

*Smart car taught  
lessons about  
wealth and love*

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ESSAY

## On the road with Carlyle

Back in the late '80s, when my eyes initially saw that car, it was not love at first sight — it was quite the opposite. I was taken aback, in fact, angry.

"Oh, no!" I told my brother. "You got me a Cadillac? I'm not going to drive it. You can just take it back."

I leaned against the garage wall, trembling. Sure, Roland had spent many hours on that humid Florida day doing what I'd asked him to do: select my future car at an automobile auction. But he'd picked the wrong car. A Cadillac just wasn't for me.

"But listen," he pleaded, "this car is like Mama's old Cadillac. It's even gray, like hers. Sure, it's shorter, but definitely easier to handle. Lots of inside toys. What's your problem? You wanted a stable, dependable car."

He was right — I did want a dependable car. I was single. No road problems, please. So what exactly was my gripe? Why was I resisting this silver-colored Cadillac my brother had so thoughtfully picked out?

The best explanation I could come up with was that for me, owning a Cadillac would be wrong. Too posh.

I rolled my eyes upward: "Talk to me, Mom. Help me! Am I just being stubborn?"

Perhaps stubbornness could be explained by my old nun psyche — the 16 convent years. Was I still holding to a monastic ideal? Or feeling that biblical rebuke — "Woe to you rich! It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for you to enter heaven."

Having inheritance money was embarrassing, set me apart. I kept the news of the inheritance to myself somehow. Now — a Cadillac? How could I ever hide that?

I envied my brother. He loved the money coming to him.

"My God," he shouted, "why can't you enjoy this Cadillac like Mama enjoyed hers?"

He had me there. After Dad died, Mama was a bird out of a cage, flying high after a 40-year, pinned-down marriage. She amazed the entire community with her ability to enjoy the money that, until my father's death, had been largely inaccessible. Unlike me, she had immediately felt at ease with the affluent lifestyle. Her first spending spree was a top-of-the-line Cadillac. When I protested her showing off, she laughingly reminded me of her long years in domestic servitude: "Honey, I'm living for today, and the hell with tomorrow. I deserve this car!"

Falling through heaven's clouds, straight from her hands. I caught the car's shiny keys. There was no doubt. I heard her familiar laugh again: "Sweetheart, say thank you and drive the damn car!"

I gave my Cadillac a trial run but on hidden highways. I guided the wheel as my spirit struggled with old stereotypes: *God and money don't mix. Nuns have chosen the better way. The religious life is the highest calling.* "Oh, shut up," I told myself. "You're not going back to the convent."

Crazy behaviors followed. If I drove to meet friends, I'd hide the Cadillac. In the grocery store, when a bag boy asked, "What's the make of your car?" my lips simply couldn't form the word. "The gray one in the second parking lane." I set my jaw and stared straight ahead.

At night, I fell to my knees. *I need a friend, God. Maybe I need a kick you-know-where.* My priest friend spoke and I listened at last: "Grow up! Drive your car, and don't forget your thank you."

I named him Carlyle. I began to examine everything about him. His colorful digital dashboard displayed heaps of information: gas mileage, moment-by-moment average outside temperatures. All I had to do was tap some buttons.

One day, I kid you not, as we buzzed past rows of Florida pines, Carlyle delivered his own pent up feelings: "OK, I'm a Cadillac, but I'm your friend. Stop judging me by a name. Check my record. I never run out of gas, never have a flat tire or transmission problems. And I always give you a quick pickup."

I drove on in silence, furiously eating the Oreo cookies nestled close beside me. *What are you saying God? Show me this moment's truth.*

And so it was a sweet surrender. Carlyle suffered no more hiding or parking in the boondocks. I made peace with him.

Or so I thought.

It took Jim, a man who had been homeless for a year, to erase more stereotyping from my psyche's deeper layers. A close friend had introduced us. It wasn't love at first sight. But I found I had more in common with this uncommon man than I had thought possible. His graduate degrees, his Catholicism, his love of music and poetry gave birth to a new understanding of who and what we could be together.

Jim and I agreed to another rendezvous, at which I realized that my Cadillac separated me even more than his homelessness. I apologized to Carlisle, but decided to hide him and walk to our meeting place.

"Where's your car?" Jim asked.

"I thought we could walk," I lied, amazed at my ability to hold a straight face.

Sounds of street and sidewalk traffic failed to hamper the deep silence we discovered in each other. There was little talking. I found myself ready to pitch a tent and live on the street with him. After our picnic, he collected our stuff and queried, "You must have your car somewhere."

His smile was warm, healing, and I was struck, as we strolled back under a beaming sun, by another singular moment of truth — a moment of grace.

Jim playfully strutted and saluted Carlisle. "Nice car you've got there! Why did you park so far away?"

Yes, it took me a while to get it: Our state in life, and the way others see us, never defines us. In a sense, Jim held up a mirror to my prejudice — much like my Carlisle. I guess we're always learning more about our hidden prejudices.

I am convinced that Carlisle fostered our relationship. We made him drive us out to Colorado's Pike's Peak, hauling a weighty pop-up tent along the steep and difficult road. Then on an off-road, a dirt track up to Christ of the Desert Monastery.

Carlisle nearly died on that trip, and Jim and I entered a fierce argument over lugging that pop-up tent. He had insisted: "Come on, he's a Cadillac! He can carry that trailer up a mountain-side." I screamed back: "Carlisle's not a two-ton truck!"

At one point, I got out of the car, vowing I would go no farther. Standing awhile outside, I heard Carlisle whisper in my heart: "If you two can make it through this bumpy trip, you'll make it to the altar."

In that lonely place, something gave

way inside me. The stream near where we had stopped mercifully washed away the rage of the moment. Between nature and Carlisle, things cooled off. Jim and I managed to mend the hurt and, in the process, discovered the incredible destiny of things. I came to wonder if Carlisle's subsequent breakdown was a type of sacrifice, lugging us forward to a wedding — our own. And the gift of what's now been a decade of joyful partnership.

As for Carlisle himself, sadly the trip to the mountains had left him with a cracked block. It was time to say goodbye. I clutched his wheel as I steered him to his final parking lot. I reached to finger his electronic controls, his faded blue dashboard. I read the odometer. Carlisle had carried me more than 150,000 miles. He had carried me past biases and stereotypes around wealth, lifting me right out of my tight concerns about "what people will think" — to see the bigger place of God's abundance. Furthermore, he tutored me that beloved possessions slip in and out of our world. In loving them and letting them go, we experience the rich-sad tastes of life, the unavoidable price for soulful living. Truly, Carlisle was a smart car.

I turned away. I don't think he cried. But I did — a lot!

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