CHORUS: A man is sitting on the sidewalk.
   He is wearing a T-shirt with sunflowers on it.
   Who is he? What is he thinking?

Jeremy sat on the sidewalk and started thinking of distant lands, sweltering swamps, crocodiles, yellow, and purple birds. The tropics... Africa perhaps... Somewhere really far and really hot, with fist-sized insects.

Boy, was it hot in Oxnard. The sunflowers on his shirt were starting to wilt in the heat. “Maybe I should go back inside and get something to drink,” Jeremy thought.

He stood up briskly, and for a few seconds an overwhelming head rush transported him to the swamps of Africa. Guessing his way through a melee of colorful birds and exotic insects, he walked into the dealership, grabbed a coke, and stood for a moment in the cool of the air-conditioned showroom.

CHORUS: Cool is the showroom, and cool is the coke.
   May they refresh him, and the birds disperse,
   So that the sunflowers may not wilt!
The birds and the insects cleared up and gradually turned into glossy new cars with gas mileage stickers. He walked back out to the gate and leaned against a pole. He opened the can with an august gesture, expecting a majestic and instantly refreshing *psshhht!* A *psshhht!* just like in TV commercials, unleashing floods of ice-cold soda bursting around him in slow motion, with attractive young people smiling their heads apart out of the sheer bliss of advertising a carbonated beverage.

But the *psshhht!* didn’t happen at all. Instead, the can unwillingly creaked open and delivered to his lips a vaguely cool sparkly liquid.

CHORUS: Psshhht! Be soothed, Jeremy,
    Soothed and cooled,
    Cooled and refreshed,
    For as the can creaks,
    Carbonated bliss flows all around you!

He leaned back and started imagining that he felt better. Above him, a big red and white welcome sign read:
    “Oxnard Plymouth — Our Strength Is Our Commitment To Your Satisfaction.”

CHORUS: Our satisfaction is your commitment,
    Our commitment is capital,
    Our capital is strong! Yes, our capital is strong,
    And strong is our satisfaction.
    Welcome, noble customer,
    Welcome to Oxnard Plymouth!

One of the sunflowers died of heat exhaustion and fell off Jeremy’s shirt onto the sidewalk.

CHORUS: Thus ends the life of a flower.
    May it rest in the scorching peace of the sidewalk.
A few feet behind Jeremy was a row of quality pre-owned cars, each of which was exactly the one every customer had been looking for. Those were not just average used cars: they all had passed the dealership’s thorough 37-point inspection, an experience that few vehicles could relate to.

CHORUS: Poor, lonely, pre-owned cars!
Their life has been pain, their life has been suffering.
Now their fate is to sit in the sun, patiently,
And hope that a customer will soon engage
With them, weathered wretches,
In a life-long partnership.
For them, love at first sight is a long-forgotten ideal,
At best they now hope for respect and shelter,
Like disillusioned whores lined up
In a low-budget brothel.

Across the driveway a customer was looking at a new Plymouth Malaga Custom Sedan. A sticker in the back left window explained that the Malaga was a full-size expression of Plymouth value. The car itself was glued to the back of the sticker to support that claim. The gas mileage sticker promised frequent acquaintance with pumps.

CHORUS: The customer is a mature buyer,
Trailed by a wife and a belly.
Which is respectable? And which is decorative?

He had already opened the driver’s door and was now in the midst of a sensual experience, caressing the inside upholstery carved out of solid plastic wood. His wife, respectful of her husband’s sure-footed taste in matters of fake wood upholstery, seemed resigned to be supplanted by a Plymouth as the main object of desire in his aging harem. She turned away and looked up at the plastic banner above the car that claimed: “The New Plymouth Malaga: The Affordable American Legend.” It was unclear whether the term “legend” meant that the model had been
around forever, or whether it acknowledged something fictional about the whole claim.

**CHORUS:** In either case, A man who has successfully
Carried such a belly through the years
Is entitled to feel patriotic,
Especially if that is the affordable thing to do.

Jeremy looked at the Malaga again. “That car looks like a cereal box tilted on its side,” he thought. He sipped up the last drops of coke, tossed the can in a graceful swing, and began to mosey on down to the Malaga stand.

As he came closer to the customer, he licked his lips, then turned all his facial muscles on “twitch” mode to reset their expression. The twitch was properly executed. It cleared the default “gonna-catch-that-fat-fish” appearance and replaced it with a more amenable one. Just in time for contact, he retrieved the “hi-I’m-Jerry-how-may-I-help-you?” look from his batch of stored expressions, installed it on his face, and successfully docked onto the customer.

**CHORUS:** Twitch, Jeremy, twitch,
And dock onto the customer,
And sell him a car!
But beware, for he’s a mature buyer!

“Hi, I’m Jerry, how may I help you?” Jeremy asked the man cheerfully.

Touched by such a spontaneous display of friendliness, the customer searched for an appropriate response but did not find one exactly adapted to that situation. In the absence of a specific protocol, his facial expression defaulted to the forty-year college reunion “I-have-no-idea-who-you-are-but-it’s-nice-to-see-you-again” smile.

“Hi Jerry, I’m Randall,” he chanced.

“Nice meeting you, Randall. So you’re looking at a Malaga, huh?”
CHORUS: It’s working! The college reunion smile
Has proved highly reusable.
And now Jeremy and his customer
Are obviously going to become good friends,
And all that would never have been possible
Without the Plymouth Malaga,
The affordable American legend!

In the meantime, Randall’s wife was exploring the realm of her
new freedom, the Malaga’s generously sized passenger seat. A
joyful yellow label on the glove compartment informed her that
“airbags can severely injure or kill young children sitting in the
front seat.” Her curiosity then took her to the visor, and there
she discovered a previously hidden mirror.

“Oh, cool!” she thought, secretly using the word “cool” like
younger people do on TV. “Now I can see the inside of the car
backwards.”

She sat in the passenger seat and looked in the visor mirror
for a while. Not only could she see the inside of the car back-
wards, but also the back window, the lid of the trunk, and the
world beyond it—all of it backwards. In that exotic world, she
saw that cars were driving on the wrong side of the road and
license plates were printed in a different alphabet. At that mo-
ment an ambulance, also driving on the wrong side of the road,
dashed by with its lights and sirens on, and then disappeared
into the corner of the mirror.

“Probably some child who got severely injured or killed by an
airbag,” she thought.

CHORUS: Airbags can severely injure
Or kill
Young children sitting in the front seat.

“And what do you drive now, Randall?” Jeremy asked.

“Actually, I have a Plymouth Malaga right now, but you know,
the older model. I’ve had eight different Malagas. Loved them
all. Got my first one when Charlotte and I moved here in 1966.
Is that right, honey?” Randall turned around and waited for his wife’s sanction.

“It was 1965 actually. November 1965, honey,” she responded.

Randall turned back to Jeremy, gave him a fake blink of complicity and added in a softer and more musical voice: “She’s the boss, she knows everything. If she says 1965, she’s gotta be right!”

Jeremy generated a competent fake look of sympathy, and steered the conversation back to the car:

“I bet the Malaga looked pretty different back in 1965.”

“Doesn’t matter what it looks like: if it has the same name, it’s the same car,” Randall asserted, with the authority of someone who has successively owned eight unrelated but homonymous cars.

“Well, tell me Randall, would you like to take it for a test drive?” Jeremy asked.

Randall turned to his wife: “What do you say, Charlotte?”

“I say go for it, Randy.”

CHORUS: Go for it, Randy,
       Go and test-drive the car,
       For a Malaga once is always a Malaga.

Jeremy walked back into the dealership and came back out a few minutes later with a pile of papers. “How can this man stand to carry so much fat when it’s so hot? He should be melting or something,” he thought.

In the meantime, Randall was sitting at the wheel and playing with the Malaga’s various gadgets. He adjusted the power seat a hundred times, then rubbed his hands on the steering wheel, pursing his lips and emitting a slight moan as he imagined himself driving a new Malaga.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Jeremy said as he opened the back door. “Let’s get this baby on the road.”

Randall began commenting on the car as they drove off.

“It drives very nicely. Yes, very nicely indeed. You know, actually, when I bought my first Malaga, that was back in
1966 — wow, you probably weren’t even born — well, anyways, back then…”

Like most contemporary car salesmen, Jeremy was luckily equipped with Elderly Customer Protection. He activated it promptly and turned on the “Oh, really? Hmm…” function with a two-minute default interval.

Randall went on:

“And I never thought I’d buy one at first, because you know, I mean, it’s like you always think that you’re going to do something, but in the end, life is so unpredictable, so you know, I thought that…”

“Oh, really? Hmm…” Jeremy replied after exactly two minutes.

“But what you’re not going to believe is that, immediately after I got out of college, which was quite some time ago as you can imagine, well, Charlotte and I — and I know you’re going to say ‘Wow, you already knew her,’ but anyway, what we did was…”

“Oh, really? Hmm…”

“And things were pretty different back then, but…”

“Oh, really? Hmm…”

“Although, of course, as you can imagine…”

“Now, we’re going to make a right at the third stoplight onto Vineyard Avenue and we’re going to get on the 101, so you can appreciate how this car drives on the freeway.” Jeremy said, shifting into manual mode for the time of an utterance.

A few blocks before the freeway entrance, though, traffic on Oxnard Boulevard had been abruptly interrupted by a large and spectacular accident.

CHORUS: Accidents are so gothic,
So large and spectacular!
Now Randy, Charlotte, and Jeremy
Are stuck in a line of cars,
Like ball bearings in rollerblade wheels.
What can they do, but wait for the normal flow to resume?
And entertain themselves with the spectacle
Of cars piled up vertically,
Instead of lined up horizontally.

“Don’t you think there’s something very gothic about accidents?” Randall asked.
“Sure. Yes, gothic. There’s something quite gothic. Very gothic.” Jeremy had no idea what Randall meant, but it didn’t matter as long as he was going to buy the car.
“Not just gothic in fact, but there’s something electric, almost epileptic about accidents… You know, it’s not supposed to happen, but it’s going to happen anyways. I think it’s very gothic, and epileptic at the same time.”
“Yes, epileptic.” Jeremy repeated. The conversation made no sense to him.
“Epileptic. Yes, it’s epileptic, that’s what it is. It’s like something suddenly goes wrong in the flow of traffic, and bang!”
“Bang, yes. Bang indeed.”
“Bang! Bang! That’s what so gothic about it.”

CHORUS: Bang! Bang!

A small body was being carried into an ambulance on a stretcher. Paramedics and police were swarming around the scene like fruit flies hovering above a trashcan. Randall rolled down his window and stretched his neck out of the car to get a better view. In the lane next to his, an elegant lady with a dark blue silk scarf in the passenger seat of a red convertible Ford Mustang was doing the same.
“Can you see anything?” Randall asked her.
“I think it’s a kid they’re carrying on that stretcher.” The lady replied.
“A kid? Oh my, I think you’re right.”
“Poor thing. People should be more careful when they’re driving with kids, don’t you think?”
“Yes, certainly.”
“Too many people drive with small kids in the front seat. That’s really dangerous,” she asserted.
“Yes, they could go through the windshield in a crash... although with airbags, I don’t know,” Randall replied.
“Actually, airbags can severely injure or kill young children seated in the front seat.”
“Is that so? Well, good thing I don’t have young children anymore... I do have a daughter, but she’s definitely old enough to ride in the front seat,” Randall smiled.
“Oh, you have a daughter? I have a daughter, too. She’s 31. She just got married last week, to a really nice gentleman from San Diego. He’s a doctor, a phroncologist I think. His folks are from Mexico, but they’re very nice people. How is old is your daughter?”
“My daughter is also 31, isn’t that a coincidence?”
“By the way, I’m Janet,” said the elegant lady, stretching her hand out of the Ford Mustang.
“Nice to meet you Janet, I’m Randall. Strange place to meet people, isn’t it?”
“I know! It’s very gothic...”
Randall wasn’t quite sure what she meant.

CHORUS: What a coincidence!
She has a daughter, he has a daughter!

By a clear but tacit agreement, the conversation had now officially died, but it would have been rude for Randall to roll up his window immediately. He waited a few seconds, pretending to be looking in the distance and purposely not establishing eye-contact with Janet, while she was doing the same on her side. Finally, he rolled up the window and turned back to his wife and Jeremy.
“Guess what? That lady in that car next to us — her name is Janet by the way — well, she has a daughter who’s 31 — the same age as our daughter — isn’t that incredible?”
“Oh really? Hmm…” Jeremy replied.
“Our daughter just got married last week to a doctor from San Diego,” Charlotte intervened proudly.
“Oh really? Hmm…”
“He’s a phroncologist.”
“Oh really? Hmm…”
“Note that I had never heard of that specialty before our daughter married that gentleman, but I hear they make a very good living.”
“Oh really? Hmm.”
“His family is from Mexico,” Charlotte then conceded.
“Although in all honesty, they’re very nice people,” Randall added.
“Oh really? Hmm…”
“And you know what?” Randall charged anew, “That lady — Janet — her daughter also got married last week to a doctor from San Diego, and his family is also from Mexico! Isn’t that quite something?”
“Oh really? Hmm…”
“You know, Randy, maybe we just have the same daughter as that lady,” Charlotte suggested.
“You’re right. That would explain it. Yes, of course, it must be the same daughter, otherwise it’s too random of a coincidence.”
“Oh really? Hmm…” Jeremy commented with the enthusiasm of a wristwatch telling the time.
“Of course. We must have the same daughter.” Charlotte concurred.
“What time is it, by the way?” Randall asked.

CHORUS: Of course, it must be the same daughter!
| His folks are from Mexico. |
| How gothic! |
| Somewhere really far and really hot! |
Jeremy had no idea what they were talking about. In fact he didn’t really care. He was staring at the window of a travel agency, mesmerized by a colorful cardboard placard advertising a cruise to some distant land. His eyes drowned in hazy reverie, he could see sweltering swamps, crocodiles, yellow and purple birds. The tropics… Africa perhaps… Somewhere really far and really hot, with fist-sized insects.
“So, Jeremy, how far are you going?” Charlotte asked. Jeremy snapped out of the tropics and responded politely: “Malaga.” “Oh, Malaga? We’ll be there in less than an hour, I think. What do you think, Janet?” “Well, my dear Charlotte, considering how fast you’re driving we might even get there earlier — if we don’t drive off the cliff and crash, that is.” “I’m so grateful you guys were willing to give me a ride,” Jeremy said for the third time. “If you hadn’t stopped to pick me up, I’d probably still be waiting for one of those Spanish buses. I get a sense they’re not very reliable. I don’t know…” “They’re not,” Charlotte confirmed. “That’s why we always rent a car when we come here!” Janet added. “Do you come to Spain a lot?” he asked. “We try to come here every year. It’s so nice out here. We first visited Spain in 1966. Is that right, Charlotte?” “Actually, 1965. November 1965. Of course, Spain has changed quite a bit since then, but we still like it. We meet lots of people from England and Germany, but we rarely run into other Americans.” “I must be the first one you’ve met this time, am I not?” “You might very well be.”

Jeremy looked out of the red convertible Ford Mustang onto the Mediterranean, trying to breathe in the salty air. The wind was blowing his long hair into a wavy brown pennant as the car breezed along the twists of the road. “This is so cool, this is so incredibly cool,” he thought. He turned back to Charlotte. “So, are you guys sisters, or…?” Charlotte and Janet gave each other a smiling glance. Janet replied: “We’re lifelong living partners.”
“Ah? Okay…” Jeremy was a little taken aback, but tried to act normal to show that he was “cool” with it. He continued on a different topic, making an effort for the abrupt transition to appear seamless:

“So, Charlotte, what do you do, I mean, what kind of job do you have?”

“I’m a writer. Not, like, a famous writer or anything, of course. I used to think I would become a great writer when I was your age, but I’ve kind of given up since.”

“Really? Why?”

“Well, I don’t know. I haven’t written that many books, to begin with. And most of them suck anyway. I’m not into it anymore. I guess you’d call the stuff I wrote ‘airport literature.’ You know, the kind of book you’d pick up while you’re waiting for a connecting flight in a place like Cincinnati, when it’s some random hour in the morning, you’ve already bought a coke and the local newspaper, but you don’t really care to read its eighth-grade-style editorial about urban violence, you’ve walked the alleys up and down a few times and ascertained that you don’t need a third overpriced hot dog or any name-brand golf equipment. Finally you mosey into a newsstand, pick any paperback with a shiny cover and a generic-sounding title printed in silver letters, hand a few dollars to a woman with a name tag that says ‘Rosalinda,’ and then you walk away and look for the departure gate. That’s my book you have in hand. You’ll read it on the plane, then you’ll forget it on your seat, and you won’t remember the title or the name of the author. That’s me. That’s my little contribution to the world.”

“I guess you don’t sound too enthusiastic about your job… Are you working on anything right now?”

“Sort of. It’s about this guy who’s a terrorist from an anarchist group and he’s out to blow up a car dealership. Anyways he ends up rigging an airbag pouch with explosives. It’s supposed to be a thriller, but I guess the plot kind of drags on after a while. I think I might turn it into a cookbook instead.”
“Well, that sounds… uh… wonderful. Yeah, it’s got exciting ideas and all. I hope to read your book when it’s finished. Where do you think I’ll be able to find it?”

“Cincinnati airport. Try the newsstand on a dull winter morning.”

CHANT: That’s her little contribution to the world,
   Somewhere really far and really hot,
   With sunflowers fields.

Jeremy raised his eyebrows and remained silent. He didn’t know what to make of Charlotte’s response, so the conversation stalled. He looked over towards the sea as the car rushed along the narrow clifftop highway. The Mediterranean was glowing with bright afternoon light, and each wave sprayed little white suns onto a carpet of undulating blue water. On the other side of the road, sunflower fields stretched out to the horizon, each flower avidly drinking color from the sunlight.

The words “dull winter morning” stuck in Jeremy’s head, bleached of their content by the Spanish sun like dry bones in the desert. He tried to paint the landscape gray and to imagine winter in his mind, but blue and yellow kept growing back in the corners. Finally he arrived at an image of a gray sea of cheap novels, a dead and wilted Mediterranean pounding cold paper waves against the gray cliffs of Cincinnati airport.

“This is so, like, gothic. It’s just totally gothic.” Jeremy thought for himself, then addressed the two ladies:

“Don’t you think this whole country is so gothic?” he asked, punctuating the question as if it was in iambic pentameter.

“Yes, Spain is very gothic. Undoubtedly gothic,” Janet responded in an ambiguous, even voice. He expected more but she said nothing else. He wasn’t sure if she was making fun of him.

“You know, it’s like, it’s just… gothic, I guess. Do you know what I mean?”
He felt that his question wasn’t making sense to her, so he gave up.

A long silence followed. He couldn’t decide if it was a comfortable silence or not. It was a very opaque silence in any case: it didn’t seem to mean anything. It was not a pause, not a rest, not a punctuation mark. Just a blank space on the soundtrack, like the kind of silence found in a closed refrigerator.

Suddenly Charlotte interrupted:

“Jeremy, you didn’t tell us what you were going to do in Malaga.”

“Huh, I’m going to meet some friends, then we’ll go somewhere. I don’t know, I guess we’ll hang out, or something.”

“I see. Well, I hope you have fun there, or something.”

“Yeah, I hope.”

“Well, fellows, I think the first thing I’d like when I get out of this car is a nice, cold beer,” Janet added cheerily. “Unless, thanks to Charlotte’s sporty driving, we all get pulled out of the car on a stretcher at the bottom of this cliff, in which case I think I’ll have some IV perfusion instead.”

“Janet, you’re such a cynic… But maybe that’s why I love you…” she went on, putting her right hand on Janet’s left hand and pressing it tenderly.

Jeremy watched the interaction between the two women from the back seat, with an uncomfortable feeling of confusion, surprise, and curiosity. He said nothing and repressed a hint of a wince by drowning it in the bright blue sea.

“I love you, too,” Janet said, “but keep both your hands on the wheel, because I’d really prefer the beer over the IV perfusion…”

Eventually, a row of dark sticks began slowly sprouting behind the hills, then grew bigger and more definite in shape: some were topped by crosses, some by smoke. Finally, Malaga’s skyline of smokestacks and gothic churches appeared distinctly, and before long the road was engulfed in urban sprawl while the sea had receded behind factory outlets and car dealerships.
“Could you drop me off at the airport junction?” Jeremy asked.
“Sure,” Charlotte replied, “I didn’t know you were going to the airport. Are you flying out?”
“Well, it depends.”
“All right, as you wish.”
A few minutes later, Charlotte and Janet dropped off Jeremy at the intersection where the airport road meets the main highway. They exchanged generic greetings and polite wishes, then shelved each other’s memory away in a dungeon full of images of people met once and never again.

CHORUS: Drive with a cynic, Jeremy,
Once and never again,
But, well, it depends.

Jeremy walked for a short while and reached Malaga’s airport. “Not much of an international airport. Looks more like a lame mall,” he thought. He reached the newsstand inside the main lobby, and as planned, met his friend Randall. A girl was standing next to him. Randall started:
“Hey, here you are. I didn’t think you’d make it so quickly.”
“Who’s that?” Jeremy pointed to the girl.
“That’s Rosalinda, she’s our contact.”
“ok, good. All right, let’s get to work.”
They went behind the newsstand, where they were somewhat shielded from the crowd.
“Did you bring the things?” Rosalinda asked Jeremy firmly and with a strong Spanish accent.
“Yes, I did. It’s in the backpack.”
>Show me.”
Jeremy carefully put the small backpack on the floor, kneeled next to it, and zipped it open. Randall and Rosalinda also kneeled around the backpack and peered into it. They could see a squarish plastic object with protruding wires and what seemed like a clock. The rest of the object was in the dark.
“Are you sure it works?” Randall asked.
“Duh — how am I supposed to know?” Jeremy replied with a little impatience at the naiveté of the question. “If I knew for sure, I wouldn’t be here to tell you.”

**CHORUS:** For sure, he wouldn’t be here if he knew.
He wouldn’t know for sure if he were here.
If he knew, he wouldn’t be here for sure.
Drive with a cynic, Jeremy, once and never again.
But just listen, she’s not done explaining.

“All right, where do you want to place it?” Jeremy asked.
“Over there, do you see the ticket counter of the national airline?”
“What? You want to put it on the counter? They’ll find it right away and we’ll get busted!” Randall shouted, then realized how loud he had been and contained his voice.

“Just listen to her, you moron, she’s not done explaining.”
Rosalinda continued, impervious to the animosity between Randall and Jeremy: “Right next to the counter, under the ‘no smoking’ sign, there is a large green trashcan. Do you see it? That’s where we want to put it.”

“All right, go ahead. You go over there and you put the backpack in the trashcan,” Randall said to Rosalinda.
“No. One of you should go. You are the men. Death is a man’s job. I will wait here and pray.”

“Yeah, right, don’t even start with your gender-role bullshit,” Jeremy snapped. Rosalinda gave him an angry and puzzled look. He hammered on in a quiet but decisive voice:

“Look girl, it’s your country, your cause, your people, and I’ll tell you what: Randall and I could just be sitting in America watching a movie and eating popcorn right now instead of helping you out with this. So you just go and place the goddamn backpack in the goddamn trashcan or we just call it a day and move on to something else. Entiendes?”

“Fine, just give it to me.” She almost ripped the backpack from Randall’s hands and walked off muttering a curse.
“Dude, you really pissed her off,” Randall said after Rosalinda was out of hearing range.
“I know, she’s fuming. I was waiting to see smoke come out of her nostrils. Stupid bitch.”

**CHORUS:** Tick tack tick tack tick tack,
Just wait to see smoke come out of her nostrils
Once and never again,
But, well, it depends.

Rosalinda stopped for a minute against a wall and opened the backpack. She flipped a switch on the machine, closed the backpack, then strapped it on her right shoulder and walked towards the ticket counter as casually as possible. Once there, she mingled with the crowd and started subtly inching towards the trashcan. She finally leaned against it and slowly slid the backpack into it, making sure nobody was watching. Then she pretended to stand in line for a minute and followed the crowd of passengers checking in for flight 635, after which she acted like she had forgotten something and left.

“We have seven minutes to get out of here,” she told Randall and Jeremy as they met again.
“Let’s jet then,” Randall said.
As they were walking away, Jeremy stopped suddenly and exclaimed:
“Shit, I forgot my allergy medication in the front pouch!”
“And you’re calling me a moron?” Randall replied sharply.
“So what do you suggest we do now, Mr. Smart-ass? Maybe you want to go dig into the trashcan and get your allergy medication back, so you don’t have to blow your little nose tonight? Come on, let’s just get the hell out of here.”
“Let’s go, we don’t have time to quarrel now,” Rosalinda interrupted again. Then turning to Jeremy, she added: “I thought you were professionals.”
“Yeah, Mr. Professional, why don’t you go back and look for your allergy pills? You have seven minutes before you get your sinuses cleared big time.” Randall added.

“Well, I guess there’s no point dwelling on that now,” Jeremy mumbled back.

“Whatever, you arrogant shithead.”
III

CHORUS: It's a dull winter morning
On the gray cliffs of Cincinnati airport,
You arrogant shithead.
But cold paper waves keep swelling in the corners,
Some topped by crosses and some by smoke.

Randall strolled by the golf equipment store, thinking: “Gosh, I wonder who would ever buy that stuff, especially in an airport.”
He wandered up and down the alleys of Cincinnati’s dreary airport, not knowing if he should buy a third hot dog or find something else to keep himself busy before his next plane left. He thought: “Maybe I’ll call Charlotte. Let’s see: what time is it in Oxnard? Oh yes, she’ll be awake.”
“Charlotte? It’s me! Did I wake you up, honey?”
“No, I was up. Where are you, sweetheart?”
“Cincinnati airport.”
“Where? Cincinnati? What are you doing there? Isn’t it very cold there?”
“I have a connecting flight in an hour, but there isn’t much to do between now and then.”
“Buy the paper. I don’t know. Get yourself one of those cheap novels and read it on the plane. It’ll keep you busy.”
“Yeah, I guess.”
“How did your meeting go?”
“You know, same old. I’ll be happy to be back home. All right, I’ll see you in a few hours. Love you.”
“Love you Randy.”

Randall hung up and strolled down to the newsstand. He took a look at the local paper, then suddenly turned to the first person he could find, a woman with a name tag that read “Rosalinda”:
“Wow, did you see that? A bunch of kids from around here blew up an airport in Spain! 6 dead and 35 injured… Gee, that’s no small job they did, your locals! Let’s see… It says they’re in an
anarchist terrorist group... Well, I tell you, in my time, American kids didn’t screw around in foreign countries with explosives...”

The woman muttered something back about how gothic it was. Randall gave up trying to establish a conversation, handed her a dollar for the paper and walked away.

He finally sat down in the waiting area immediately next to the departure gate, watching planes land and take off in the gray winter morning. “Where are all those people flying to?” he wondered. Foreign countries probably. Sunny, warm places. He started thinking of distant lands, sweltering swamps, crocodiles, yellow and purple birds. The tropics... Africa perhaps... Somewhere really far and really hot, with fist-sized insects.
“Isn’t it really hot today?” Jeremy commented.
“Oh, tell me about it!” Charlotte replied.
“So, would you like to take this car for a test drive?”
“Sure.”

“So, Charlotte, what do you drive right now?”
“Well, I don’t drive anything right now.”
“Oh really? So is this going to be your first car?”
Charlotte’s expression turned bleak: “Well, when my dear husband was with us, I never had to drive. He would just take me everywhere. Randall, my husband, died a year ago. Do you remember that terrorist attack on that airport in Spain? It was in the news everywhere.”
“Yes, yes, I remember that.”
“Well, he was one of seven Americans who died there. He was on a business trip and he was just heading home.”
“Oh, I’m so sorry. That’s so… gothic, I mean, I’m so sorry to hear that. It’s such a gothic way to die…”
“In any case, our daughter Janet has been trying to convince me for a year to get a car and to take charge of my life. So I guess I made it in the end.” Charlotte eventually looked up and forcing a painful smile onto her face.
“Well, that’s wonderful. It’s very courageous of you. I hope we can find just the car you need. Your daughter will be proud of you.”
“There’s just one thing I need to ask you: my daughter insists that I should buy a car with an airbag: does this car have an airbag?”
“But of course! It even has two airbags. Look right here — I mean, no, don’t look, look at the road while you’re driving, of course — but when we stop somewhere, you’ll see there’s a label right here that says ‘airbag,’ and another one right on your steering wheel. You’ll see.”
“All right.”
“Now, we’re going to make a right at the third stoplight onto Vineyard Avenue and we’re going to get on the 101, so you can appreciate how this car drives on the freeway.”

CHORUS: Painful is your smile, Charlotte,
Yes, it was such a gothic way to die.
May you appreciate how this car drives on the freeway,
Once and never again.

A few blocks before the freeway entrance, though, traffic on Oxnard Boulevard had been abruptly interrupted by a large and spectacular accident. Two ambulances, a firetruck, and several police cars were blocking the way. Paramedics were swarming around like honeybees while the police was trying to keep passers-by away.

The police chief walked with an ambulance technician to the edge of the cliff and pointed down:
“See, they’re down there.”
“Oh God, they must have driven themselves off the cliff!”
“Yup. I don’t know how the hell we’re going to get down there.”
“Well, they’re probably all dead anyways. That’s one hell of a fall. I can’t see how anyone could possibly survive that.” The technician shook his head.

“Let’s at least try to send someone down,” the police chief concluded, then walked back to the firetruck to seek logistical assistance. Two officers were sitting inside the truck. One of them was reading a book. The other one was whistling the jingle of a TV show.

“Hey there, what are you reading?” The police chief asked the first one.
“I don’t know. Some random book. I picked it up on a bench, I guess someone must have forgotten it.”
“Is it any good?”
“No. Actually, it just flat out sucks. I guess you’d call it ‘airport literature,’ if you know what I mean, except that it’s kind of gothic.”
“I see. Well, anyways, do you guys think we can send someone down there?”

“Yeah, sure.” He turned to the other officer in the firetruck: “Why don’t you go? I want to finish this chapter.”

“Fine, I’ll go, give me a minute.”
At the bottom of the cliff, the crash had dipped the red convertible Ford Mustang into the sweet Mediterranean like a cookie into milk. The front was crumbled and crushed, and soaked in about a foot of water, but the back was recognizable. Finally one of the firefighters climbed his way down the cliff. It wasn’t too steep, it turned out.

**CHORUS:** Not too steep. That’s what they always say.

Just too steep for a firetruck,
Or a convertible Ford Mustang, for that matter.
But cookies must crumble and sunflowers must wilt,
May both rest in the peace of the blue Mediterranean.

Charlotte was quietly sitting behind the wheel, her eyes wide open turned up towards the sky, with just a little bit of blood drooling from the side of her mouth. The airbag had deployed, dutifully breaking her nose, while the rest of the crash had broken her neck. The firefighter examined her for an instant, felt her lack of pulse, and pronounced her dead.

Next to her, Janet was still sitting in the passenger seat, except for her head, which had detached from her body under the impact, and was now lying on the narrow strip of beach at the bottom of the cliff. Warm, peaceful waves were gently massaging the tip of her hair. The bright red blood oozing out of her severed head was slowly mixing with the Mediterranean’s saltwater, giving her a last rich and lathery shampoo.

“Blood is very good for your hair anyway,” the firefighter remarked to himself, “it acts as a conditioner.” He looked at Janet’s head on the beach and thought how blood had healthy protein that makes your hair shiny and manageable, like in TV commercials.
CHORUS: Janet had always wanted to be a model
For a shampoo commercial.
It was so beautiful to die on the beach in Spain,
While realizing her dream.