

'73 Datsun, Green: Runs Good

A lot happened in the fall of 1983: I ended a terrible marriage, and then my youngest sister died. And I was broke, I didn't have a job, and the terrible husband was taking the car with him. It was his car anyway; he'd only let me drive it when he felt like it. He let me use it to drive the kids back and forth to school. And one morning on the way to school just before he moved out, I cried: What was I going to do without a car? My sister hadn't died yet, that was something still floating like a black cloud in the unknown, waiting to happen. That morning I cried because I didn't know how I was going to get a car.

My daughter was religious at the time: "Why don't you ask God?"

Oh, she was right, I was the one always telling her to pray when I couldn't solve her problems, like get her more friends or understand math for her. I don't mean I ordered her to pray, it was just a suggestion I made out of my own desperation.

Like most things we tell our children, this one came back to me.

"You're right, Nina," I told her. "Good idea. I'll pray on it."

The next day I told her: "God told me to ask Grandpa."

Doubt nibbled at her faith. "*He* won't give you a car."

How did she know that? I knew my father loved me, but he wasn't a present-giving Daddy. He was a solid Daddy, never violent to his family, an advice-giving Daddy who sometimes surprised me with favors. He'd once put a new electrical circuit in my house — a

hot, unpleasant job — and once he'd given me twenty dollars for my birthday. That was a while ago; maybe it had only been ten. I bought a bottle of Old Bushmills and toasted Daddy, happy-high. He was a fine Daddy, just not a big present-giver.

So now I told Nina: "God didn't tell me Grandpa would give me a car. He just told me to ask."

She didn't know what to say about that, and we'd arrived at the school. A kiss and a wave.

When I came home I called my father, shaking a little, scared to ask for such a big thing. He wasn't home. He was in Nicaragua helping people, making heart monitors out of discarded TV sets.

My stepmother was sympathetic but I was embarrassed. Actually, this was my third divorce, and I thought I should have known better. I knew it was my own fault I was in this situation.

"Oh, we'll help you," she said. "Don't worry, I'll ask him as soon as he comes back."

She didn't even mention what was wrong with me to marry such an asshole in the first place. She'd been smart: she'd married my dad. She didn't say anything like that.

But while my father was flying back from Nicaragua, his youngest daughter — my baby sister! — was in Cambridge, giving all her stuff away.

While he was home in Oakland, sleeping off jet lag, my sister was drilling holes in her exhaust manifold. My sister the engineer worked very carefully. She didn't want to screw up the job this time. This was my sister Nikki, beloved of my father and stepmother, cherished by me and Annie, especially adored and coddled by our other sister, Jody, my stepmother's daughter who my father had adopted. Worshiped by our baby brother. A girl with a brilliant mind and beautiful golden hair; a guitar player, a fixer of cars, a flyer of gliders.

The summer before her junior year in high school Nikki was something of a trial to her parents, and they had sent her to stay with me and Peter, to help us move to our new house. She made us a metal sculpture to hang on the front porch; she held baby Josh on her lap and read to him. I missed her when she went home and wrote to her sometimes, but she was young and busy and didn't return my letters. She went on to MIT and rarely came back to see us, or her parents.

And then, last summer — her last summer — Nikki had finally come to visit. She was sweet to her parents and took me and the kids up for glider rides. She even came with me to Joe Miller's walk in Golden Gate Park, a rag-tag band of seekers and screwballs. She'd stood at the edge of our dancing circle, wary as a deer. As we gently broke the circle and began our walk to the beach, she took off suddenly, with a feral lope, racing ahead of us on the path. She was waiting when we arrived at the beach, her long hair flying in the wind like a golden flag. She did not want to hear about joy or love. She had already decided she was through.

Jody called me from New York at six in the morning, passing on the grim news from the Cambridge police. I borrowed my husband's car and drove across the bridge praying, because it had fallen on me to tell our parents. I thought that was just about as bad as it could get, the pain filling their living room, exploding out the windows. A rumbling dusty stink bomb of anguish and grief.

My father bravely remarked that in Nicaragua, where he had just come from, tragedy was commonplace. Everyone there was so young because people didn't live long. And my stepmother, very strong, had seen her German town blasted and burned to ashes, practice for the bombing of Dresden. She never said much about that, but I'd looked it up. The firestorm sucked all the air out of

the center of the town, suffocating the people in the underground shelters. The ones outside melted into the pavement. She and her family lived on the edge of town — they were spared, but eleven thousand people had died in a night. She had been, then, a few years younger than Nikki ever lived to be.

I wasn't thinking about the car.

But a few days later when I was visiting, my father mentioned that he'd heard I needed a car.

I screamed, "How can you talk about that now?"

But he could, and pretty quick it turned into an argument because I wanted an automatic and he said a stick. Much more practical, save your brakes. Better mileage.

"No," I said, "I live in the City, the hills —"

He described a device he'd heard about or perhaps invented that held the brake for you when you were stopped uphill — that way you'd have both feet free for the clutch and gas. It sounded nuts to me and I told him so. Then I felt bad because I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Nikki had only been dead for a week.

He said a stick shift was better all around.

What I didn't say was that I'd never learned to drive one. But going home on BART, I told myself I'd learn.

He told me he'd look around, and I looked, too, racing him to see who would find one first. My old friend Willy drove me to Fremont to look at a Toyota. For sale by Mohammad, an old guy in a white robe. I was glad Willy was there. He rode in the back while I drove with Mohammad sitting on the edge of the passenger seat. It was a nice little car — an automatic, of course.

But the steering felt a little weird, and then Willy asked Mohammad what that noise in the rear end was, and suddenly Mohammad's English wasn't so good.

On the way home Willy and I stopped at a park under the Dumbarton Bridge and talked about what Palo Alto used to be like, back when we first knew each other. My father and stepmother, with Jody and Nikki and our brother, had been living in Palo Alto then, too. Willy used to pick me up at their house sometimes when I was there for the weekend; he remembered the blond toddlers playing on the front lawn.

A couple of weeks later I'd looked at a lot more cars that weren't right. Then my father called: he found a nice little Datsun, a '73 with 80,000 miles. Four doors, he said, that would be convenient, with the kids.

He met me at the North Berkeley BART station and we drove to a graduate student housing project in Albany. The husband was at his lab; we talked to the wife. She had all the papers spread out on the table. There were some kids' toys on the floor; she was a little younger than me. She said they were from Israel.

We went out to the carport. It was a cute car, awfully green. First thing, I looked in through the window: Two pedals! An automatic after all! I loved it, I was so happy! My daddy was buying me this great car. I named it Esmeralda.

"Yes," I said. We went back inside to get the pink slip. My father gave the woman a check and told her about how a tree was planted in Israel for him even though he wasn't Jewish. It was because he'd been in the Spanish Civil War. We all shook hands. My father and I walked out together. He told me to go to the DMV office in El Cerrito because the lines would be shorter. I listened, grateful and superstitious. If he had told me to circumambulate the building seven times before going in, I would have done that, too.

That car was very good to me. In seven years, all it needed were tuneups, brakes, a set of tires. The mechanic told me it could go

to 200,000 miles. Except sometimes it overheated, or seemed like it was going to. My son Josh learned to drive and borrowed it, and he said sometimes it wouldn't start; he thought the starter was going and I replaced that. Josh graduated and went to UCLA, and then I was afraid to drive it all that way to visit him, sure it would overheat or break down outside of Buttonwillow or some other timewarp desolation weirdness twenty miles from a phone.

Then, suddenly, my mother bought herself a new Honda and gave me her old one. For a month I tried to sell the Datsun with signs on bulletin boards and ads in free papers. People called and said they wanted to see it and I waited around, but they never showed. Willy told me to put an ad in the *Chronicle*.

I would have been happy to get five hundred for it, but he said you have to ask seven to get that. So my ad said: '73 Datsun, \$700. Willy said, "Put that it runs good."

The first guy who called had a Spanish accent and came over when he said. He told me he was from Puerto Rico and had a job in the farmers' market. There's not too many people from Puerto Rico in San Francisco, but I used to know a lot of them when I lived in New York.

I asked him if he knew that game with the big jar of water and the pennies, where you drop a penny through a slot in the jar lid, trying to hit the shot glass in the bottom. The water deflects the coin, so it's harder than it looks. If you get your penny in the shot glass you win a quarter.

This guy hadn't heard of that game. I'd thought it was a Puerto Rican thing.

We went out to look at the car. He walked around it two or three times. He asked a couple of questions and I offered to open the hood.

"Why?" he shrugged. "I don't know anything about cars.

Does it run?"

"Yeah, it runs good" I said. "It probably needs brakes. Do you want to drive it?"

"No," he said. "That's OK. How much?"

"Seven hundred," I said.

"OK," he said. "I got to go to the bank. Can you take me?"

Wait. I wanted to say. It's really only five hundred. But that would have been dumb. It would have made him wonder if the car was worth anything at all.

I looked up his bank in the phone book to find the closest branch. I drove him to Stonestown, wondering which one of us was crazier. He was paying the asking price for a car he didn't know anything about, and I was riding in a car with a strange man who could have been a serial sex killer.

He told me his wife was visiting friends in Seattle and when she got back, he was going to surprise her with this car. Take her places on the weekend, go to the country.

I told him again the car needed brakes. And he might need to do something with the cooling system eventually. He just nodded.

I waited in the bank parking lot while he went in for the money. What if he didn't have any? What if he was in there robbing the bank, and came out waving a gun, yelling at me to drive away fast? I shuddered. Life was precious to me.

He came out of the bank smiling. He still wanted me to drive. Back at my house he counted out seven big bills. I signed over the pink slip and told him how to get it registered. I felt good that I wasn't sticking him with any unpaid parking tickets. He was OK.

A couple of months later I saw him driving down Mission Street. I was glad the car was still running good.