

SUMMER OF THE SUPER CAR

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for Zachary Ryan Alberico

My septuagenarian husband bought a car; a gleaming, pearl gray, top-of-the-line, next year's model, Mercedes-Benz. Having driven it home, he left it parked in the driveway for anyone to see. How embarrassing! Not yet his age, still I'm no spring chicken, either. My idea of appropriate is one of us behind the wheel of my dead mother's old Chevy, driving in the slow lane. I asked myself, Why not just paste paper money all over himself and walk around? Same effect! No sooner had I thought that than I heard him say, "It's used like you wanted; pre-owned. It was a steal. Only 500 miles on it. I got 10% off the sticker price. See, the old man hasn't lost his negotiating skills." How pleased he looked. If he were a peacock, he'd be spreading his tail feathers.

"Unlucky," I told him. "The first owner probably died." Likeliest cause, apoplexy, I thought, considering the cost of the car, with interest, and how long it would take to pay it off.

"Oh no," my husband assured me. "Original owner was a real estate broker. Foreseeing a crumbling housing market, she decided something less showy for chauffeuring clients would be better."

"Really?" I said. Then, at my husband's insistence, examining some of the new used car features, I thought, Fat chance, that! How much more likely, faced with so many system controls, undone by all those whistles and bells, possibly having pressed one wrong button too many and burnt her tush on the heated seat, she'd simply thrown in the towel and traded in her brand new car for a more easily mastered model. Who would blame her? Not I.

I told my husband, "You take this back. Tell the salesperson your wife put her foot down. She says under no circumstances, absolutely not."

Sounding so sincere, even I almost believed him, my husband said, "Oh dear! I would if I could but I can't. Done is done when it comes to a deal. Besides," he added, "just wait until you ride in it. You'll be amazed how smooth it is."

Well, considering what it must have cost, I'd be more surprised if it were not. Still, growing up, didn't they always tell us, Don't be a party pooper! My mother was one. Trying not to be like her, I climbed into the passenger seat, and we went for a spin. For sure it was smooth. Maybe even like the ads say, breathtaking, I thought, suddenly alarmed by my husband's breathless state, how pale he looked, and wilted. I asked him, "Are you okay?"

"Oh yes," he said. "I just need to get used to driving this. As with any new thing, there's bound to be a learning curve." We've been married for decades. He's a very fine husband. That moment, my heart went out to him. So what, I asked myself, if the love of your life thinks to be happy he needs an ostentatious German-made car with a "cockpit" in place of a dashboard display and 22 individual storage compartments plus trunk? Oy vey! as my grandmother

would say. This for a man who can't remember where he put the peanut butter yesterday?

I yanked back my heart. A wife has to stick to her guns or where will she be? Up the creek with no principles, I told myself. Phrases that come from living so long in Virginia, no doubt. Exploring the "glove box", I removed the "Operator's Manual" and flipped through it. Seven hundred pages thick of which over 100 contain practical hints: "What to do if" something goes wrong. If the "vehicle rising" sign comes on, for instance. In his or my case, I'd recommend pulling over, finding the SOS button and pressing it. While waiting for help to arrive, we could pass the time studying the rest of the manual: Learning how to program the KEYLESS-GO, for example, or the 100 channel satellite radio; or memorizing the "COMMAND list" that controls the audio and navigation systems. Sure we could! Maybe after we master our home video cassette recorder, a gift from our daughter twelve years ago. Now there is this!

"So what's a PCMCIA card?" I asked my husband, putting back the manual. He didn't know. "I haven't had a chance to read the instruction book yet," he told me.

"I see," I said, getting out. What I really wondered, though was how anyone could be willing to pay that much for something that spends so much time out of doors and gets defecated on by birds. I went indoors to call my sister in New Jersey. I explained the situation to her. "I think he's lost his fruit," I said.

My sister is a social worker. She told me, "More likely he's only going through some late stage life crisis. Much better than middle, believe me. My mid-life clients buy motorcycles, or their spouses do. Then they argue over how much life insurance they need. Usually they can't afford it until they've finished paying off the bikes. At least your husband can afford his car. You're lucky being married to such a good provider. My goodness, at his age he still has a job." I could hear her thinking, Not like mine, taking early retirement to putter at home while I go on working. Well, someone has to. I felt myself losing ground.

I tried explaining. "It isn't only the money. It's also the principle. For what it costs just to keep that car in gas, you could feed a family in Somalia for a long time. Not to mention, in Indonesia, there's been another tsunami."

"Puh-leeze," said my sister. "Tsunami this, tsunami that. I'm so tired of hearing all that. The first time was one thing, but year after year? Well, I realize it isn't their fault. It's not like practicing abstinence. But couldn't they move?" Was that the social worker in her speaking, or just her opinion? "Besides, if you feel so strongly you can always make a contribution. Not everyone has that luxury. I tell my clients they need to practice anger management skills. Maybe you should try that."

"Yes? Like what?"

"Well, ask yourself, Isn't it really a very nice car? Can't you manage to enjoy it a little? You don't want to be like our mother, do you? Was there ever a restaurant she ate in that she liked?" No, and no, were the answers to that. I

made up my mind; first, to send a check to Doctors Without Borders; next, to bite my tongue when it came to the car.

It turned out not to be that hard. For the next two weeks, the car stayed parked in the garage while my husband took the metro back and forth to work. When he was home, he applied himself to studying the manual. He'd read for a while, then rush out to the garage, get into the car, and try out what he'd learned. Then back inside to read some more. If instructions for setting the clock were included, he couldn't find them. Called on to help, neither could I. However, I did come across this – on air bag deployment: Occupants too close can be seriously injured or killed as the air bag inflates with great force in the blink of an eye.

Uh-oh! How close is too close? I continued reading: The distance from the center of the driver's breastbone to the center of the air bag cover on the steering wheel must be at least ten inches or more. (Emphasis mine.) I'm a short person with very short legs. I need to sit forward to reach the pedals. Not that I planned to be driving that car. Still, grabbing a ruler, I rushed out to measure.

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It isn't until the third week, when Zony, our fifteen year old, New York grandson, comes for a visit, that we begin regularly to use the car. Super Car, he dubs it, as in, "Are we taking the Super Car to the cleaners?" Yes, we are. As we pick up my husband's Wednesday Special: three suits for the price of two, I cross my fingers, hoping the cleaners won't notice our new transportation.

Still from the start of Zony's maiden trip, his grandfather and I learn a big difference between those who are young and folks our age: We read directions, then try implementing them. They press buttons and wait to see what will happen. Using Zony's method, we all three learn: how to raise and lower the rear window sun blinds, turn on the high-pressure water jet for cleaning the headlamps, fold in and out the exterior mirrors, adjust the seats lumbar supports. By the time Zony's visit is over, though, some things yet remain a mystery, including the clock. We could try asking the dealer, but that's not my husband's style. Instead, "Are you sure you can't stay longer?" he asks Zony; possibly, begs.

Zony can't. "School starts next week."

Of course, as soon as he's gone, we miss him, and not just for his mechanical expertise, either. We chat by telephone. Sometimes, he asks me, "Grandma, have you driven the Super Car yet?"

"Not yet." Eventually, I tell my husband, "A family car I can't drive is oxymoronic." We arrange for him to give me a lesson. With me in the passenger seat, he drives to the vacant outer edges of a movie theater parking lot during down time. We both get out. I pocket the KEYLESS GO, and we exchange places. Eying the air bag warning sign, I move my seat forward, but not too far; I

step on the brake pedal and press the start button. Did anybody ever say, "Having to use a key is what I most hate about driving?" I wonder. Warning myself to pay attention, I put the car into drive and begin to circle the lot.

So far, so good! Nothing to it, I tell myself proudly, then try to decide, Should I drive home? No, I decide, whereupon I head for a parking space to my right. Oh, no! Where did that white car come from, with its student driver sign and student driver driving, a person who obviously hasn't yet mastered keeping a safe distance, or passing only on the left, or staying in lane? At least both cars were going very slowly. We all get out to assess the situation. Thank goodness! Anyone would almost need a magnifying glass to see the single scratch on the student car bumper.

Holding a clipboard and sweating profusely, the youngish instructor keeps saying, "No problem." Clearly, it's not an opinion my husband shares. Through gritted teeth he asks, "Don't you have dual controls in that car? What kind of instructor are you anyway?" Worried for my elder husband's health, I only want to get home. Also, I'm hoping no one brings up turn signals and proper use of them.

In the end, agreed there's nothing more to be done, we all get back into our respective cars and depart, the student weeping, both men driving, and my husband now speechless. As for me, my mind is made up: No more driving the new car. Hoping to cheer my husband, I inform him of this. And also this: "In the winter, when it snows, you can use my car. It has front wheel drive - much better traction. Also, in the rain. That way, should you ever (G-d forbid) get trapped in a flood, or fall off a bridge into a lake (I'm knocking on wood), you can roll down a window manually and swim to safety. Plus removing road salt or lake water, after, won't require an expensive hand job." Apparently my efforts worked. My husband's smiling.

"Wash," he says. "You mean your car doesn't require hand-washing." Then, taking my hand in his, raising it to his lips, he kisses it. How romantic!

"Hey, watch it!" I warn him. "You could have an accident. We're too old for such shenanigans." Then, I smile, too. I'm thinking this: When EST rolls around, at least I'll know how to reset my clock.