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HUNT FOR A FERRARI FIASCO

by Joan V. Preston

It was inevitable (ever since our dating nights when the only thing between our bodies was the latest issue of a car magazine) that someday an automobile would be born to us.

It began with our first birth, a son. Before we knew it, his full-of-car-stuff puberty was daydreaming over the classified foreign exotics (are there any other kind?) and we heard, "Dad, you just gotta go look at this one." "I wish she didn't look so good," lamented father Bill who also wished he had sprung for the estate with the *three*-car garage. She snuggled into her bay, shyly bumping the pumpkin-skinned Camaro into the Texas sun to get an even better tan. Announcements went out to friends who would appreciate this long-awaited delivery. They came and cooed over her and patted her just like the baby she was. Most had never thought about a Ferrari that wasn't red, wasn't a race car and wasn't born to a Hollywood movie. But what she was intrigued them. Shining silver, V-12, 2+2. She undoubtedly looked like Bill's baby.

Babies thrive on fresh air. Could the air be any fresher than a drive west from Dallas? Dallas was hot and so were the Republicans who were coming to convene in 1984. We had been restless ever since we knew Ferraris would be on the pedestal at Laguna Seca, running in historic races, and basking at Pebble Beach. Our baby couldn't remain a baby forever; at 21 years she was ready to become a California girl.

An August vacation in an automobile that had never met an air-conditioning coil. This would be a courageous story! Engine trouble? Robbers on the highway? Rattlesnakes? Barren waste? From here to there, Texas to California, we were talking painted desert, death valley desert, gambling desert. You could bet on that.

So what does the desert lack that makes it a desert? Water! The old canteen would hold a day's supply for man, woman and machine. As I filled it with the first day's liquid, lemonade, I wondered how the machine would like the taste.

We were off with windows rolled down and vents opened wide seeking fresh, cool air. Suddenly, a stop – just to check. The new father's grin smiled back at me from under the backwards hood that was hinged at the front. "Everything's fine; nothing needs changing on this baby."

Singing merrily, we were on the road again. Eighteen wheelers, as bold as sheet-metal buffalo, startled me as the open windows sucked in their passing stampede. Our ears were humming and we were speckled with the plain dirt of Texas.

South of Odessa in no time. We began a futile search for the crater of the second largest meteor to hit the U.S., only 20,000 years before its landing pad became the second largest state. Wait, what was that soaring object high above? Another meteor? Smashing! The Goodyear blimp without its stadium getting a vulture's eye view of our sporting event in the middle of nowhere. Its adventure was over as it headed home to Texas from California and the summer games of the 23rd Olympiad. Not finding the crater didn't seem so bad after all.

Our first shouting match. If the back seat is for lovers, the front seat must be for mouth-to-mouth shouting. Convert kilometers to miles? My first calculation had produced 26 mpg. A second try, encouraged by Bill's loud cry of disbelief, produced 16.3 mpg. He was satisfied with my latent mathematical skill, but in my heart I knew he was even more thrilled with his Ferrari's performance.

Miles of car conversation continued to be shouted over the din of prairie wind. It was about time our baby had a name. "Smokey" might be a good one. After all, she burped clouds of blue smoke when greeting every little Texas town. But parental love prevailed. "Smokey" did not emit the charm of her growing personality. We would give it more thought.

Up ahead we spotted a mountainous V. – Van Horn, Texas, the first of many small towns that sought attention by putting warpaint on Mother Nature's face. Makeup or not, the Davis and Guadalupe Mountains had the look of beautiful, volcanic mountains. A quick glimpse of my travel guide confirmed there had been volcanoes here once upon a time but they rarely had been seen by tourists.

The passing withered sage grew only in monotony. I resorted to rummaging through the glove box where I found a small book to read. The title book. A tale of intrigue raced through my mind as I discovered that an Italian donna, Clara, had been the original mother of this baby. Hmmm. Clara. "Let's name her Clara!" Yes, Clara, just like the heroine of *The Nutcracker* story.

My visual senses were beginning to reel from the endless stops for photogenic mountains when another sense brought Clara to a stop. Was that the odor of burning plastic. Not here, in the desolateness of the Texas-New Mexico border. What a perfect place to drill with the fiery red extinguisher that was mounted Boy Scout-fashion at my feet. But there was no fire where there was smell. It must be the brake linings of the truck ahead. Disappointed, I reluctantly conceded to be on our way.

How quickly New Mexico became Arizona. It was time to forget the log of passing desert and look more closely at the desert in the dioramas at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. Time to go up into Tucson's distant mountains to see where we had been. The first thing we saw was a young red Ferrari

at the Westward Look Resort. We parked our shining girl nearby and left the two of them to look westward while we sipped wine and enjoyed our first gourmet dining since leaving our own kitchen.

There wasn't much hope for adventure on the short, hot drive from Tucson to Phoenix so we looked forward to the poolside comforts of the Cottonwoods Resort. Reconstituting our parched throats and bodies, we sacrificed the opportunity to shop for Ferrari-style luxuries at the Borgata across the street in Ferrari-style Scottsdale. Next morning began with a photo by the resort's marquee. We carefully concealed the ragged beach towels that mercifully soaked up the sweat of the open road while obscuring the genuine leather seats. But the road wasn't very open. Getting out of Phoenix, using mythical signs and freeways, became almost impossible.

Our first morning to depart without breakfast. This would inevitably lead to car sickness, no McDonald's for miles and hunger pains. Hours later we finally stopped in Tonopah, Arizona, at a small service area that promised a cup of coffee and something sweet. Two sweet ladies with exposed tattoos strolled in and sat down beside us. Tattoo for two? Late breakfast with other courageous women had been worth the wait.

A pause for agricultural inspection at the California border. How fast could we eat a hundred grapes that had been allowed to travel from California to Texas but weren't allowed to come back home? Should we toss them out the window to become Arizona raisins? The inspector pointed to the rear of the car, "Is that the trunk or the engine?"

We were ecstatic. Obviously Clara had developed a mysterious air about her and was getting the attention she deserved. Our laughter filled us up and we weren't hungry for the grapes anymore. Inspection passed!

East of Indio. The hot air became hazy and the wavering roadside resembled a crematorium. Was this what the meteor crater would have looked like? Bombs were always tested in the desert but our ears, numbed by desert winds, hadn't heard any being tested today. Perhaps this was just the way things look below sea level, somewhere we had never been before. Only twenty more miles to satisfy our desperate longing for the green of the palms and the blue of the springs.

Our earliest start yet. We could make it to Monterey if the day were long enough. In the distance, sculpture-like windmills beckoned from the low, rolling mountains that had no town to monogram them. Billboards advertised for other mountains willing to be decorated with windmills. It was impossible not to scan the hills for a glimpse of Don Quixote.

From Palm Springs to Los Angeles had taken just over two hours. We accepted with faith that there were still mountains beside us. The thick smog concealed them. Worst of all, it hid the beloved and beleaguered H O L L Y W O O D sign while vainly trying to keep us from knowing where we were.

Ventura. Fuel stops were just fuel stops until a large transporter pulled in also and a handsome young man stepped down to greet us. His transporter was filled up with Ferraris on their way to Monterey. The easy way. It was friendship at first sight when he recognized Clara as a Ferrari. Other passers-by had only squinted and looked puzzled when they saw her Pinin Farina label. They never even suspected she was a Ferrari.

Beautiful Santa Barbara. Cool air at last. It had only taken 1,500 miles to find it. Refreshed, we had air-conditioned ambience by closing the windows and opening the little round vents at our feet. Lulled by the quietness, Clara cooed something

about long ago and far away in the snow-capped Italian Alps.

Oh no! Not another road disaster for someone else! We gasped as we saw ahead the treacherous half-on, half-off-the-road vehicle and gasped again as we recognized our new friend in the Ferrari transporter. We hadn't even a hint of a flat tire for me to write about.

We began to stop again for those "just in case" checks. Service station boys younger than Clara, still wondering about their first kiss, now wondered at their first glimpse of a V-12. "Someone must have taken good care of her," they sighed breathlessly.

Bakersfield. Where oil wells grew more prolific than trees. Clara's odometer rolled up to 98,000 km. I breathed a sigh of relief when Bill shouted, "60,000 miles" and spared me the challenge of more 2+2 mathematics.

On to Monterey! The Pacific Ocean thousands of feet below crashed into the rocky shore with the same enthusiasm that we chased every curve of Infamous Highway 1. Hanging over the edge for miles, bridge after bridge, this dream automobile adventure had become a tale of suspension.

Just as we anticipated. Monterey greeted us with a cold shoulder. But we were soon warmed by the laughter and stories of Ferrari men and their motoring machines at Carmel's La Canada Concours d'Elegance. Clara met some cousins that more or less looked like her. Especially charming was meeting a San Francisco Symphony violinist accompanied by his class-winning Ferrari that was tuned finer than his violin. He and his wife had also driven to Monterey to seek an adventurer's story. Was this something that was going around?

Early breakfast this time with men and women who had Ferrari tattooed on their hearts. Clara was about to make her latent debut with 600 Ferraris in a 1.9-mile whirlwind parade around Laguna Seca race track. She beamed. We bowed. We nestled under a tree to watch the racing Ferraris make their entrance. Clara had definitely been more of a lady!

The party was over too soon. The pace slowed to a crawl. We began our long descent, with thousands of other enthusiasts from the burning California racing hills down into the narrow cruising streets of town. This evening would bring the honor of banqueting with Ferrari legends, Luigi Chinetti and Phil Hill. In the morning we would stroll the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance and admire the Ferraris in the beauty contest there.

Another Ferrari fantasy day slipped into history. As the Pacific mist began to roll in, we carefully pulled the cover up over Clara and tucked her in for the night. My eyes were misty too. The three of us had enjoyed so much together. Clara, Bill and my search for a courageous story would be headed east in the morning. We needed an early start. With or without breakfast?

"She's only running on ten cylinders! That traffic jam leaving the race track! I'll need to change her plugs in the morning."

McDonalds. Ferrari dealer. Stop after stop until breakfast and the plugs were in hand for the big changing rite. Right in the middle of the Hyatt parking lot. The tools, weary from their long wait in the trunk alongside the grapes, were at last rewarded for their patience. I stood watch, writing feverishly and beaming with pride as Clara's daddy showed how he could take care of all her problems.

Watching and writing would have to wait. I returned to our room to finish packing for the long drive to Barstow, one that had now lost hope of an early start. Another exciting announce-

ment burst through the hotel door, "There must be a problem with the voltage regulator!"

A few days before I had logged the burning out of the fog lights but had resisted seeing this as an adventurer's plight. Things were sounding better. Facing over 100° desert again, I would be sitting directly in front of a head lamp rigged to burn excess voltage. And I would be in charge of flipping its toggle switch. Log to write. Photos to take. Calculations to calculate. Lemonade to pour. Voltage to control. Sitting in the passenger seat was never meant to be just going along for the ride.

I tried not to think about the day's 500-mile goal. Fields of lettuce, soaking up the California sun while waiting to be shipped to salad bars, were tossed with vineyards in the distance. Could the Forty-niners have dreamed about the green that would produce gold when the gold ran out? I thought instead about how nice it had been to pack leisurely while waiting for the plugs to be changed.

"Of course not! I didn't pack your shirts." There was more than enough time to gaze at fields of lettuce as we drove 56 miles west to pick up the shirts that had stayed behind.

Fields of lettuce, grapes for days of wine and raisins, pecans, almonds and cabbage. Cabbage being processed. Without Clara's open windows we never would have known. But California wasn't just a state of vegetables, fruits and nuts. It was a state of speedometer checks.

"Never have so many signs and miles been devoted to something no one is interested in." Bill checked anyway. We entered the land of the desert tortoise and concluded he had nothing on us. It was Clara's odometer that was moving too slow. Day was turning to dusk. Twenty-Mule Team Road led to Boron. This road was leading nowhere. Windmills came again into the twilight view just as two Phantom fighters from Edwards Air Force Base tilted at them and disappeared over the mountains.

We had been warned the desert would become freezing cold at night – but the sign read, "Avoid Overheating. Turn off A/C for next 16 miles." Bill drove slower so we could savor the heat. I offered to turn off the heat lamp still burning behind my seat.

Darkness finally came and with it some cooler air and and a deserted feeling. But we weren't deserted. Clara's beaming headlights would catch the eye of a weary driver miles away

who would blink and blink to let us know we were not alone. She would have lowered her bright European eyes but they were already looking down.

Barstow was a good place to be after being nowhere most of the day. Barstow was a good place to wash the dirty laundry. Barstow was a good place to get ready for Las Vegas.

Clara seemed to roam near Caesar's Palace where men and women were in love with slot machines instead of motoring machines. It was no loss for her to head for Hoover Dam. She drew more attention there in spite of competition from the grand dam. We wound our way across the dam and high above it. A motorcycle approached. Sitting proudly in its side car was a boxer. Do dogs keep logs?

When it came we had forgotten about it. Rain. East of Winslow, Arizona, it poured down but not a drop poured in. Clara's wipers slowly pushed the rain out of her face like Scarlett O'Hara waving a fan. Pretty, but useless.

Chains of mountains and trains. Endless trains that traveled all the way west beside us and were now eastward-bound too. Santa Fe is a romantic city to others, but Santa Fe to me was the powerful link in the chain of freight that keeps America moving. It often took five engines to pull the load. I looked back at 1.9 miles of Ferraris on the Laguna Seca track and realized we had only taken a ride on the Short Line.

Santa Fe to Albuquerque to "how you say it?" Tucumcari, New Mexico. It means "stay all night" spoke the elderly native American who pumped the gas. We wished we could, but we already had a reservation waiting for us in Amarillo. Long ago Apaches had held Mexicans at Tucumcari "all night" but nothing could hold Clara and our homeward-bound hearts.

100,000 km! Clara's amazing endurance still fascinated us. Kilometers or miles? It really didn't matter anymore. All too soon other numbers would have to be taken into account. Fuel economy of 15.17 mpg. An average oil consumption of 366 mpq. A round trip of 4,022 miles from Dallas to Dallas.

Home sweet home! Dallas! She was still being blamed for taking a young President's life 20 years before. While we were gone, she had nominated and given life to a soon-to-be-elected older President Reagan. With a sky scraper range of glass as her only hope for a mountain chain, she glistened and warmly held out her arms to welcome us back. Just as she had welcomed other pioneers 150 years ago.

ANSWERS TO PHOTO MYSTERY ON PAGE 34

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