

Cars are very different from how they used to be. Eddie can remember a time when you could buy a car manual and work out what everything was, as well as how it all fitted together. His first car, which was a bit of a wreck right enough, was an open book, or rather an open bonnet. He used to sort it himself in those days with a few spanners, spares from the scrappers' and a bit of help from his brother.

But cars now - well, they're like computers on wheels. No chance of fixing their innards with a spanner and a roll of gun gum. They have to be taken into a specialist garage and plugged in to the master computer; complex diagnostics have to be performed on them, a list of gobbleydegook is fed out of a workshop printer and at the end of the day the punter is no wiser, but a lot poorer.

Eddie's car is his freedom, his ship, his magic carpet. It's the part of his life that - mostly - remains unregulated by Theresa. True, she sanctions the monthly repayments on it; true too that it is she who allows the money for diesel to fuel it; true that she requires it to be available for lifts to and from the supermarket, the bingo hall and the homes of various relatives. But other than that, the car is all Eddie's and he its commander-in chief.

In the boot of the car lurks Eddie's secret stash: notes that he has earned from overtime or jobs done on the side and which haven't found their way into the joint account. This is money that doesn't have to be spent on new sofas, or replacement carpets, or accent walls, or a million and one other essentials that their house seems to devour so regularly and voraciously. This money is truly his, to spend, lend or gamble as he chooses.

Because Eddie doesn't really get computers - in his job he doesn't use them - he tends to leave alone the trickier gadgets in his car. He can operate the radio now that his grandson has tuned it to his favourite stations; he's proud of the fact that he can even use the buttons on the steering wheel to turn it up for an in-car karaoke when he's on his own. He can warm the seats for himself and Theresa on a frosty morning.

- Always said you had a hot butt, sweetheart
- Give it a rest, Eddie. It's too bloody early in the morning

or too late at night, or the wrong week, or too hot, or too much housework to be done, or some-fecking-thing.

Eddie dreams of a woman who would laugh when he says it. A lady who would put her hand on his knee, perhaps, and say

- *You just wait, fella. I'll show you a hot butt - later*

She would laugh a lot, this lady. She would have a warm voice and a soft body and a total disregard for the state of the sofa or the carpet. She would, in fact, be more than delighted to make imaginative use of both...

Eddie sighs. How he would lavish his secret stash on such a woman; he pictures romantic nights in petal-strewn hotel rooms, the salt sea breeze just lifting a curtain as Eddie holds her in his arms and provides whatever her generous heart and body should require.

Tam's waiting for him when he pulls up outside his house. Makes a change, Tam's often late, keeping Eddie waiting because he had a long lie, or he couldn't find his boots, or some other excuse. Eddie thinks Tam's a lazy sod but he doesn't say so

because Tam's good company and not all the boys are. You can have a laugh with Tam and he doesn't mind when Eddie plays his Patsy Cline CD.

An hour later and they're still looking for the site. It should have taken them half an hour but they got snarled up in a one way system, and they're going round it for the third time. Eddie's swearing loudly by now. The one time Tam's punctual and they're still going to be late. He's just setting off round the system again when Tam says

- Why do you not just use the satnav?

Eddie snarls a reply.

- Easy, says Tam. A kid could do it.

Eddie growls something.

- There, suddenly shouts Tam. It's just there. You passed it. Go back round and I'll show you.

At dinner time, Tam offers to show Eddie how the satnav works. It takes them a wee while to make the screen pop up and Tam has to show Eddie a few times how to put in the address and touch the right buttons to get the route. They decide they'll try it out on the way home even though they know the road.

Eddie sets it up with Tam's postcode and after a couple of goes, manages to stroke all the right buttons in the right order. An arrow appears. Tam says

- You need to turn the volume up Eddie. Here.

And then she speaks. She says

- *Head south west on Victoria Street. In one hundred yards, turn right*

And it's her. It's the one. The woman of his dreams. Her voice is warm, low, intimate; its tone is rounded with a slight huskiness, just like Patsy at her best. He swerves and curses, then says

- Sorry pet

Tam laughs and points a finger

- You don't have to answer her back, Ed. Just do as you're told and she'll give you no bother.

Eddie can't answer him. She's speaking again

- *Turn right into Dalmilling Road, then left onto Appen Way*

He obeys her without question all the way to Tam's house. When she says

- *You have arrived at your destination*

he feels his heart beating faster than he can ever remember. He hardly hears Tam's banter and his own goodbye is automatic. Instead of going straight home, he takes a long way round, heading for the Shore Road which is quiet at this time. Eddie needs to think.

He parks up and tries to remember how to set the postcode for somewhere, anywhere, other than home, but before he can touch the screen, she says

- *Well thank goodness for that, Eddie. I thought he'd never go. Now I've got you to myself, honey, we can talk properly*
- Who are you? says Eddie. I don't even know your name

Her laughter resonates around the inside of the car. It is low and generous and invites confidences.

- *You mean we haven't been introduced, Ed? But you know who I am, don't you?*

Eddie can't speak; he knows now that she is everything he has ever wanted, but he can't find the words to say it.

- *You turned me on, Eddie, she says*
- *I did, says Eddie*
- *You don't know how long I've been waiting for you, Eddie ... her voice drops even lower, her words are warm honey...how I've longed for you to stroke my touchscreen. And now that you have, Eddie, we can be anywhere we want to be. I'll take you, baby, wherever you want to go...*

As Eddie gazes at the screen, it seems to flicker. At the same instant, he becomes aware of an aroma of coconut oil, mixed with the scent of a sea breeze on a hot, sandy beach. There is a hint of pineapple juice, or is it piña colada?

In the screen, behind it, it seems to Eddie, turquoise waves roll rhythmically onto bright, white sand. Faintly, so faintly, he hears the waves' rhythm echoed by a steel band. Eddie closes his eyes, and the beating sun lights up his mind. He moves into the shade of his beach shack bar and breathes in the perfumes of possibility.

Around him on the sea-washed bare boards of the bar are the mismatched and hectic colours of the chairs, the fruit-laden cocktails and bright patterned cloths clipped to rickety tables. Here will never be needed the new sofa, the fitted carpet, the accent wall.

He opens his eyes again, slowly focusing on the touch screen. Huge eyes the colour of a turquoise sea gaze back at him.

- *Not piña colada, Eddie, Sex on the Beach.*

The steel band is closer now, its reggae rhythms making him want to move and sway in his seat. The scent of coconut oil fills his head; the heat of the sun beats down on the brilliant waves and flings their glistening sparkles back to the hot sky. The corner of a curtain moves gently in the salt sea breeze.

- *At the next roundabout, take the first exit and continue west...*
- *west...*
- *west.*