

Ticktock

by

Dean Koontz

one

two

three

four

five

six

seven

eight

nine

To Gerda
with the promise
of
sand, surf
and a Scootie
of our own

To see what we have never seen,
to be what we have never been,
to shed the chrysalis and fly,
depart the earth, kiss the sky,
to be reborn, be someone new:
is this a dream or is it true?

Can our future be cleanly shorn
from a life to which we're born?
Is each of us a creature free
or trapped at birth by destiny?
Pity those who believe the latter.
Without freedom, nothing matters.

-The Book of Counted Sorrows

In the real world
as in dreams
nothing is quite
what it seems.

-The Book of Counted Sorrows

ONE

Out of a cloudless sky on a windless November day came a sudden shadow that swooped across the bright aqua Corvette. Tommy Phan was standing beside the car, in pleasantly warm autumn sunshine, holding out his hand to accept the keys from Jim Shine, the salesman, when the fleeting shade touched him. He heard a brief thrumming like frantic wings. Glancing up, he expected to glimpse a sea gull, but not a single bird was in sight.

Unaccountably, the shadow had chilled him as though a cold wind had come with it, but the air was utterly still. He shivered, felt a blade of ice touch his palm, and jerked his hand back, even as he realized, too late, that it wasn't ice but merely the keys to the Corvette. He looked down in time to see them hit the pavement.

He said, Sorry, and started to bend over.

Jim Shine said, No, no. I'll get 'em.

Perplexed, frowning, Tommy raised his gaze to the sky again. Unblemished blue. Nothing in flight.

The nearest trees, along the nearby street, were phoenix palms with huge crowns of fronds, offering no branches on which a bird could alight. No birds were perched on the roof of the car dealership either.

Pretty exciting, Shine said.

Tommy looked at him, slightly disoriented. Huh?

Shine was holding out the keys again. He resembled a pudgy choirboy with guileless blue eyes. Now, when he winked, his *face* squinched into a leer that was meant to be comic but that seemed disconcertingly like a glimpse of genuine and usually well-hidden decadence. Getting that first 'vette is almost as good as getting your first piece of ass.

Tommy was trembling and still inexplicably cold. He accepted the keys. They no longer felt like ice.

The aqua Corvette waited, as sleek and cool as a high mountain spring slipping downhill over polished stones. Overall length: one hundred seventy-eight and a half inches. Wheelbase: ninety-six-point-two inches. Seventy-point-seven inches in width at the dogleg, forty-six-point-three inches high, with a minimum ground clearance of four-point-two inches.

Tommy knew the technical specifications of this car better than any preacher knew the details of any Bible story. He was a Vietnamese-American, and America was his religion; the highway was his church, and the Corvette was about to become the sacred vessel by which he partook of communion.

Although he was no prude, Tommy was mildly offended when Shine compared the transcendent experience of Corvette ownership to sex. For the moment, at least, the Corvette was better than any bedroom games, more exciting, purer, the very embodiment of speed and grace and freedom.

Tommy shook Jim Shine's soft, slightly moist hand and slid into the driver's seat. Thirty-six and a half inches of headroom. Forty-two inches of leg room.

His heart was pounding. He was no longer chilled. In *fact*, he felt flushed.

He had already plugged his cellular phone into the cigarette lighter. The Corvette was *his*.

Crouching at the open window, grinning, Shine said, You're not just a mere mortal anymore.

Tommy started the engine. A ninety-degree V8. Cast-iron block. Aluminium heads with hydraulic lifters.

Jim Shine raised his voice. No longer like other men. Now you're a *god*.

Tommy knew that Shine spoke with a good-humoured mockery of the cult of the automobile yet he half believed that it was true. Behind the wheel of the Corvette, with this childhood dream fulfilled, he seemed to be full of the power of the car, exalted.

With the Corvette still in park, he eased his foot down on the accelerator, and the engine responded with a deep-throated growl. Five-point-seven litres of displacement with a ten-and-a-half-to-one compression ratio. Three hundred horsepower.

Rising from a crouch, stepping back, Shine said, Have fun.

Thanks, Jim.

Tommy Phan drove away from the Chevrolet dealership, into a California afternoon so blue and high and deep with promise that it was possible to believe he would live forever. With no purpose except to enjoy the Corvette, he went west to Newport Beach and then south on the fabled Pacific Coast Highway, past the enormous harbour full of yachts, through Corona Del Mar, along the newly developed hills called Newport Coast, with beaches and gently breaking surf and the sun-dappled ocean to his right, listening to an oldies radio station that rocked with the Beach Boys, the Everly Brothers, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Roy Orbison.

At a stoplight in Laguna Beach, he pulled beside a classic Corvette: a silver 1963 Sting Ray with boat-tail rear end and split rear window. The driver, an aging surfer type with blond hair and a walrus moustache, looked at the new aqua 'vette and then at Tommy. Tommy made a circle of his thumb and forefinger, letting the stranger know that the Sting Ray was a fine machine, and the guy replied with a smile and a thumbs-up sign, which made Tommy feel like part of a secret club.

As the end of the century approached, some people said that the American dream was almost extinguished and that the California dream was ashes. Nevertheless, for Tommy Phan on this wonderful autumn afternoon, the promise of his country and the promise of the coast were burning bright.

The sudden swooping shadow and the inexplicable chill were all but forgotten.

He drove through Laguna Beach and Dana Point to San Clemente, where at last he turned and, as twilight fell, headed north again. Cruising aimlessly. He was getting a feel for the way the Corvette handled. Weighing three thousand two hundred and ninety-eight pounds, it hugged the pavement, low and solid, providing sports car intimacy with the road and incomparable responsiveness. He wove through a number of tree-lined residential streets merely to confirm that the Corvette's curb-to-curb turning diameter was forty feet, as promised.

Entering Dana Point from the south this time, he switched off the radio, picked up his cellular phone, and called his mother in Huntington

Beach. She answered on the second ring, speaking Vietnamese, although she had immigrated to the United States twenty-two years ago, shortly before the fall of Saigon, when Tommy had been only eight years old. He loved her, but sometimes she made him crazy.

Hi, Mom.

Tuong? she said.

Tommy, he reminded her, for he had not used his Vietnamese name for many years. Phan Tran Tuong had long ago become Tommy Phan. He meant no disrespect for his family, but he was far more American now than Vietnamese.

His mother issued a long-suffering sigh because she would have to use English. A year after they arrived from Vietnam, Tommy had insisted that he would speak only English; even as a little kid, he had been determined to pass eventually for a native-born American.

You sound funny, she said with a heavy accent.

It's the cellular phone.

Whose phone?

The car phone.

Why you need car phone, Tuong?

Tommy. They're really handy, couldn't get along without one. Listen, Mom, guess what

Car phones for big shots.

Not anymore. Everybody's got one.

I don't. Phone and drive too dangerous.

Tommy sighed and was slightly rattled by the realization that his sigh sounded exactly like his mother's. I've never had an accident, Mom.

You will, she said firmly.

Even with one hand, he was able to handle the Corvette with ease on the long straightaways and wide sweeps of the Coast Highway. Rack and

pinion steering with power assist. Rear-wheel drive. Four-speed automatic transmission with torque converter. He was *gliding*.

His mother changed the subject: Tuong, haven't seen you in weeks.

We spent Sunday together, Mom. This is only Thursday.

They had gone to church together on Sunday. His father was born a Roman Catholic, and his mother converted before marriage, back in Vietnam, but she also kept a small Buddhist shrine in one corner of their living room. There was usually fresh fruit on the red altar, and sticks of incense bristled from ceramic holders.

You come to dinner? she asked.

Tonight? Gee, no, I can't. See, I just

We have *com tay cam*.

just bought

You remember what is *com tay cam* maybe forget all about your mother's cooking?

Of course, I know what it is, Mom. Chicken and rice in a clay pot. It's delicious.

Also having shrimp and watercress soup. You remember shrimp and watercress soup?

I remember, Mom.

Night was creeping over the coast. Above the rising land to the east, the heavens were black and stippled with stars. To the west, the ocean was inky near the shore, striped with the silvery foam of incoming breakers, but indigo toward the horizon, where a final blade of bloody sunlight still cleaved the sea from the sky.

Cruising through the falling darkness, Tommy *did* feel a little bit like a god, as Jim Shine had promised. But he was unable to enjoy it because, at the same time, he felt too much like a thoughtless and ungrateful son.

His mother said, Also having stir fry celery, carrots, cabbage, some peanuts very good. My *Nuoc Mam* sauce.

You make the best *Nuoc Mam* in the world, and the best *com tay cam*,
but I

Maybe you got wok there in car with phone, you can drive and cook at
same time?

In desperation he blurted, Mom, I bought a new Corvette!

You bought phone *and* Corvette?

No, I've had the phone for years. The

What's this Corvette?

You know, Mom. A car. A sports car.

You bought sports car?

Remember, I always said if I was a big success some day

What sport?

Huh?

Football?

His mother was stubborn, more of a traditionalist than was the Queen of England, and set in her ways, but she was not thick-headed or uninformed. She knew perfectly well what a sports car was, and she knew what a Corvette was, because Tommy's bedroom walls had been papered with pictures of them when he was a kid. She also knew what a Corvette meant to Tommy, what it symbolized; she sensed that, in the Corvette, he was moving still farther away from his ethnic roots, and she disapproved. She wasn't a screamer, however, and she wasn't given to scolding, so the best way she could find to register her disapproval was to pretend that his car and his behaviour in general were so bizarre as to be virtually beyond her understanding.

Baseball? she asked.

They call the colour bright aqua metallic. It's beautiful, Mom, a lot like the colour of that vase on your living-room mantel. It's got