for the base-level SE model in the US, and if this Dodge had been bought in the US, it should have had the chromed grille surround instead, featured in all of the configurations, except for SE. That day, I had located the origin of my father's Dodge Caliber, finding indirect evidence that it had originally been produced for the Canadian market.

Now, I assume, he wishes me to dispel his concerns, which have escalated yet again by me not bringing any encouraging news about my relationship status, preferably right here, before the birthday dinner, so that we could all be sitting at a polished solid wood table, unencumbered by displeasing thoughts, savouring oysters, crab and prawns.

Regrettably, I cannot remember where I put the dime, despite initially intending to keep it as a cherished little trinket. From time to time, when reminiscing about the sensational discovery of last year, I keep wondering: why did the top management of Dodge decide to rename the trim levels in 2011, only to change their minds the next year and eventually stop the car production that same year? Original names were SE, SXT, R/T and SRT4, the latter two were the high-performance versions with a more aggressive appearance. What prompted the decision to rename SE to Express and SXT to Heat? There was also a variant presented sometime in the middle of its production cycle called SXT Sport, but I know very little about it. Besides, the base trim level for Dodge Nitro — another Dodge vehicle being offered during the same period — was named SE too. From what I recall, not only was there the SXT version of Dodge Nitro, but also the one named SLT, and they underwent a similar labelling change in 2010, becoming Heat and Detonator, respectively. Again, the names were changed back to abbreviations in 2012, with both models being discontinued the same year.

I see my mother exiting her office. She waves her hand at us and scuttles towards the car. My father and I open our doors simultaneously. Mother hugs me as I get out and gets inside to put on the dress. I approach my father, standing behind the car.

I scratch the mud stain off the edge of the tailgate. Earlier today he mentioned that when he was my age, two of his ex-girlfriends had already had abortions. I picture two slightly flattened fetuses, quivering inside a silver gift box. They are sticky, smudged with blood,

wrapped in the umbilical cord.

Both of us twitch as my mother has pushed the car horn to signal her readiness for departure. She stops me while opening the rear door and asks me to sit in the front. I notice another Dodge Caliber, dark blue, entering the parking lot — the European version.

We are among the last guests to arrive at my grandmother's birthday party. The table reserved for us is made of solid wood and finished in a clear lacquer. My father is seated next to me.

To keep everyone entertained during the wait for the main course, a waiter brings a basket of half-open clams with fortunes inside – the restaurant's take on fortune cookies – and passes it around the table. My father opens one and reads aloud the printed note: "Good boys eat oysters, bad boys slurp on them". Mine says: "There's never a wrong time for a caviar tartlet".