

When my nose finally stops bleeding and I've disposed of the bloody paper towels, Teddy Barnes insists on driving me home in his ancient Honda Civic, a car that refuses to die and that Teddy, cheap as he is, refuses to trade in. June, his wife, whose sense of self-worth is not easily tilted, drives a new Saab. "That seat goes back," Teddy says, observing that my knees are practically under my chin.

5 When we stop at an intersection for oncoming traffic, I run my fingers along the side of the seat, looking for the release. "It does, huh?"

 "It's supposed to," he says, sounding academic, helpless.

I know it's supposed to, but I give up trying to make it, preferring the illusion of suffering. I'm not a guilt provoker by nature, but I can play that role. I release a theatrical sigh intended to convey that
10 this is nonsense, that my long legs could be stretched out comfortably beneath the wheel of my own Lincoln, a car as ancient as Teddy's Civic, but built on a scale more suitable to the long-legged William Henry Devereauxs of the world, two of whom, my father and me, remain above ground,

Teddy is an insanely cautious driver, unwilling to goose his little Civic into a left turn in front of incoming traffic. "The cars are spaced just wrong. I can't help it," he explains when he sees me
15 grinning at him. Teddy's my age, forty-nine, and though his features are more boyish, he too is beginning to show signs of age. Never robust, his chest seems to have become more concave, which emphasizes his small paunch. His hands are delicate, almost feminine, hairless. His skinny legs appear lost in his trousers. It occurs to me as I study him that Teddy would have a hard time starting
20 over—that is, learning how unfamiliar things work, competing, finding a mate. The business of young men. "Why would I have to start over?" he wants to know, a frightened expression deepening the lines around the corners of his eyes.

 Apparently, to judge from the way he's looking at me now, I have spoken my thought out loud, though I wasn't aware of doing so. "Don't you ever wish you could?"

 "Could what?" he says, his attention diverted. Having spied a break in the oncoming traffic,
25 he takes his foot off the brake and leans forward, his foot poised over but not touching the gas pedal, only to conclude that the gap between the cars isn't as big as he thought, settling back into his seat with a frustrated sigh.

(432 mots)

Richard Russo, *Straight Man*, 1997