

2-2-95

Lynchburg

Shortly before our third grandchild was born several years ago, Jan and Roland asked me to come to Salem to stay with Kelly, then three. Needless to say, I was delighted with the invitation. The timing was perfect; I could play with Kelly in Salem during the three weeks before I had to be back at VCU for the beginning of the fall semester, with time to learn Kelly's routine before Jan went to the hospital.

I enjoy driving. On the trip to Salem, I arrived in Lynchburg, just past the halfway point, in time for lunch. I ate at Wendy's and got back on the divided four-lane street/highway that served local and through motorists before the U.S. 460 bypass around Lynchburg was completed. I had reached my cruising speed about a mile along the road when, abruptly, the car stopped. Lunchtime motorists and U.S. highway travelers were whizzing along the road. As soon as I realized that I could not start the car and that I was helplessly obstructing some very determined drivers, I decided that if I was going to die anyway, the probable outcome to my sitting there on the highway, I would prefer to die with my boots on.

I put the car in neutral, hopped out, and started pushing with my left arm while steering with my right hand. Promptly, traffic halted on both sides of the highway. Four or five men came up to help me push. At their insistence, I got back in the seat to steer while they shoved me off the highway onto an unpaved, wide, smooth area to the right of the road. One man stayed behind to be sure that I could make the next move. We saw a Chevron station ahead, less than a block away. My good Samaritan "carried" me (a use of the word I had come to appreciate years ago when we lived in North Carolina) in his pickup truck to the station.

The mechanic was still at lunch, but the attendant assured me that Benny would be back and that he was a good mechanic. My pickup ride went on about his business while I awaited Benny's return. I used the time to call Roland and Paul to warn them that I was delayed. Paul wanted to drive to Lynchburg to take me on to Salem, but I didn't think that move was practical because I would need the car in Salem. I promised to keep him informed about the progress of the repairs.

It was a very warm day in August. Although the station office was not air-conditioned, it was airy and comfortable. I enjoyed watching the passing cars, almost all of whose drivers honked and waved when they passed the station, a reassuring sign of the standing of the station in the community. When Benny returned from lunch, I walked with him to the car. A preliminary examination under the hood showed him that I had some kind of fuel pump problem. He wanted to study a manual of the car because he hadn't worked on electronically equipped cars enough to be sure of himself. Back at the station, he discovered that my 1984 Plymouth K-car was a half-year model which probably had a different fuel pump from the one used in the first models of that year. He wanted to remove that pump to take it to the parts store to be sure of getting the correct part. That careful approach also reassured me.

I had to have the car towed to the station so that it could be placed on the lift. He doubted that AAA would be of any use to me, but I thought I should try them. A tow truck came within the hour. Because the car had front wheel drive, it had to be towed backward, and the driver said he would not be responsible for loading the car onto the lift. When we drove into the station, he joyously greeted Benny as a long-lost friend. Without a word of protest, he helped Benny push the car onto the lift.

Benny found removing the pump to be very slow work, but he finally got it off and took it to the parts store, a trip which took about thirty minutes, although, I must say, it seemed longer. I entertained myself by watching the passing parade and observing how many people came into the station just to say hello to the operators. Obviously, all of them, including Benny, were well known and very well liked, a comforting thought while I was waiting for the repair work.

After Benny returned with the correct part, he spent what seemed to be a very long time installing it. Meantime, I was torturing myself by trying to guess what Benny's working all afternoon on the car was going to cost me. Our experience in Richmond had been that any time a car needed repairs, the resulting bill was at least \$200.00. I had no reason to believe the cost would be any different at an unknown garage in Lynchburg, even though it was obviously held in high esteem locally. At last, about five o'clock, some four and a half hours after I had stalled on the road, Benny came triumphantly into the office to tell me my car was ready. Fearfully, I asked about the charges.

"\$45.00," he replied.

"\$45.00?!" Incautiously, I exclaimed about the length of time he had been working exclusively on my automobile.

"Well, I'm certainly not going to charge you for all that time I spent studying what to do and getting the part. \$45.00 covers the cost of the part and the actual time I took to install it!"

If he hadn't been so covered with grease, I might have hugged him at that point, but I had to be content with lavish thanks and a five-dollar bill for him to use for beer the next Saturday night.

After notifying Paul and Roland, I got back on the road to arrive ultimately in Salem. However, as I approached Roanoke, the tension of the whole day came crashing down around my shoulders. I had handled the whole afternoon with aplomb, but the reaction which set in was way out of proportion to the stress of the occasion. I missed the turn from U.S. 460 to I-81 into Salem and became thoroughly lost trying to find my way back. Finally, I stopped and called Roland for instructions. He suggested I stay where I was, and he came to lead me ignominiously to his house.

New grandchild Greg was a few days late in putting in his appearance, thus causing me some worry about getting back to VCU in time to start my classes. Kelly was so sure her parents would go off to the hospital without telling her that she took to sleeping in the hall right outside their door. When Jan and Roland did go to the hospital, it was after Kelly got up one morning. Even before we got the call that she had a baby brother, she had become quite calm about the situation. The baby was wonderful, and I got back to Richmond in plenty of time for my classes. All ended well for all of us.



I've often wondered how much my car repair bill would have been in Richmond. Benny and Samaritans, wherever you are, we love you.