

Highway

Literally diving in head first into the musty wooden seat covering, Galen slammed the door with a hurried ‘bang!’. Trying to calm his trembling hands in excitement almost made him drop his keys, but somehow, he managed to hold on, plunge the teeth into the ignition, revv the V8 engine of his Lamborghini slightly (in a fit of habit and self-indulgence, he’d probably admit later on) before releasing the handbrake and speeding off the platform, almost having to blow past a red light. But it was still yellow, so he wouldn’t be caught.

Chuckling in short gasps of breath, Galen loosened his tie with one hand and unbuttoned the stifling collar of his almost pristine white shirt. Small patches had already begun to form despite the fact that he had already taken off his suit jacket before going into the convenience store.

The convenience store. Gritting his teeth to prevent an almost wild and certifiable grin from reaching his face, Galen gripped the steering wheel tighter in order to steady his slightly shot nerves.

Clear mind, he thought to himself. *Relax. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out...* he inhaled and exhaled slowly like a mantra, like a lifeline, forcing himself to blank out the piercing thoughts in his mind and focusing on his driving. He couldn’t afford to mess up now; no – not after having stolen a pack of Hershey’s kisses from the convenience store.

After taking a right and entering the Route 105 highway towards Grayfield, he allowed his thoughts to return again as he eased his speed to a comfortable 75 miles per hour. Taking a hand off the wheel, he fumbled around the passenger seat next to him to locate his handkerchief and wipe his beaded forehead and neck before pushing the ‘on’ button of the CD player and allowing his favourite 80’s music to hum through his car.

*“Who’s gonna tell you when it’s too late?
Who’s gonna tell you things aren’t so great?
You can’t go on thinking nothing’s wrong
Who’s gonna drive you home tonight?”*

Tuning the music out of his mind, he let himself think about what he did just a few skips of a heartbeat ago. He let himself chuckle again and take a quick glance at his ‘spoils’. They lay there within the bag on the seat, silver foil reflecting the sunlight and glinting brightly against his black seats like stars in the night sky. *Never in a million years would I have thought that I would be capable of stealing*, he thought, thinking of the shy, quiet kid he thought he knew inside and out. *Who would’ve known?*

It had been a strange impulse. He had actually gone into the convenience store with the purpose of buying a bottle of soda because of the scorching heat. However, whilst walking past the candy and chocolate section, he’d spotted a newly refilled slot full of Hershey’s kisses, his favourite type of sweet since...

Since forever, perhaps. Or maybe more like 43 years. He smiled to himself, itching to open one of the packs but knowing that he couldn’t because he would have to take both hands off the wheel in order to do so. They had always made the outside packaging so freakishly difficult to open. He remembered the time when he’d almost tried everything in order to open the darn thing – from

biting it, scratching it with his nails, even trying to *think* the packaging into opening itself up (he had this weird phase where he thought he was psychic and tried to prove it numerous times until he had plunged a fork into his thumb whilst trying to bend it). In the end, his mother had come with a chortling mouth and a pair of scissors.

I would have used the scissors in the first place if mum didn't forbid me to use it until I was 10, Galen thought, rolling his eyes slightly at the overprotective mum of his memories. *But then, I always did what she said*, he added as an afterthought, glancing momentarily at the swaying pair of lucky dice that his mother gave him on his 40th birthday.

It was also towards his 40th birthday that he decided to get what he'd always wanted – a sleek, black Lamborghini – the Gallardo. He wasn't extremely rich, but, as luck would have it, he was browsing through his local newspaper when he saw an ad trying to sell a second-hand-but-still-in-good-condition Gallardo. What happened after that was a little dream-like in his memories, but he could still remember meeting the short, bald Indian owner, haggling a little, striking a deal, then shaking the small and calloused brown hand of the Indian to close the deal.

Underneath his palms, past the etched leather of the steering wheel, he wondered whether it was possible to feel the imprint of those hands caressed into each and every crack. Gripping the wheel a fraction tighter than he had been, he smoothed his own hands over it, making sure that he didn't accidentally turn the car at the same time.

After the whole handshake thing, the events were much more of a flurry and much more desired to be forgotten – he still had to pay off 3 more instalments in cash before he was finally free of the Shark Loan. The evil, evil Shark Loan.

Anyway. He'd gotten the car, alongside with a few exclamations of astonishment from his wife, awed stares from his 4-year-old son who had no idea what was going on (but the car sure was shiny, he'd said) and mixed responses from his friends and colleagues. Oh, sure, jealousy was definitely included in that mix. At least, he hoped so.

Letting his eyes glance into the rear mirror, he reflected on his most recent, most daring action by far. For goodness' sake, he *stole something!* some part in his mind yelled at him with unpleasant force, shaking him up a little before he steeled his nerves against it. *So what*, he grumbled back. *It was only chocolate! And overpriced, too! Why, when I was still in grade school, they sold each pack for 49 cents! It's all the price of inflation now that we're paying for!* He stumbled a bit over the 'when I was still in grade school' part, hoping that he didn't sound too old. Age was something he really, really didn't want to think about right now.

It was...interesting, to say the least, he thought after a period of mental silence. Now that he had time to himself to think, he remembered glancing left and right, noticing that the owner was buried in a newspaper and that 3 other customers were minding their own business in the other sections of the store. Then, there it was – the rush of heartbeats and whispers of *'take it!'* flooded his entire nervous system, leaking out of every pore of his body until –

*"Who's gonna pick you up when you fall?
Who's gonna hang it up when you call?"*

He didn't remember much after that sudden surge of impulse. He supposed he had acted unconsciously upon self-preservation, tucking the chocolate into his pocket before striding out to his temporarily double-parked car, forcing himself to take steady paces instead of rushing out like he wanted to. *But why Starburst?* he wondered to himself. It wasn't as if the other candies were dull or boring. In fact, he'd also spotted a cluster of Mike and Ike's, something he had never had time to try before but had wanted to. He searched his subconscious for an answer, before suddenly remembering the time he had tried his first Hershey kiss.

It was from an old lady who lived across the street of their quaint house. Apparently, despite being a very traditional and overbearing mother, she in fact had never told him to not accept sweets from little old ladies. So, he had gone over to her house one day, secretly admiring the lush and pruned flowers along her garden path when suddenly, she had hobbled over from her back yard, frantically waving a pair of garden shears around. Well, as frantically as an old lady could, so the potential of poking someone's eye out was considerably lowered. She had thought that he was there to *"pick them with your grubby hands, just for your dear old mother I'll bet!"* and was on the verge of threatening him with her shears until she looked closer at his astonished but fearful face, that was stammering *"I – I'd never do anything like that! I swear!"*. Little old ladies, apparently, also had soft spots for young boys like him. She had invited him inside, but he, still slightly shocked at her previous outburst, was too afraid to do anything. Sighing but looking slightly guilty, she had rustled through her pocket before taking something out and pressing it into a soft hand of his. *"Take this,"* she had said, before grinning apologetically, revealing a perfect set of white teeth. She had hobbled back to her back yard afterwards, while he stayed in the same spot, staring at the small square of Starburst, still surprised at the feeling of a wrinkled hand against his. His first. But after he had broken out of his stupor, he unwrapped the silver foil and popped the brown, waxy kiss into his mouth. If he were a few years older, he would have laughed too much at the prospect of an old lady giving him a kiss; but, as he was merely 5, the sweet deliciousness of the chocolate melted his heart. Perhaps it was just his sweet tooth begging for more, but he couldn't care less, lost in the way Christmas mornings come for a child.

*"Who's gonna pay attention to your dreams?
Who's gonna plug their ears when you scream?"*

His mouth watering, Galen glanced at the long, straight stretch of road ahead, sorely tempted to open the packet of kisses. *But I'd have to let go of –* Screw it.

Letting go of the wheel, he reached over and grabbed the packet, tearing it open with a force that he knew needed no scissors or bent forks afterwards.

Plunging a now calloused and slightly wrinkled hand now, he took out a single kiss, pulled on the 'magic string' (as he secretly called it) and placed it on his tongue. Letting the sweetness spread to the corners of his mouth, he sighed in content, placing a hand on the steering wheel once more.

WHEE-WOO! WHEE-WOO! WHEE-WOO! WHEE-WOO!

Galen's heart leaped, his entire body jerking like an echo. And – *shoot!* and cursing mildly, he had tried to get rid of the 'evidence' but instead ended up dropping the entire bag of kisses onto the

car floor. Looking around frantically, he glanced fearfully over his shoulder, searching wildly for the flashing red and blue.

A bright red fire engine flew past along with an ambulance, wailing its commanding right of way.

Galen stared, watching the vehicles blare past with no hesitation whatsoever. He stared until they were out of sight.

Shaking himself slightly and giving off a shaky, nervous laugh, he tried concentrating on slowly sucking his chocolate like he always does, not noticing that his knuckles had turned pale. He desperately tried to ignore the panicked look he knew would be reflected off the mirror.

Quietly, softly, yet in some way quite, quite abrupt, the kiss didn't taste as good as it used to.

What...what would mum say, if she saw me now? He gulped on air and his slimy saliva, tasting the bitterness of regret. *It wasn't really my initial intentions! was it? But I...* He thought. He thought of his mother, the one who was always the first to put her hands on her hips when she found out he had done something wrong, the one who had always warned him against the criminal, the immoral, the forbidden. The one who also loved and cared for him for so many years, and had shown tears of pride when he graduated from Oxford.

But I just wanted to have some fun! Don't I deserve it? Hands on hips, disappointed look. Let-down look. Guilt trip. *I worked so hard for so many years! And for what?*

For what?

Galen paused, his soul not daring to even begin to answer because – *pointless, it's all so pointless!* He ground his teeth in frustration. *I just wanted to LIVE!*

Sorrowful look this time, from his wife. *What?* He could feel her eyes boring into his, shock and disbelief clouding those beautiful, normally gentle, chocolate depths of hers. *It was only chocolate! That's all!* he argued with those eyes, but he knew their answer already. *IT WAS ONLY CHEAP CHOCOLATE!*

He pressed down harder onto the accelerator, not caring about the speed limit anymore.

*"You can't go thinking nothing's wrong
Who's gonna drive you home tonight?"*

Swerving to the left, he exited the highway and headed down the same route he took each day, forcing his car to slow him down. Desperately, he tried to think of someone he could give the chocolate to, to redeem himself.

I can justify myself, right? I mean, if I gave it to Randy whom nobody at the office likes, I'll be a nice guy! A good guy! It's like Robin Hood, right? Passing the 3rd traffic light, he turned left again, feeling the looming of the trees causing slight claustrophobia. *No, that wouldn't work. People would think that I'm weird because I'd be giving an opened bag of Hershey's kisses. Hey, what about Nick? Yeah, the kid'll appreciate it. And what's wrong with a father giving his son a share of his chocolates as a reward for being the top of his class again? That will work!* Galen nodded to reassure himself, cranking his music to a higher volume.

*“Who’s gonna hold you down when you shake?
Who’s gonna come around when you break?”*

“Who’s gonna give their own child stolen chocolates?”, his heart pierced his mind with a whisper. Pulling up in the driveway, a few blocks from his house, Galen slowed his car to a stop before easing into the park gear.

Laying his arms across the steering wheel, Galen placed his head into his arms, his cool forehead pressing into muscle. Staring downwards at his feet, he spotted the chocolate scattered haphazardly on the rubber mat, silver foil glinting back like accusing eyes in the darkness.

Squeezing his eyelids shut, he swallowed, never having regretted something so much in the entire 43 years of his life.

*“You can’t go on thinking nothing’s wrong
Who’s gonna drive you home tonight?
Oh, you know you can’t go on thinking nothing’s wrong
Who’s gonna drive you home tonight.”*¹

¹ Lyrics of the song “Drive” by The Cars