

Jalopy Blues

Written by Jack Sparacino
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Can we talk about the blues? Back in the 50's and 60's lived a popular show on TV called "Queen for a Day." It starred Jack Bailey, a backbench actor who played miniscule parts in huge hits like "It's A Wonderful Life" and "Gunsmoke."

The program foreshadowed today's avalanche of reality shows. It featured down on their luck women sharing their personal stories of hardship and loss in response to Bailey's opening charge, "Would YOU like to be Queen for a Day?!" The show dutifully featured an applause meter used to measure the audience's sympathy toward each woman's tale of woe.

Here, in today's Lowcountry, driving around town in my increasingly woebegone car, I started to feel like a contestant on this pity wrapped show. Starting with my venerable but now badly aging Audi 100-CS Quattro. My dad bought the car new in 1992 and sold it to me in 2000, shortly before he passed unexpectedly. He took great care in maintaining the cushy car and I tried to do the same. In recent years, this evolved increasingly into a shaky labor of love, as major systems began to fail. The trunk pistons gave out, no big deal, so we replaced them. But the steering rack and fuel injection also failed, along with the sunroof, cruise control (a real problem given my arthritic ankles), brakes and air conditioning (yep, only an issue for about 9 months a year). The old gal leaked oil like the Exxon Valdez (friends banned me from their driveways) and I pack ratted extra power steering fluid around in the trunk. Oh yes, and forget listening to music while you limped along . . . the audio system blew out years ago. (Cue the little bitty violins, Mr. Bailey.)

But I continued to love that old gal, nearly antique at 24. The body style remained contemporary, the paint job clean—even though the CS spent most of its life in Connecticut where salt and sand treatment of winter roads is a way of life. She selflessly offered a luxury ride, smooth and quiet with leather interior. And a cup holder! There were even some dashboard controls, which our son Jack gleefully explored one day. "Hey, what does this button do, Dad? Whoa, what about this one over here?" Push, poke, press. Tums.

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That love was reinforced every day by my knowing that the car was the only tangible *thing* I still owned from my dad. We took it fishing for blues one glorious day and traded speculations on whether either of us could duplicate our journey through grad school and earn another degree today. He said he wasn't sure, it was such a daunting experience (resulting in a doctorate in engineering from MIT). But ever optimistic, he concluded "yes" in contrast to my "no way, pop, I could never put in those endless hours under all that stress anymore."

Also emotional for me was the fond memory of driving that old Audi down to Saint Helena Island from my job in Stratford, CT when I retired in late 2005. Both of our boys joined me for the two-day trip. Jack rode shotgun up front, right where he had tested the controls years earlier, insisting we delay dinner until we found a restaurant that had *servers*. Well, we must have taught him something worthwhile, as he has never 'relished' fast food joints.

Greg, bless him, remained scrunched up in the back seat warding off a permanently crooked neck, amidst a mountain of baggage, studying Mandarin Chinese (seriously), eagerly anticipating a zippy career in international banking. He would have eaten practically anywhere, and burrowed into his notebooks as Jack and I negotiated evening arrangements. It was a great trip, one of my favorites. Pleasant chatter, evolving scenery as the grey hills of winter Connecticut gave way to lush Lowcountry creeks and spartina. Knowledge that I was *finally* retiring to enter a fishier, warmer phase of life. And yes, dinner that night off I-95 at Appleby's was just fine. Funny how food gets increasingly satisfying after, say, 9 pm which is when we finally found someplace decent with

servers

. Hunger games, anyone?

All these wonderful car memories eventually faded like your grandma's pressed flowers. A five-thousand dollar repair bill came and went, among other zingers. Then finally, this spring, I confronted another monster bill just to keep the car running, never mind actually fix everything. I began to hear a gentle knocking. "Who's that?" I queried. "It's me, Jiminy Cricket," came the answer. "It's time, Jack old bean. Time to get a new car, buddy. Seriously. And your dad would agree, right? Would he want you driving this clunker forever? *Nah*. Chirp, chirp, fweeep."

He had a point, the cute little *gryllus campestris* and Disney star. When I tried to wisecrack him about never being able to replace such a car and actually liking to drive a (ahem) hard bargain, I sounded like I was auditioning for a spot on "Queen" and felt like my nose was growing by the minute. Pinocchio style, I suppose. But what to do? Just get a new Audi and be done with it?

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Sure they're pricey, but worth it. But wait, what about that Audi A6 that dad bought shortly before he died? Wasn't that still up in Connecticut and pristine? Could that fill the bill?

Several calls later it was my brother Paul and Navy burnished Greg to the rescue. The plan? They would meet in Stamford, Greg would take possession of the car and drive it to our home down here. A few more calls later involving my insurance agent, mechanic, town hall, and DMV, and we were off and road running. With my dad seemingly looking on, I was longingly gazing out the front door when Greg came inching up our driveway in the A6.

He and his friend Jimmy had even stopped to detail the car on Lady's Island on their way. It gleamed inside and out, shouting "victory." We celebrated a few hours later with a perfectly swell dinner downtown. I drove, though it felt more like floated, to Saltus. So deliriously happy to have a serious emotional and practical problem solved, not to mention having dinner with family, I forget whatever we ordered, but not the wonderful service we always enjoy from Danielle. Jack was sure right all those years ago, there's nothing like a fine server to help ensure a great meal.

So no, I won't offer myself up for any cheesy remake of "Queen for a Day" or pen any more lyrics to "Busted Car Blues." Having brakes, a/c, a radio, cruise and such that actually *work* (and no leaks!) has me cured. About that radio, it even talks . . . sort of. Select a station and when a song comes on, a display tells you what channel you're on, the song title and even—how about this, aging boomers—the artist. For now I'm keeping that dial tuned to 104.9, The Surf. They play only happy songs, it seems. No blues today.

Dad would be proud. Beep-beep, y'all.