

Granny's *Baby-Blue* Buick Special



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One of my favorite Coastal events is Cruisin' the Coast. Each year I look forward to the passing parade of jazzy, colorful cars sprinting along the highways and byways of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. As I sit in my lawn chair on Hwy 90, I'm also entertained by the attire many of the drivers and their riders wear. I especially like seeing a vintage car sporting a lovely lady resplendent in a silk headscarf and a pair of cat-eye sunglasses, their rhinestones catching the glistening sunlight. A driver complete with a splashy Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts, plus a Montecristo cigar, always rounds out the picture. But of all the classy cars zipping around with their spiffy riders, there's one that I look for most of all: a 1949, baby-blue Buick Special.

When I was in grade school, summer va-

cation was much anticipated. As soon as it arrived, my dear parents packed me up for a summer holiday with my sweet Granny from D'Lo, Mississippi. Watching my parents drive away from Granny's little house, I knew my summer of fun and excitement was just beginning. Dear Granny never had much money. She was an R.N. who worked at Jackson's St. Dominic Hospital until heart problems caused her to retire on disability at the age of 56. But her lack of funds never stopped Granny from running the roads, as the old-timers say.

Granny never owned a new car, but she always managed to have a clunker-of-a-car ready to take us where we needed to go. By 1964 her 1949 black Buick Special had seen better days. She was its fourth owner, none of whom had taken care of the once-pristine car. When I first saw it, its front grill reminded me of some eerie, deep sea creature, like an anglerfish; the car's huge rust



spots were the color of the fish's skin. The car's interior was a wreck. Its once plush seats were torn. Its headliner sagged and was held up by stickpins. Like all cars of that vintage, it had a huge steering wheel, to which Granny added a "suicide" knob. I can see her to this good day turning that wheel with all her might in the days before power steering. But Granny never liked how the car looked, so one summer afternoon she took matters into her own hands.

We drove to Jackson. Stopping at a hardware store, we purchased two paint brushes, along with a large can of baby-blue, Rustoleum paint. Then we paid a visit to the local fabric center. Several yards of blue-and-white canvas were purchased there. After a stop at the Frostop for some chilly root beers and a couple of hamburgers dripping juice and mustard, we roared back to D'Lo. It was late when we arrived at Granny's house. I quickly bathed and jumped into bed, excited at the prospect of what the next day would bring. Granny kissed me goodnight and said, "Pleasant dreams. I love you." Out went the light and off to the Land-of-Nod I went.

In the morning, the warm sunlight woke me. Because Granny had no air-conditioning, all the windows were open. The early morning breeze was an evocative bouquet, combining the candied sweetness of honeysuckle and magnolia blossoms with whatever strong disinfectant Granny had used to mop the kitchen floor. In the stillness I gazed out the window. Granny's tall pink hollyhocks were a splash of color against the azure-blue sky. I spotted a bumblebee, quietly going about his morning job of pollinating the other flowers in Granny's garden. The smell of frying eggs and bacon catapulted me from my bed to the kitchen. Heads were bowed. Granny thanked God for the food and His blessings and said amen. I dove into the morning repast with relish. Granny smiled and said, "Anthony, are you ready to help me paint the car?" "Paint the car?" I thought. I'd never done that before. But never being one to say



no, I jump at the idea. The dishes were thrown into the sink and our morning adventure began.

"Anthony, shake up the paint while I put down some old sheets just in case we get messy." Granny then got the brushes and opened the paint can. The smell filled my senses and the bright blue color danced before my eyes. "Now, do the best you can," Granny said. "And let's get started." You might be wondering, did we cover the chrome? No, we didn't. The window glass? Nope! We just slobbered paint in all directions.

Later that afternoon, as we waited for the paint to completely dry, Granny sat down at her treadmill sewing machine and whipped out some new seat covers using the blue-and-white can-

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vas we'd purchased. With some difficulty she sewed elastic onto the covers, along with some additional ties. "Now, Anthony, we'll put these on our car. It will look just like new!" And to an impressionable, twelve-year-old boy with a vivid imagination, it did! Later that night, Granny tucked me into bed with a hug and kiss. "Pleasant dreams. I love you," she said. And out went the light.

For the remainder of that mystical summer, we drove around Simpson County in Granny's *new* car. There was not a dusty, country road that we did not travel in search of new adventures. We often packed the car with cane poles, a can of squiggly worms, and a box lunch of ham sandwiches and creamy potato salad. Leaning against our new car, parked along the creek bank, we fished the afternoon away. Sometimes we visited Granny's friends. But on one of our

excursions, I learned that the old saying, "Never look a gift horse in the mouth," could pertain to chickens as well.

"Granny! Look at that!" I said, my eyes bursting with excitement. Before us, down the road a piece, was an overturned chicken truck. When the truck overturned, the chicken crates had been smashed, liberating the doomed cluckers. Thankfully, no one had been injured. But the old driver and his youthful assistance still had their hands full. They were chasing Rhode Island Reds, Plymouth Rocks, and Leghorns, all of which dashed around...well...like chickens with their heads cut off! The impact of the asphalt had stunned many of the chickens, some of which were draped across the road—feathers, beaks, and feet dancing in the late afternoon sunlight.

"Ma'am, if you want some of them yard-birds, you can have all you can catch!" the old driver yelled. "We ain't never gonna catch 'em all." Granny looked at me. I looked at her, the race was on! We drove toward the sea of dancing, clucking chickens. As the baby-blue Buick neared the crash site, I jumped into the backseat. Carefully, I opened the back door as the car slowed to a crawl.

"Anthony, you be careful!" Granny said. And I was! Grabbing one of the flopping chickens, I pitched it onto the back seat; a flurry of feathers followed. The stunned chicken looked at me with amazement and then collapsed in a feathery huff. Whoosh! Another of her sisters flew through the air into the car, clucking and flapping. "That's enough," Granny said. "Who-wee! What a lucky day we've had!" Once we got home, I watched Granny wring the chicken's necks, boil'em, pluck'em, and fry'em. Those chickens were some of the best I ever ate! With a stomach full of fried chicken, homemade biscuits, and turnip greens, I waddled off to bed, but not before Granny said, "Pleasant dreams. I love you!"

As the years passed, the story concerning the hand-painted, baby-blue Buick and the liberated chickens morphed into legend. It was seldom my family got together that the story did not surface. Its re-telling always ended in raucous laughter. But all good things

must eventually come to an end. By 1984 Granny was living with my parents due to her age. One afternoon in that year, as I unlocked my front door, I heard the phone ringing. It was my father. The news was not good. Granny had been taken ill and was in the hospital.

After several tests, the doctor gave us the results: cancer. When Granny asked the doctor how much time she had, he said, "Possibly...two months. You can take chemotherapy, but I fear the cancer's gone beyond any help." My heart sank. Here was the love of my life, a woman who had created some of my most lasting memories. And now she was dying of cancer, which is the most stupid of diseases; stupid because it eats up the very thing that gives it life. In the ensuing months, Granny never complained. Her only request was, "Please keep me clean and pain-free."

As the last days of Granny's life trickled by, my family never left her side. We took shifts staying at the hospital. My shift was from five to ten in the evening. At ten, my mother relieved me and stayed the night. My father had the day shift. As

Granny's condition worsened, she never lost her smile, even if it was not as bright as it had once been. Each night before I left the hospital, she would hug me and say, "Pleasant dreams. I love you!"

A visit by Ol' Man Death is never easy. And it seems he always visits in the wee hours of the morning; a phone call at that time is never good. I lifted the receiver and my father said, "Son, God called Granny home a few minutes ago." "How's Mom," I asked. "She's fine...just glad Granny's suffering is over."

In the days that followed, family from all over arrived for the funeral. Gulfport's old Riemann funeral home on 25th Avenue was filled to capacity on the day of Granny's funeral. The smell of chrysanthemums perfumed the air as the pastor delivered a bittersweet eulogy filled with family lore, love, and warm memories. As I sat there listening, holding back tears, I remembered what Granny had always said to me just before kissing me goodnight: "Pleasant dreams. I love you." And then it dawned on me—that was the last thing my dear grandmother said to me before God called her home.

So if you should see me sitting in my lawn chair by Hwy 90, watching the passing parade of vintage cars, and a baby-blue 1949 Buick Special glides by, don't be surprised if you see me shed a tear or two. They won't be tears of sadness, but tears of joy, because the sight of that Buick will conjure up in me a myriad of misty memories; memories of my grandmother's love and the memory of that unforgettable summer when we painted her car blue, road the back roads of Simpson County, and feasted on liberated chickens in days long gone.

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless you and keep a song in your heart.

Kal



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About the Author

Anthony W. Kalberg was born and reared on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and has a background in the arts and stage performance. A Gulfport resident, he had front-row seats for Hurricanes Betsy, Camille, and Katrina and survived them all. Those life-changing storms have had a major impact on both his writing and his life. *A Chasing of the Wind* is his first novel.

