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GOODBYE, VOLVO

“It’s got 97,000 miles on it,” I replied to the minister’s question.

“They say a 1991 Volvo like this can easily go 150,000,” he responded, as I filled out the paperwork.

I knew I was taking a big step, making a major change. I was about to remove a physical image of my husband’s presence in the life we had shared for 21 years; I was releasing a significant part of the memory of his presence. Since December, I had been thinking about what to do with his car. I knew now it was time.

Yet, I still see him, coming around the corner with a tray of hot tea and cookies for our surprise after-dinner treat. Or I hear his step or movement or voice. I sense he is coming into the room, where I am working on the computer, and he will say, “I’m here. What did you say you wanted me to proof read for you?” In an instant, I am aware of his presence, and in the next instant, I know I am wrong. He is gone.

He had hung on to that car. He loved it. I liked it, too, a classic beauty in its day: a 1991 Volvo Sedan 240. Sunroof. Electric windows, even A/C, Swedish version. It turned on a dime, as the saying goes. I enjoyed driving it, steering with ease. It was a sturdy car, always giving off the essence of safety, security in its strong frame and boxy style.

Harold liked to store his personal items in the trunk—tennis racquets, tennis balls, fishing poles, tennis shoes, folding beach chair, baseball caps, jumper cables, jackets. I

always wanted him to clean it out. But no, that was his own place, his stuff. I recognized it as his piece of private property. He used the car to maintain his freedom--with a trip to Publix or the bank or to the gas station and back. He didn't go far, and not for very long

As an engineer, he actually was a better driver than I, calculating each move, and executing it with skill. He never misgauged a parking space and had to back up and start in again, or bumped into the stone marker while heading into a space, or bumped over a curb, the way I did.

I thought about keeping the car for visiting children and grandchildren to drive to the beach or mall. But the more I looked at it, with its peeling paint exterior, the more I knew the family wouldn't drive it. I offered it for sale to neighbors. I made a For Sale sign and slid it into the back window. I called a man who hauls away old cars. I checked the Kelly Book price online. I even took it up to CarMax, who insulted me and Harold and the car with their offering price. As I realized what I might have to do, I began to notice, as I passed by, salvage yards with cars smashed into flat metallic shapes. I waited a while longer.

One day this week, I awoke with the idea: a donation to my church. Then suddenly, all the pieces fell into place quickly. The church responded immediately to my email, pleased that I wanted to donate the car. There was a young man who needed a car to get to work. I thought that sounded just right. I knew Harold would have liked that idea, too. It would go to a person---another male—who truly needed it and would value it.

I cleaned all the windows with Windex this morning, before I started up the engine. In the last month, I had driven it around the parking lot to keep it in running.

order. I noticed a bit of rust starting along the edge of the front window. I brushed away leaves on the hood that had fallen from nearby trees. I had dressed up this morning, because a friend was taking me out for lunch later, and then would drive me home. I wore a jacket that I could remove in the car, due to the heat I anticipated.

I felt tense as I adjusted the seat belt, and started the drive. I knew it was the last ride. I adjusted the side view mirrors, a gesture to Harold since he always asked me if I could see out the side windows. Now I wondered if it wasn't so much a kind gesture as much as anticipation of some of my not-so-good driving maneuvers. I suppose I also was thinking about the last ride as a special moment. I knew Harold would have appreciated it that I dressed for the occasion.

I felt nervous about the twelve-mile trip to the church in downtown Fort Lauderdale. Would the car run the whole way? Dare I take I-95 and risk car trouble on the interstate? Would it be unbearably hot without the air conditioning? When had the oil been changed last? Were the brakes still good? Was the gas gauge accurate?

I backed out, turned out of the parking lot, stopped at the four-way stop, and we started on our journey. I made a left at the light. The car picked up speed, moved along easily, eager to be back on the road again. I could feel it.

I joined the line-up for I-95, and swept into the moving traffic. Staying in the right lane, I kept my speed at 60, watching to maintain space between the car ahead and me. I noticed there were not many cars on the road. That was lucky. I exhaled a long breathe, and felt my body begin to relax. I opened the windows a little on the driver's side. The

air flowing in was balmy. I pulled down the visors on my side and the passenger side to cut down on the sun's glare.

We maintained a pace; we were sailing along. I thought, Pity there is no CD player. If I had taken time to bring a cassette tape, I would have played it--maybe one of Harold's Frank Sinatra tapes. I became aware of a growing sense of relief and even contentment. I was tempted to hum. I eased back into the driver's seat now, trusting in that old car, just as I had trusted its owner all those years. I knew it would get me to my destination.

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