
170,000 Miles of Memories

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Chicago—The last time I had a real conversation with my mother, I was racing to suburban Detroit where she lay in a hospital bed.

The car I drove was a 1994 Pontiac Bonneville SE with more than 150,000 miles. Big as a boat and red as a tomato, the Bonneville had once been my mother's favorite. I bought it from her in 1999. Now I'm trying to let it go.

You'd think it would be easy. My three kids have long considered the Bonneville one of the ugliest cars on the road. The air-conditioning doesn't work. The transmission skips gears on hills. The doors are falling apart. But I haven't sent it to the junkyard. My wife, who's usually smarter than I am, says she knows why.

Gasoline flows through the veins of my Detroit family. My grandpa and his buddies used to race Ford Model A's on the highway south of the city. As a young man, my father washed his black 1953 Ford convertible twice a day. My two brothers and I had summer jobs at Dad's engineering firm, designing machines that built car parts.

My mother, JoAnne Polley, grew up in Detroit, but her family couldn't afford a car. She went to Wayne State University determined to earn a degree and become a dietitian. Instead she married my father, Tom Gruley, who had wooed her with letters he wrote from the front in the Korean War.

My father taught my mother to drive on his '53 Ford. "She would pull out from a light and burn rubber and everybody thought she was racing because she let the clutch out so hard," my dad says.

Mom was a lousy driver. Maybe that's because she didn't care much about cars, at least not back when she had four kids under the age of 8. We'd all pile into the car for trips to the supermarket, the bank or Aunt Kathy's house. Without seat belts to restrain us, we crawled all over while Mom smoked Salem menthols and lurched into turns without bothering to signal.

One day she tried to change lanes and the steering wheel refused to budge. "She made a complete stop on the expressway," recalls my youngest sister Kimi. It took Mom a moment to discover she'd strung her seatbelt through the steering wheel. Another time, she

jumped the track in a car wash after neglecting to put her car in neutral. "It took several large men to pick the car up and put it back on the track," Kimi recalls. "I wanted to die right there."

If you questioned Mom about her driving, she might stop you with what we called The Look—a withering glare that left me and my siblings unable to speak or even think. Or, blunt as usual, Mom might tell you: "That's dumb."

On nights when my father was coming home late, Mom would put the younger kids to bed and make us hot chocolate from unsweetened cocoa. We'd sit in the kitchen and talk about books and movies, Richard Nixon and the Pope, her father and mine.

I was just 13 or 14, my mother's oldest child, and she shared some of her most personal tales: How she survived her alcoholic mother. How the nuns at St. Gemma's Elementary challenged her faith. How my dad's struggle to build his business tested their marriage.

Looking back now, I see a woman in her late 30s, torn between caring for her five kids (soon to be six) and finding her place in the world outside

our three-bedroom ranch-style house. She gave me advice I took—read, write, laugh at yourself—and some I've had trouble with—don't worry about what others think. We would talk until Dad's headlights glowed in the driveway, then Mom would hurry me off to bed.

In 1976, at age 18, I read Jack Kerouac's novel "On the Road" and decided to hitchhike across the country. My father was against it. So was Mom, but she gave me a ride anyway to Interstate 94, where I would begin my journey. My mother rarely cried. But as I yanked my backpack out of her station wagon, she sat behind the steering wheel, weeping. It would take me 20 years and three children of my own to understand why she wept, and why she still let me go.

By the time my father bought Mom a brand-new '94 Bonneville, she'd driven Chevys, Cadillacs, Fords, Buicks, Pontiacs and Oldsmobiles. She had a clear idea of the sort of car she wanted: red.

Mom looked good in red. But the Bonneville was about more than looking good. My mother had raised six children, and earned her college degree at age 52. The Bonneville was her ride to freedom.

Instead of hauling kids to school or choir or volleyball, Mom commandeered the Bonneville for trips to bingo, bowling, ceramics class and lunches at the Big Boy with her friends. Sometimes she rode with her poodle, Sparky, who lounged on the deck beneath the back window. When my father's car needed service and he tried to borrow the Bonneville, Mom gave him The Look. "You're not going to leave me at home without my car," she would say.

My dad doesn't remember what he paid for it, but loaded Bonneville SEs

sold then for about \$25,000. My mom's came with dual airbags, cruise control, gray leather seats and a spoiler fin across the trunk. Consumer Reports rated it "very good" for cars in its price range.

After 86,000 miles, Mom wanted a new car. My father bought her a 2000 Pontiac Grand Prix -- red, naturally. Then Dad, who liked to keep paid-for cars in the family, put new tires on the Bonneville and offered it to me. With two kids of driving age, I couldn't resist the bargain price of \$3,500.

"Oh my God, Dad," said our daughter Kaitlin, then 16. "I can't be seen in that." My wife declared she wouldn't drive it either. I liked the Bonneville fine. The V-6 engine had spunk, and the trunk easily fit my hockey gear and golf bag. The car still carried the scent of my mother's perfume, "Beautiful" by Estee Lauder. I didn't mind so much. My brother-in-law dubbed it the "Big Red Sled."

At first, Mom worried I wouldn't baby the Sled as she had; cars have never meant much to me, except as transportation. For awhile, whenever we talked, she'd ask, "How's my car?" I'd report that I'd just gotten an oil change or washed it in the driveway of our home in northern Virginia.

After we moved to Chicago three years ago, I kept up routine maintenance on the Sled, but it didn't get washed much because our city house has no driveway. I took a train to work most days while the Sled sat in the garage with my hockey equipment moldering in the trunk. The smells of sweat and leather wiped out any trace of Mom's perfume.

In Detroit, my mother's eyesight dimmed and tremors made her driving

jerkier than ever. One day Mom backed out of her garage and kept going—across the street and into a neighbor's garage. My siblings and I urged her to stop driving before she hurt herself or someone else. "Don't tell me I can't drive my car," she'd snap.

But she finally stopped. "I don't know if she didn't trust herself or what," my father says. By then Mom was hauling around an oxygen tank for her emphysema, the result of decades of smoking. Dad would take her out and she would say, "All I want to do is get home and get in my chair." Sometimes I wonder if she gave up driving because she was sick, or if she gave up on life because she could no longer grab her keys and escape.

I called her from the Sled as I was barreling toward Detroit in April 2006. My brother Mike had told me to hurry: Our mother was in a hospital, and gravely ill. Mom and I had a short conversation. I told her that everything good about me was because of her. She said she was glad I was coming. That's when I knew how sick she was. She normally would have said that speeding across Michigan just to see her in a hospital gown was dumb.

It was less a plea than an order when she told us that evening, "Let me go." Dad resisted. But the rest of us persuaded him to grant Mom's last wish. A nurse removed Mom's oxygen tube and cranked up the morphine drip. My mother died the next morning, one day short of her 75th birthday.

Just as Mom had slowly broken down, so did the Sled. Knobs fell off the dashboard. The alternator, the starter and the water pump had to be replaced. One day a stranger flagged me down

and handed me a thin, rusted piece of steel that had fallen off the car. I had no idea what it was. I felt guilty, as though I was somehow letting Mom down.

My wife, Pam, kept asking when I was going to take the Sled off life support. I told her the car was paid for, insurance was just \$30 a month, and that V-6 still jumped to life when I needed to blow past a semi-trailer. Maybe, I said, when our last child graduates from college, I'll get rid of the thing. Or maybe not.

A few weeks ago, Pam visited her mother in Plymouth, Mass. Closets and drawers in my mother-in-law's home still hold Pam's father's clothing; he died in 2006, five months after my mother. Pam sniffed some of his shirts and socks. "They didn't smell like anything," she said. "My father was gone." Pam was facing what I'd been dodging.

I can still picture my mother behind the wheel from my childhood perch in the back seat. She's wearing her twinkly brow-line glasses and a sleeveless Ban-Lon top. The driver's seat is pulled up so far that her knees nearly touch the dashboard. She's whistling "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling." I don't need a tomato-red clunker to carry that memory.

Our youngest, Danielle, graduates today. And next week I'm giving the Sled to a friend's sister. Mom would understand. "Ach," she'd scoff. "It's just a car." ❖

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