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My Paradise

I am a part of a culture that is dying a slow death. A culture that was very popular ten years ago and at that time was thought to be around for a long time to come. We were wrong. People changed, others grew up. Newcomers were scarce. Things didn't go as planned. Every few years, there comes a glimpse of hope, a dream to get things how they once were, but after a few weeks the reality sets in. I'm speaking of a culture that defines exhilaration, danger, adrenaline, freedom, passion, brotherhood, and unfortunately, sometimes ignorance. I'm speaking about street racing.

In 2001, a light shined on a fast growing trend among teenagers and young adults when the movie *The Fast & The Furious* came out. At the time, street racing was mainly an underground event with a small following of people that were few and far in between with the exception of California, the culture's Mecca, who kept the heart of the street racing beating. *The Fast & The Furious* was clearly a game changer. Small aftermarket part shops began booming. Every sixteen year old who just got their license and a hand-me-down Honda spent every dollar they could gather on the next upgrade for their car.

The goal was to be the best. Each Friday night, a group of dozens, if not hundreds of us would gather at the local Starbucks to show off our rides and mingle with one another. After scoping the competition and getting a feel for what the others had, I would call someone out. If accepted, we would go down to one of many spots, small two to three-lane side streets that had no regular traffic, regroup over there and it was on.

We would begin driving to our makeshift start line, do a couple burn-outs to warm up our tires for increased grip, line up side by side, and then a flagger would stand in between the front of both vehicles. The next step varies from driver to driver depending on how efficient they were. For me, I would hold a steady idle, level out my clutch to the point where it sits within thousands of an inch of my flywheel, then look at the flagger who was pointing at me waiting for an approval to start. I'd nod my head. My heart beat began to increase, the combination smell of burnt rubber, overheated brake pads, and carbon monoxide in the air. The harmonic sound of two engines idling side by side drowned out the background noise of loud music and conversation. Once the flagger had approval from both drivers, he raises his hands. I take a deep breath and before he can rest his hands to his side, I've dropped my clutch and put the pedal to the floor. He is now an object in my rearview.

I sit there with my right foot pressed as low as it can go anxiously awaiting my mark. I glance down at my tachometer as it hits 6,000 RPM. My cam lobes hydraulically lock with one another, the engine decibel level rises, and I get kicked backwards in my seat. I love my Honda. 8,000 RPM is here before I know it. I slam and release the clutch pedal down while simultaneously hitting second gear. My other foot never left the gas pedal. My tires chirp. I look to my side hoping I see no one. I see headlights. This process repeats for a few more seconds as I shift through my gears. The only thing that matters to me is that I look up and see headlights in my rearview. I look, there they are. I turn on my hazard lights to signal to the others I was victorious. At this point, I take a deep breath of success, hit the brakes, and downshift until I come to a stop. I turn around and go back to the start line where I watch it all happen again until it's my turn once more.

After a long week of work, some people like to blow off some steam at the bar, or by hanging out with friends, maybe watch a movie, go to dinner, or play games. We are no different. This is our relaxation. This is my paradise. There's a quote out of *The Fast & The Furious* that does a great job of explaining the feeling. Although it now sounds cliché and a little corny due to its popularity and modern-day mockery, to me, it couldn't have been said any better. When Dom is talking to Brian about his past and his feelings about racing he says, "I live my life a quarter-mile at a time. Nothing else matters: not the mortgage, not the store, not my team and their B.S. For those ten seconds or less, I'm free."

There is this feeling I get behind the wheel that is hard to put into words. It's a combination of confidence and fear, I feel in harmony with my engine through the gas pedal. My engine screaming at the top of its lungs, my tires squealing as they try to keep grip. My heart feels like it's going to jump out of my chest due to the uncertainty of what could happen. I release my aggression through these turns as my car hugs each corner. I push it to the limit, just barely holding on. This might sound petrifying to some but this is my definition of serenity. When I'm behind the wheel I'm at peace with nature without a care in the world.

There are many different reasons people are attracted to street racing, some like the rush, some are in it for the money, some like the respect, others like the competition. One thing that everyone enjoys, though, is the brotherhood. We all had our own team, or crew as some liked to call it. A group of friends, many of which grew up together, that hang out all the time, work on their cars and go out racing together against one or multiple other crews. You were officially part of the crew when you were given a decal for your car. Names like X Rated, Team REVolution, Fast Forward, and Drag On tattooed cars to show what crew you were out there representing. My crew grew rather close. We wrenched together, worked together, learned together and from each

other, laughed together, cried together, and at times fought with one another. All of that made our bond stronger, and gave each of us a place we felt welcomed. In life, it's human nature to want to be accepted, to be cared for, and if nothing else, that's what we got out of it.

That feeling may explain why our culture is near death, however. As people grow older, they develop families. They have new priorities resulting in less time for their crew. Others don't find it rewarding enough to invest all that money. Every few years, a *Fast & The Furious* sequel will come out and it seems to get people talking, but nothing yet has come of it.

On a recent Friday night, I was sitting around reminiscing of old times and had nothing to do. I drove by the Starbucks where we used to meet, the one across the street from the police station where you'd be lucky to find parking. It's now completely empty. I thought I saw a tumble wheat pass me by. There was no loud music thumping, no engines revving, no cars lined up, there was nothing. Just white lines and pavement. Yes, my culture is almost dead, it's true, but I'm not letting it go without a fight. I am going to make an attempt to revive my culture and even then, even if it is too late, I will still carry it with me because you may be able take me out of my culture, but you will never get my culture out of me.