Car Talk

I learned to drive in the parking lot of what was then called the A&P supermarket, which marked the turnoff to a house my family owned then, by a cove and across from a small harbor. The idea was that my father would teach me. During the summers I spent a good deal of time alone with my father on a nineteen-foot sailboat called the *Nausicaa*. In the *Odyssey*, Nausicaa, the daughter of King Alcinous and Queen Arete, is washing clothes by an inlet on the island of Phaeacia, near where Odysseus, after a shipwreck, has washed ashore. When he appears, roused from slumber by the splash in a tidepool engineered by the goddess Athena, Nausicaa's startled handmaidens flee, but "Alcinous' daughter held fast, for Athena planted courage within her heart."

Odysseus is naked. Nausicaa lends him some laundry to wear and takes him home to meet her parents, whom he entertains by telling stories: The Nausicaa episode is a frame for many of the tales of the *Odyssey*. Oddly, her name is often translated as "ship burner." The boat had come with that moniker, and it didn't occur to my father to change it.

On calm days, I liked to lie prostrate on the prow, my cheek against the boat's warm skin, which smelled of salt, sun, rubber, and seagull. When a storm blew, the boom swung around, lines cut into my fingers, and my father shouted imprecations. Decades

later, he took one of my daughters out on a Sunfish on a nearby pond. The wind came up. We may not make it back, he said. She returned white-faced and never went sailing with him again. At her age, I did not have that prerogative.

When it came time for me to obtain my learner's permit, my father announced that since he'd taught me to sail, he'd teach me to drive. My mother was the much better driver, but no matter. Rather than *Port! Starboard!* my father yelled *Left! Right!* On the empty black tarmac of the shopping plaza, I clutched the wheel of our old Ford Country Squire station wagon as if we were tacking into the breakers.

It's fair to say I didn't take to it. I did get my license, but it was years, really, before I learned to drive, which, like many other things one learns, consists of paying attention, looking in the rearview mirror, and not counting on others to play by the rules. By then I was newly separated from my husband. When we were married, he did the driving: We had four children, two of whom were my stepchildren. My skills weren't up to the back-seat squabbling, the braking at the side of the road until Q. apologized to M. We drove our cars into the ground; the last one—a 1987 Volvo—until the engine fell out on Park Avenue during the school run.

Then I was on my own. Or sort of. I'd kept up my license, but now I needed a car. What kind of car? As in the usual run of things—a congenital tilt towards irreality, an obdurate wistfulness—I pined for something that did not exist: the car at the end of the mind, a car as dazzling as Wallace Stevens's gold-feathered bird:

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

This vision had a precedent. When I was in college, my route between the dilapidated triple-decker where I lived off campus and my classes took me by the university's Museum of Comparative Zoology, which housed a collection of glass flowers. I often stopped in to look at them. One winter there was a frog-green Karmann Ghia in the museum's icy parking lot. I'd never seen one before, and it was as if this odd, magical car, like the glass orchids and delphiniums, had materialized, too, from an exhaled breath. I called my son, who is car mad. Recently I'd heard him recommending a Maserati GranTurismo to a friend. How about we look for a Karmann Ghia? I asked. Volkswagen stopped making the Karmann Ghia in 1975. He said, Well, not too practical, don't you think? A two-seater?

It occurred to me then, as it would every day thereafter for the rest of time, that all my children, three of them almost grown, expected seats in any car I owned, a car big enough to continue to cart around their bicycles, surfboards, boxes of books, duffel bags of laundry. The answer, it turned out, was a Saab station wagon. We found it at a used car dealership in New Jersey. It wasn't gold but silver. When I announced this to

Mike, the mechanic who'd encouraged us to replace the Volvo before the engine fell out, he shook his head. How about a nice Honda? he said.

The Saab was ten years old. The air-conditioning was lackadaisical, but the heat worked. What did you expect? said Mike. It's a Swedish car. I drove it first perilously, then less perilously. I drove to see my parents, to buy groceries, upstate, down, and across, from New York to teach in New Haven, as if I were trying to complete a puzzle whose answers eluded me. As time went on, I drove to visit an old friend, driving long distances to see him until the distance between us became too great.

With my youngest child now home alone with me, I took car trips. On these trips, we often encountered huge sheets of rain. We pulled off the road, hazard lights blinking. In the car's bathysphere, we played the game Botticelli. Is it someone I know? I asked my daughter. She was ten, eleven, twelve. Is it a man or a woman? Are they alive? Groucho Marx, Florence Nightingale, Yoko Ono, Grandpa, conjured out of the gloaming. The back of the car filled up: driftwood, kites, a battered set of the *Little House on the Prairie* books. The seats stayed gritty with sand. Once, driving across Vermont on a desolate stretch of Route 2, we stopped for gas. While she fished an ice cream bar out of the freezer case, the man behind the counter said, You driving this road all alone with that little lady? Yes, I was.

A few weeks before Christmas one year, a wheel came loose. The wheel was screwed on. A well-heeled friend said, Let me *buy* you a car. In February, there was a snowstorm. When I left the house to shovel out the car, the right side was stove in: Both doors had been smashed. Tony, a neighbor with no fixed address, said, I told them it was your car, miss! The city snowplow had done the damage. We can call it a loss, said Mike, when I inched it up to the garage. Instead, we used the insurance money to do the bodywork. The next summer, on another trip to Vermont, the Saab made an odd grinding noise. I called Mike. He told me to hold my phone up to the car so he could hear it. I think you're okay, he said. To a friend who balked at learning to drive, I said, I learned to drive so I could leave my marriage. I don't want to leave my marriage, she said.

The end came. That autumn, on the way from New Haven to New York, smoke began to issue from under the hood. I turned off the nearest exit into the parking lot of the Sikorsky Aircraft company and got out. A guard gesticulated. I can't move it, I said. There was now a considerable plume of smoke, and a few small flames—fire-fangled feathers. I can't move it, I said. The guard looked at me, and back at the car. Well, he said, I reckon you can't.

He called a garage. They agreed to send a tow truck. I called a former student of mine, who had a car, and who'd paid his way through college by gambling online, to pick me up. The Saab went quietly, having worn itself out with histrionics. By some miracle, the nearby train station had a bar. In the morning, I called Pete, the mechanic in Shelton

and asked him if he would mind conferring with Mike. Mike called about half an hour later. He said, You remember you asked me to tell you when it was time? Well, it's time.

The next weekend, in a rented car, my daughter and I drove out to Shelton. The sun was out. On our trips, now and again, we'd bought one-dollar scratch cards when we stopped for gas. Once we won a dollar, but our losses outweighed the gains. In Stamford, we stopped to buy one. When we arrived in Shelton, I didn't want to get out of the rental. C'mon, Mom, my daughter said. The Saab was at the end of a line of cars in stages of profound disrepair, its silver chassis blackened by giant fingerprints of smoke, as if it had been picked up and tossed back to earth by a giant.

I signed the papers—the car would be junked for parts—and then we went to say goodbye. The Laura Ingalls Wilder set was still in the back. I opened the trunk to take it out. Leave it, my daughter said; it's always good to have something along to read. She took the lottery card from her pocket and tucked it under the mat. We hadn't scratched off the numbers. Good luck, she said. She turned to me. We were both holding back tears. You never know, right? she said: She could win.

Yes, you never know. I couldn't drive, and then I could. I drove to places I wanted to go, and when I didn't want to go to those places anymore, I drove to others. When I think of the ramshackle silver car, who took us through snow, rain, heat, and gloom, a fire-flanged bird, flying off to who knows where, dismembered, there is a panoply of other images, lantern slides, like billboards on a rain-soaked highway: the ice-slicked Karmann Ghia outside the museum of glass flowers; the road sign, when we left the store on Route Two and the ice cream bar dripped on the seat, which said WATCH OUT FOR WILD ANIMALS; Nausicaa, fishing Homer out of the sea, swaddling him in laundry. Which ship did she burn? Wave until we can't see you! my children yelled, when we left my father standing outside under the pine trees by the cove, as we drove away in our dangerous car.

A few weeks ago, I brought the car I drive now to be inspected at a garage in upstate New York. In the field behind the shop was a 1974 Saab 99. It was glossy black, and it had a rounded, amphibian silhouette, like the one I remembered from my first sight of the Karmann Ghia, glassy with ice, in the parking lot in Cambridge. Attached to each headlight was a tiny windshield wiper. It looked exactly like it was batting its eyelashes.

When Odysseus first spies Nausicaa by the cove on Phaeacia, he compares her to a slim palm tree at Delos that filled his heart with wonder. When my father died, the *Nausicaa* was sold. Or was it? No one can recall. Perhaps it sailed off on its own past Indian Neck, with the ghost of the girl I was, reading a novel, resting her head on the gunwale. We kept the Saab alive as long as we could. Implicit in any vehicle is the idea of possibility: leaving, and maybe, coming back. For the afterlife, we gave her luck and something to read. "This is too dark a night to be out with panthers," Pa says in *Little House on the Prairie*. What lingers in the mind between what happened and what did not?