Not Just Feet of Clay

Jane McClellan

Appalachian Heritage, Volume 25, Number 1, Winter 1997, pp. 16-18
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.1997.0096*

FICTION

Not Just Feet of Clay

Jane McClellan

I was clutching the steering wheel of the Dodge coupe, its headlights aiming straight up into the sky as it slid down the embankment in slow motion like a horror scene from a movie. Only this was real.

World War II had ended, and Dad owned one of the first new cars to reach our Kentucky hills—thanks to his good friend, Ransom Jordan, the only car dealer in our small county. The Dodge was so rare a commodity that I was forbidden to drive it even though at fourteen I'd been driving the old Packard for months. Of course, either Dad or Mother was always along then, unlike tonight when, irked by the restriction, I'd pocketed the keys and driven off without permission.

The fluid-drive gave me no problem. I'd watched my parents maneuver the gear shift, and I'd felt the car's signal and response. I cruised down the highway into town, stopped for the only traffic light, and headed on toward East Jenkins. I had no destination in mind, just the free feeling of tires rolling on pavement, the response of the steering wheel to my hands—the same feeling of control I'd first had learning to ride a bicycle and to paddle a canoe: competence combined with ease.

Two factors combined to wreck me. First, the thought that my parents might notice the Dodge's absence and assume this rarity of a new car had been stolen. The second was a week of heavy rain that softened even the hardest clay and filled creeks with the rushing flow of silt.

Hoping to return home before either parent noticed the car's absence, I began to look for some place to turn around—not an easy find on a road cut out of a hill so that on one side the clay embankment rose straight up and on the other it fell straight down to a rocky creek bordered by a railroad track. Finally, I saw a narrow dirt road I could pull into, but I'd have to back across the pavement and onto the shoulder to turn around. Since there were no other cars in sight, I swerved immediately onto the dirt road and cautiously backed up till the rear wheels sank onto the shoulder. But when I shifted into low, the back wheels kept sinking until the car perched on the side of the hill, its headlights serving as searchlights to the stars.

Jane McClellan writes, "I was born and grew up in Jenkins, Kentucky, where my father was a supervisor for Consolidation Coal Company. I'm now a retired teacher/professor whose memories haven't faded."

After a sickening slide when my stomach tried to leap into my mouth, at some point the movement stopped. Something, I knew, held fast against the car's heavy weight. Yet from what I could make out in the hazy darkness, no boulders or trees were anywhere nearby. I held my breath and cut the engine. The car shimmied once, then settled. I was afraid to just sit there until some Good Samaritan happened along, for if the road's shoulder was soaked enough to give way, the bank would be too. Yet opening the door could unbalance whatever precarious hold the car had. Either I had to chance sitting still and hope someone would drive by, notice the headlights beaming heavenward, and get help before the Dodge and I sank to the rocky torrent below, or I had to get out and chance causing the same dire results.

Of course, no girl who lacked the patience to wait for permission to drive her dad's new car, could sit and hope salvation would come rolling down the highway. I eased the wide, heavy door open as slowly as I could bear to, eased my legs around and out, and tried to look for a spot to leap to if the Dodge began to slide before I could step down and move beyond the door. When my feet touched dirt, my legs began to shake so bad I was afraid I couldn't climb the bank. I was faced with the weight of the door, which I was still holding and which, left open, would surely drop shut and send the car crashing below. Controlling its closure took the same weightless finesse that disarming a bear trap takes. Ever so slowly, holding back the door's weight as I eased it forward, I let it whisper against the frame. The Dodge poised against the bank as if some mighty magnet held it.

I remembered that Ransom Jordan's garage had an evening wrecker service, so I headed toward East Jenkins. I heard a car approaching behind me, but didn't look until it pulled in front of me and stopped: Chief Cline of the local police. Three of his children attended my school; his son George was my age, and when we were in sixth grade, had spent a good bit of energy trying to catch and kiss me. Chief Cline knew my parents, my grandparents, my aunts, uncles, and cousins. He leaned across the seat, opened the door, and barked, "Get in. We're going to get a wrecker—fast."

I was familiar with the phrase, "the bitterness of regret." But I never knew its reality until this ride with the chief of police. My mouth held the bitterness of green pawpaws, and I would gladly have given up my piano, my silver friendship ring, even my Irish setter if I could have turned the clock back and left the Dodge safe at home.

I had to swallow this bitterness again and again as the wrecker pulled up by the Dodge and flares were set to block traffic. Worst of all, the

wrecker man said the hook might slip off the bumper and send the car crashing below. But the hook held. Then he and Cline, curious to see what had kept the Dodge so steady for so long, climbed down the hill. When Cline motioned me down, relief washed through me: he was treating me like a person, not a criminal. I scrambled down and looked at the wiry weed, incredibly small, that had blocked one rear wheel and had done no more than bend with the car's weight.

The wrecker towed the Dodge to the garage where Cline waited with me while the wrecker man straightened a bent piece of chrome and replaced it. I assured him my dad would pay the bill and turned to climb into the police car. Cline's hand clamped on my shoulder. "Your car's ready. Now you're going to drive it home."

I wanted to protest that I didn't have a driver's license, but I knew better than to open my mouth. I was as condemned as any criminal to a punishment that perfectly matched my crime and completely reduced me to willing obedience. The drive home, with Chief Cline following every foot of the way, was the longest trip I've ever made. When I pulled in the driveway, he tapped his horn. I waved. Then I turned toward the house and the final judgment of my father.

He was seated in his armchair, reading as usual. I was paralyzed with shame; all I could do was stand still and hope the punishment would be fast. I thought of all the foolish acts of disobedience and dumb things I'd done in my brief life, and I wondered how my parents had been able to love me. I was beyond the easy solace of tears. I felt no pity for myself, only shame for the sake of my parents.

My father looked up over his glasses. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay." And his eyes returned to his magazine.

The release was sudden: I was forgiven. And I could then forgive myself. The suffering I'd undergone had been a repentance that mattered only to me. Any anger my father might have felt had washed away under his fear that I might have been seriously injured or even killed. For when he'd discovered the missing keys, he'd known who the car thief was, and he'd known I had no experience with the Dodge and its innovative fluid drive. His call to the police station had happened to catch Chief Cline, who set out himself to find me. And so their relief absolved me in their eyes.

But not in mine. Only the deep regret for what I'd done etched away my guilt and taught me to accept the imperfection of my humanity.