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### The Little Orange Bobcat

It was time for us to get a new car, an occupation that we always dread and put off as long as possible. Paul recalled the relatively easy experience we had had in buying a Ford station wagon from a small town in East Texas before we left Dallas. It was still serving us well. He called Roy Coomer in Wills Point and asked if he had a small Ford with a good record for low mileage. We wanted a standard shift and air conditioning. All Mr. Coomer could offer was a Bobcat, the Mercury version of a Ford Escort. We took it. It was the easiest car-buying transaction we'd ever had.

I was delighted. This was a perfect opportunity for a wonderful visit with family and friends. So, I flew to Dallas to pick up the car. The only doubt I had was that the car was ORANGE. I reasoned that there are different shades of orange, one or two of which *might* be acceptable in a car. With my friend Nancy Ingram, I took a Greyhound bus to the little town of Wills Point, some fifty miles from Dallas. Riding the bus was a pleasant experience even though the flat terrain from Dallas into east Texas was far from picturesque. Nancy and I had an uninterrupted opportunity to renew the neighborly relationship we had enjoyed over numerous cups of coffee five years earlier. Our George and Roland were no longer the little boys Nancy had known, and I found the pre-teen stories about her Laurie and Edward fascinating. Edward was still the active, blond little boy who apparently had never met a speck of dirt. Laurie, who had been diagnosed as somewhat retarded, was advancing satisfactorily.

I grew up where the cliché description of a little town was "a wide place in the road." Wills Point is such a place. It boasts a deserted train station, a cotton gin, and two traffic lights. We got off the bus at the second one, right at the car agency, the most impressive building in town. Nancy and I immediately saw a cute little orange station wagon parked on the driveway, pointed toward Dallas. Before I went through the necessary paper work with Mr. Coomer, at Nancy's insistence, we went over the car from front to back bumper, looking for minute flaws and possibly hidden defects. I had already found myself satisfied with the shade of orange, muted by the car's light brown, pseudo-wood trim. The color was all right - bright without being obvious, even lending itself to other color names if I could be clever enough to think which one.

I took possession of the keys, wheeled the car onto the U.S. highway/Main Street and drove three blocks to the other traffic light, where there was a Pizza Inn, the only possibility other than a Dairy Queen that we had spotted for lunch. Then, we headed back to Dallas, with me getting accustomed to the various buttons and dials on the new car. Several days later when I was ready to drive back to Richmond, I was pleased to have Francile Ehricht, a college friend, as a passenger for the first part of my trip. She was bound for a visit with a relative in Mississippi. Picking up Francile at her home entailed my having to negotiate Central Expressway during the Dallas morning rush hour, the only really traumatic experience I had the whole trip. We had a great time renewing our college friendship and filling in the details of our lives since graduation. I left her at the train station in Memphis, approximately one-third of the way from Dallas to Richmond.

I enjoy driving and found that Interstate 40 across Tennessee was scenic and easy to drive. One restful night in eastern Tennessee, in Johnson City, I think, saw me on the home stretch through the lovely mountains of southwest Virginia and on into Richmond. The little orange Bobcat was a pleasure to drive. I enjoyed the control that the gear shift lever gave me, and it was the thriftiest user of gasoline Paul and I had ever owned, a convenient attribute during the gasoline shortage of the seventies.

However, one day when the car was over a year old, as I turned from Three Chopt onto Monument Avenue on the way to a meeting at VCU, the clutch pedal fell off; it simply dropped to the floor, useless. Fortunately, the car was in gear and I was able to pull over to the curb. I found a hospitable woman at home in the nearest house who allowed me to use her phone. I called Paul and AAA and waited for the tow truck. The car went to the nearest Mercury repair shop and I went home with Paul.

The repair took a minimal amount of time, and I found myself contentedly driving the Bobcat for another year. Then, one day as I was driving, again, down Monument Avenue, enjoying the snow-covered landscape and rejoicing in the clear street, bless me if the clutch pedal didn't drop to the floor again. This time, I was in the process of shifting gears, and the gear settled rather positively into neutral. Needless to say, the car wouldn't GO. Traffic was nonexistent, so I got out and pushed the car to the curb, locked it, and went across the street to a doctor's office where I was permitted to use the phone. Paul was out of the office. AAA sent a tow truck, whose driver permitted me to ride along with him to the repair shop, an interesting trip, seeing familiar streets from a higher level than usual.

Paul did rescue me from the repair garage, the Bobcat was returned a few days later and served us very well for a couple of more years, with clutch pedal intact. Only a number of years later did I again have the opportunity to push a car off the road, this time a Plymouth with automatic transmission - no clutch - on a busy highway in Lynchburg, a fascinating adventure. But that's another story.