

My baby smelled so good. Drawing a deep breath through my crooked nose, I thought nothing on this earth brought satisfaction like the scent of a new car. So factory pristine, I drove it off the lot with less than a mile on the odometer. My first, unused car. And at the age of fifty-seven, that meant I had plenty of beaters before my beautiful Caddy. I needed to come up with a good name for her.

Momma, God rest her soul, made it possible. Life was difficult with her in my apartment these last few years. Had I known about the stocks back when she moved, I would have cashed them in to get a two-bedroom place. But I believed she kept them hidden to give me a gift after her passing. That, or she forgot about them. I preferred to think she wanted to reward me for my sacrifices.

And what a prize. I sank into the driver's seat. The leather crunched to mold around my body. Pulling the door shut, I marveled at the vacuum suction to seal out road noise. With the electronic fob in the cup holder, I turned the false key. The roar, then idle vibration, made my fingers tingle with anticipation to hit the road.

The dashboard came to life. In auto-dimming, bluish light, the combo navigation system, satellite radio, and control center popped up. I tried to remember everything from the salesman's ten-minute tutorial, and got three radio channels and my home address plugged in by poking around blindly. I pressed the nav button and house icon. I knew the way home, but I figured the system would tell me how to avoid traffic.

Easing out of the dealership to avoid bottoming out, once on the road I gunned it. Man, was she quick. Instant response and a steady wheel. I tapped the turn indicator to get three blinks, and entered the highway onramp. It was nice to use just the mirrors to merge into traffic, the little yellow light telling me a car was in the space I wanted to go. At my age, turning my neck to see out the side could result in a thrown disc.

Rolling with the flow, jazz softly playing unmarred by the noise of traffic, I spotted brake lights off in the distance. The nav system chimed twice to get my attention. The screen asked if I wanted to take an alternate route to avoid traffic. I tapped yes.

A familiar voice told me to exit the highway and proceed on the access road straight through the stoplight. Too familiar. It sounded like Momma. Had to be my brain playing tricks on me. I went through the stoplight, and a block later, nav said to turn right at the next intersection...in Momma's voice.

"Dammit, what the hell's going on?" I said out loud while turning.

"Don't you cuss around me," Momma's I'm-not-gonna-to-take-any-sass-from-you voice piped through the car's eight, surround-sound speakers.

I hit the brakes. The safety belt snapped me back into the bucket seat like a zip-tie.

“Whaddaya thinkin?” her high-pitched warble screamed at me, “Don’t stop in the middle of the road! You wanna get us killed?”

I looked around me, as best as I could while lunging forward, meeting with resistance. I tried three times to get the straight-jacket-strong restraints to let me loose. When they decided to let me go, I nearly rebroke my nose on the steering wheel. I expected to see a car following me with a camera thinking someone used me as the subject in some type of funny video. I definitely got punked.

“Would you pay attention?” Momma screeched better than a barn owl, “Stay in your lane. And turn left up here.”

“Here where?” I muttered, pissed such an expensive car would have such a crappy nav system. “The next block?”

“Yes. Right here.”

“Right?”

“I said left. Turn!”

My sweet ride cornered nicely when I responded by turning almost past the intersection. The anti-lock brakes prevented a massive fishtail. Thank God there was no oncoming traffic. I pulled over to the curb, pushed the gear handle in park, and nearly fell out in my haste to escape, the seat belt only marginally clotheslining me. I turned a full three-sixty-degrees twice, and saw no vehicle with a film crew. Maybe someone put a camera in the car. I leaned in and touched every nook and cranny of the interior, trying to focus on my task through the distraction of the new-car smell. Nothing. Man, I never thought I’d hallucinate about my dead mother. I hadn’t done drugs in decades, but this uninduced trip made all the others pale in comparison. I guess the mind plays tricks on you sometimes, even when clean. Shaking off the heebie-jeebies, I returned to the driver’s seat and started her up again so I could get home. I needed a nap. And a drink.

After I meandered through a non-descript neighborhood of cookie-cutter, single-family starter homes, I merged back onto the expressway. I remembered a news story about car computer systems. Had someone hacked mine? I’d rather they drive me off a bridge instead of use Momma’s voice to nag at me. The nav system beeped again.

“I dunno why you got back on the highway,” Momma grated out a standard complaint, “you know there’s just gonna be another wreck up ahead.”

What living nightmare was I in? I tightened my grip on the wrapped leather steering wheel, knuckles white. Stop thinking about her!

“Oh look,” her voice took on a whimsical note, “there’s Country Critters Bar-be-que, Yo-yo Fro-yo, Joe’s Hose Plumbing...”

Holy hell. Only I know about her habit of listing off every place of business we drive past. It wasn't a hack, my car was possessed by Momma. My beautiful Caddy! What have I done to deserve this? Wasn't I the only kid out of five willing to take her in when she couldn't pay her rent because of medical bills? Didn't I take her to doctor appointments, track her medication, and massage her pre-diabetic feet? For God's sake, I gave up sports shows so she could watch *Dancing with the Stars*, *Project Runway*, and...control my gag reflex...*The Bachelor*. Instead of silent in a grave, here she is, reading aloud. Just like when she lived. Mercifully, no accidents slowed me down. I merged over to take my exit.

"Why didn't you answer my question?" Momma demanded.

Crap. Apparently, death didn't give her insight about my short attention span. Hell, if I couldn't pay attention enough to get better than Cs and Ds in school, how did she think I could stand listening to her griping about every damn thing that crossed her path? I accepted getting yelled at by her because I couldn't muster up enough concentration to listen to every friggin' detail that came out of her mouth. I knew she wouldn't live forever, so I put up with it, taking the verbal jabs when she caught me thinking about something else other than what she spewed. I never thought I would need to go back into that habit once I tossed dirt onto her coffin.

"Momma, I'm trying to concentrate on driving."

"It's lunchtime. Donta think you should stop to get somethin' to eat?"

"No," I snapped back at her, "I'm not hungry."

"Yer not eatin' enough, just skin and bones now. I knew you wouldn't be able to take care of yerself."

"Momma, I'm fine. The doc told me for years I needed to lose weight. Now that I'm not eating nightly helpings of cream-of-something-soup casseroles and canned vegetables, I'm down to a healthy number. Both weight and cholesterol."

"Don't you complain about my cookin'," she declared, offended, and had she been in solid form, I'd have her finger wagging in my face. "I did what I could to keep you fed on a tight budget."

"I know you..."

"You loved my cooking growing up." Her voice cracked at the end of her interruption.

Was she crying? Jesus, how was this happening? Why? Lord knows we had our issues, and I may have raised my voice to her a few times when her words stung too sharp, but I always did my duty and took care of her. I didn't deserve this. She should haunt all her ungrateful kids who didn't pitch in to help. They didn't visit her once after she moved in with me. Didn't offer to have her come to them, even when they knew she couldn't travel and would have to decline. They called on her birthday, Christmas, and sometimes on Mother's Day. I helped her get all

gussied-up on those days because somehow, she thought it made a difference in the quality of the conversation. They thought their thirty-minute-a-year sacrifice compared to my three-hundred-sixty-five, twenty-four-seven prison.

I pulled into my apartment complex and barely slowed around three corners to my parking spot facing the front door of my ground-level unit. My anger bubble expanded from the dealership, past Momma, to my siblings.

“I’m sorry,” Momma softly whispered, the trace of tears still present in her voice, “I don’t know why I do that. You took such good care of me, and I miss you.”

I sighed, the pattern of behavior our hourly routine for years. Nag, argue, cry, apologize. Why couldn’t the Momma of my childhood haunt me? When she was happy, sang songs, smiled at you to get one back.

“It’s okay, Momma. I know you don’t mean to upset me. We’re home. Time for me to go in.”

“Okay, sweet pea. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Momma.”

I cut the engine and watched the glow of the console fade the way I viewed the life leave her in the hospital bed. Closing the door so it didn’t slam, I didn’t lock it. Why make it harder for the tow company? Once inside, I dialed the dealership and asked for my salesman. On hold with the New Age music calming me, I looked out the window to my shiny black car with custom rims. It was quiet in the apartment without the TV blaring in the background. And no chicken smell seeped from the crockpot. I had no one now, not even a pet. No hobbies. Just a thankless, anonymous job moving boxes around a warehouse. And my Caddy.

I hung up the phone and decided to name her Momma.