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LIVES

Car Thief

By MICHELLE HUNEVEN
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My father's romance with driving began in 1923, when he was 8. He and his family drove from Connecticut to a new home in Altadena, Calif., in a Model T Ford. "Hell, no, the roads weren't paved," he told us. "Some were barely dirt tracks!"



Holly Wales

When I was growing up, we left Altadena at every chance. Weekends we drove to the Sierras. Spring break meant Arizona or Utah. My parents were schoolteachers, so the three summer months were marathons: we drove to the East Coast, then back through Canada. My father's best friend lived in Guatemala City, so we drove there and back — twice. We drove to Fairbanks and back — twice. Hostages in the backs of various camper vans, my sister and I alternately fought and ignored each other. I lay on the shelf over the VW's engine as birch forests ticked past; my friends at home were going to the beach (with boys!), and I was in the Yukon.

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My parents retired to Ojai and drove every summer to a fish camp in northern British Columbia. After my mother died in 1988, my father went there alone for another decade. The rest of the year, he drove up and down California, visiting his brother in Paradise, me in Pasadena.

But in his late 70s, my father's driving deteriorated. He stopped checking before changing lanes. My sister was along when he ran a car off the road. "Dad!!" she cried.

"Hell," he roared, "I've been driving for 63 years!" — as if seniority exempted him from censure.

In 1993, he fell asleep and drove his Camry under a truck on the 405 freeway, flattening the sedan's cab, crushing his pulmonary cavity. The pulmonologist suggested that my father's driver's license be revoked. "He lives to drive," I said. "It would kill him." The doctor volunteered to notify the D.M.V. himself. But he must have forgotten. And my father made a spectacular recovery. One month later, he drove 90 miles to show me his new Toyota RAV4.

He rolled the RAV4 in Redding but emerged unscathed and had the car repaired. He

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crunched a stranger's car door in a parking lot and had it fixed. At 86, he moved himself into a senior living facility in Ojai, and his license was renewed.

The facility's manager called me a year later. "We have to deal with your dad's driving," she said. "He's banging into everything." So I had to sit him down:

"Maybe it's time to give up the car, Dad."

"Don't you worry about it," he said. I did worry, and yet I couldn't bring myself to do something about it.

He flunked his driver's test at 88 — but kept driving. Possibly, given his fading memory, he'd forgotten that he had no license. I spoke to the Ojai police, who could not impound his car without specific cause. "You'll have to take it," said the facility manager. "His memory's so bad, he'll forget all about it in a few days."

So that Thanksgiving, I picked up my father and brought him to dinner in Pasadena. A friend came along on the trip back to my father's place, where we swiped a set of keys from his desk and stole his car.

Once I got home, I called him. "I took your car," I said. "So you'll know."

"The hell you did!" he said, and laughed. But a few minutes later, he phoned back. "You little thief!" he said — and that was the nicest thing he called me for a year.

He did not go gentle into the carless life. He had Hertz bring him a car, but because he had no license, the agent wouldn't leave it. Then he started sending letters threatening me with legal action, disinheritance, prison. Some were short, scrawled bursts of curses and name-calling; others were closely argued legal rants.

My father's memory grew worse, and I began paying his bills. One day his account dropped by \$34,000. The bank showed me the check: he'd scrawled his signature; it turned out the rest was filled out by a 55-year-old woman he called his "friend." His idea: He'd buy her a brand-new Nissan Altima and she'd drive him wherever he wanted to go. But before there was 1k on the odometer, both friend and Altima disappeared.

Today, at 94, my father is in assisted living, his half a room not much bigger than the vans in which we crisscrossed North America. He recognizes me; that is, his eyes light up, and sometimes he knows my name. Often he says, "I had a car, but my daughter stole it."

"I know, Dad," I say. "I'm the daughter."

His forehead furrows. "Bring the damn thing back. I have places to go."

I know exactly how he feels. But I'm the driver now.

Michelle Huneven has published three novels, "Round Rock," "Jamesland" and, most recently, "Blame."

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