

The Ballad of Choosing Cars
by Starling, age 13, Portland

Laura Tidderwodle really didn't want to be there.

The process of choosing a car was already miserable enough. But having to choose a car alone while your husband went to an "emergency meeting" that had apparently come up during the exact time slot Laura had selected to visit the dealership? That was the absolute worst.

But even as Laura walked down Lincoln Street, high heels clacking and dark cut waving in the wind, to number 129 (otherwise known as Chandelweed Auto), she knew this was something she had to do. Her husband was an indifferent man who'd probably just pick the first car he saw. Laura was the planner of the new duo, the one who'd calculated precisely how many miles and gallons of fuel a new car should have. If Eric did this, he'd mess it all up. And even if he did come, it would end up being Laura who made the final call. Laura didn't really need him, but his presence was a comfort. But of course he couldn't come.

So there she was.

The dealer greeted Laura at the front entrance. He was a short and pudgy man, who went by the name of Charles Chandelweed, and who dressed exactly like one of the car dealers from the 1980s: plaid suit and all, and who had one of the worst fake New York accents known to man. Laura was already having reservations about the whole situation, even before he started discreetly smelling her hair. But he was only the tick attached to the much bigger beast of a problem: cars.

Eric's parents—now Laura's parents-in-law—had given the couple a wedding gift of \$20,000. And since Eric and Laura already had a house, they decided to invest the money into the one thing they didn't have but needed quite badly: a new ride.

The two had almost \$30,000 for this new indulgent purchase (\$10,000 from their own pocket), and they wanted something that would last.

As soon as Laura explained this to Chandelweed, he agreed immediately, saying "If quality is what you seek, Chandelweed is your man!"

And as much as she already despised the pudgy pint of a salesman, she had to admit that he was right. Chandelweed's had been rated as the best car dealership in southeast Boston, and if there was one thing Laura Tidderwodle believed in, it was reviews. And even though the one negative comment on all of

the reviews, such as EaziBeez1's review: *Excellent cars, far too much attentiveness: this dude's flirting up a storm*, was turning out to be true, overall, the dealership was turning out to be pretty worthy of praise. There were all varieties of cars parked inside the partially open garage: new and old, shiny and smooth, sports cars and trucks, vans to the skies. She could tell this guy's cars were the real deal.

Laura had decided beforehand that she wanted a big car. One that could hold kids. She'd always wanted to be a foster parent.

She told the dealer that she was looking for a bigger car, and he led her to the far end of the dealership. "Where all the bigger—and dare I say better—cars are. Fit for a fine lady like yourself." Laura followed him, very eager to get this over with.

Chandelweed babbled information along the way about cars and models and mileage, while Laura simultaneously checked for texts and texted her husband that she was at the dealer's and the car dealer was flirting with her and why did he have to have a meeting now? And as the dealer was telling her about the mileage on an SUV, a white car caught Laura's eye.

She moved over to it. "Could you tell me about this one?"

He flashed a yellow-toothed smile. "Sure, love. One of our best models. You have excellent taste. This baby's a Subaru. He's a regular land boy, and a beautiful hiker across terrain, as well as city streets. Smooth, metallic, an absolute beauty—"

"Can you tell me the details?"

"Sure, sure, whatever you want, darling. This baby has a mileage of about 26 per gallon on the city streets, and on the highway can have a mileage of 33 miles per gallon, 5-seater. Great city car. I can get you this baby for about \$20,000."

Not bad, Laura thought. *This could work*. Then she noticed a sign on the car one over: a green piece of paper in the window depicting a car, and a charger wrapped around it. She walked over. "What does this mean?"

"Oh. That's an electric. Same model, and per charge can get you 222 to 228 miles."

"Per charge?"

"Yup. Instead of using gas, she runs off a charge. Comes with a charger. You take it, plug it in, and voilà. One ready to go car."

As Charles explained the process in more depth, Laura remembered an article about electric cars she'd read in the newspaper. They were supposed to

be really good for the environment. Regular cars made exhaust fumes, and put carbon up into the air, but electric cars weren't like that.

"How long does charging take?"

He smiled toothily. "Eleven to fifty hours. Depending on the charge. Are you married, by the way? 'Cause if not, maybe I can help you out."

Laura ignored him. "And what's the price?"

"About \$40,000."

"That much? Isn't it the same model?"

"Yup." He shrugged. "No clue why it's so much more."

Laura looked at the cars. They truly looked identical, other than the green sign. Laura didn't understand how there was any difference, let alone a 20,000 dollar difference. But at the same time, she did. It was all under the hood.

Electric cars cost a lot more because of the batteries, and the fact that a metal called lithium was needed, which the world was short on. Laura had heard that this was a problem, but she hadn't realized how much of a problem. How much more the electrics cost in comparison. And as much as Laura wanted to do the right thing, she wasn't sure she could pay that money. It could make her and Eric's new life quite a lot harder.

Taking it one car at a time, Laura inspected every crevice of the first car, the gas car. She glanced at every piece of metal and plastic and glass, Looking for imperfections, desperate to find a flaw that would make her have to choose the electric. Nothing. Not so much as a scratch.

She asked the dealer for the keys, which he quickly got. And while it was amusing to see his short, pudgy form racing across the garage to his office and back again, Laura still felt kind of... stuck. She got into the driver's seat, and as she sat in the car, wondering what it would feel like to own it, Laura saw herself reflected in the rearview mirror. She imagined herself in a world clouded with exhaust and smoke and drowning polar bears like the ones on Instagram.

A world where no one could go outside because the smoke was too thick, threatening to choke them all. A world where people died daily from suffocation. A world where mothers didn't feel like they could keep their children safe. A world where scientists tried to make things better but couldn't. A world without freedom, that the "land of the free" was rapidly heading towards.

Laura left the car and asked Charles to get the electric car's keys (she had to admit, the sight of him running for a second time did lift her spirits a bit). Once he returned, Laura got in the car and sat. The seat felt exactly the same. The controls were a little different, but if Laura practiced, she knew she could master

it. This car had a different future hidden behind the windows: one with plants blooming and carbon decreasing.

A world where people grew plants on their roofs. A world where the rich helped both animals and people alike. A world where the Earth was the first priority, not making money. A world with gardens, mountains, precious natural spaces that Laura's kids and grandkids would be able to see. A world with hope, a truly free world. And if the American revolution had taught Laura anything, wasn't it that freedom was worth paying for? Even if she had to take out a loan, even if she had to sell her whole world...

Wasn't freedom worth it?

"I'll take the electric."