

## **Rocket 88**

by Sydney Lea

A few weeks ago, one of our grandsons, nine years old, stepped away from the clamor of a family gathering and walked straight up to me. His preoccupied look told me something was on his mind. I bent to listen, the power of my two hearing aids not a match for the collective chatter. He was asking me a question, but uncertain I'd gotten it rightly, I told him to repeat it. "Grandpa, what's an Oldsmobile?"

I simply answered that an Oldsmobile was a car that's not produced anymore. I immediately wondered why the question had occurred to the boy in the first place but before I could ask, he rushed back to be with his little brother and cousins. Distracted myself by plenteous, beloved company, I didn't get around to pursuing the matter that afternoon.

Then suddenly everyone was gone.

I'm sometimes grumpy about the technological revolution of our times. I'm a dinosaur, I know, but apart from typing on a computer, my technological limit seems to be watching sports on our quasi-antique television. They're the single thing, in fact, I *do* watch on TV. Whenever I tune in, I'm both astounded and appalled during camera scans of the stadium crowd, by how few on hand are paying attention to the live game as opposed to their cell phones. It's as though nothing could be real if not mediated by a screen.

Well, of course, a television has a screen (our old one, according to our sons and daughters, a laughably small one), but, well, you know.... And true enough, I use my own phone and that grandson uses his—actually his father's—to exchange commentaries on Boston Celtics games. *Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frere!* His text messages can be hilarious, and I enjoy them if anything more than the contests themselves.

My grandson and I, along with his father, have watched quite a few Celtics games since the day I'm recalling. Each time, I've meant to use a half-time break to discover why the boy had asked about an obsolete car at our clan's get-together. The stark truth, though, is that the older I get, the more my mind wanders, and I've consistently forgotten to do so. I can vow right here to ask at the next opportunity, but right here too I'll admit there are even odds at best that I'll fulfill the vow—not that anyone need care whether I do or don't.

But the main thing on my mind is how our brief exchange set off a reminiscence, not at the family occasion, but today. It has had me thinking of Joey Marsh, a high school senior when I was a freshman. He would appear now and again in his dad's crimson Olds, as if—built like a Periclean statue and movie-star handsome—Joey needed any further edge on the lowly rest of us.

After graduation, he was bound for Princeton, I think, or some other elite university. But he was elite in every other way we could imagine too. So, all I could manage was envy, for example, as he cruised away from Allen's with yet another of seemingly countless pretty girls beside him on the front seat, close as his own skin. Allen's was the drugstore where we lesser beings gathered after team, band, or theater practice, depending on our interests, for awkward flirtation and fountain treats. (I'd bet that no one even ten years younger than I would know today what a lemon phosphate was, or even a soda jerk. I'm fetching up an utterly different era.)

I may have had actual dreams about Joey's Rocket 88. I'm certain I had daytime ones. That flashy paint job! That fearsome V-8 engine! In the hallway one morning, I heard Joey brag to a couple of classmates that from a dead stop beside one telephone pole, he could floor the red Olds's gas pedal and be clipping along at sixty before he reached a third. That may be nothing these days, but it was boasting matter in those.

Last I checked, and granted, it's been quite a while now, there's still the same straightaway on Addison Pike where the kids with hot cars held their drag races. I usually heard second-hand reports of these epical events but on the few blessed occasions when I could watch in person, I ached, yearned, and thrilled as two formidable machines peeled rubber and blew sonorous exhaust through their Glas-Pak dual exhausts. I don't recall ever watching or hearing that Joey's Olds had lost a heat.

Of course, there's no call to share any of these reflections with my grandson, much less to tell him how I resented my father for driving his puny four-cylinder Volkswagen bug. Dad believed in humility and practiced it, which I now see as a genuine virtue. He would, however, occasionally brag about his little car's *gas mileage* of all the stupid things on earth! I always prayed he wouldn't do so in front of some companion of mine, especially a male one.

I won't suggest to that grandson either that I too would have scored with the attractive girls if I'd driven an Olds like Joey. I don't believe that now and probably didn't then.

Early this morning, a Sunday, my wife left for western Massachusetts. She'll be away all day on a visit to an older sister, one undergoing brutal treatment for cancer. That woman doesn't smoke and never has; she barely drinks; she exercises and has regular mammograms. Sure, it's a cliché, but no less true for that: Life's not fair. I record these thoughts, for instance, at a time when an autocratic and downright criminal American chief executive, eight years older than that good woman, wreaks havoc on America's social and economic fabric. He does this, so far at least with impunity, even as he gulps gallons of sugary soda every day, along with what in his sub-literacy he calls "hamberders" from the fast-food eateries.

My anxiety over the political and ethical state of the nation is unrelenting; further, I've been silently protesting my temporary solitude; further still, I'm concerned for that sister-in-law, whom I love and admire. All this has had me down throughout the morning. I'm a bit ashamed to admit as much. Too old to join or arrange demonstrations anymore (though my state's senior senator, who's even older, keeps doing so in volume, God bless him), still I'm doing what little I can otherwise to resist the deep evils of Trumpism: signing petitions, donating cash to progressive opponents, what have you.

As for my aloneness, it will be short-lived. The very fact that I can miss a wife of forty-three years so dearly even for a few hours is its own indicator of unmerited good fortune.

Finally, although I have an array of old person's ailments, some fairly worrisome, to be sure, for now I remain quite functional physically.

In short, the fact that I've been spending so much of this morning lamenting my own relatively puny discomforts does feel inexcusable. That's because it is.

Spoiled as I am, I've positively been nurturing my genteel *Weltschmerz*, privately whining too about the way a rainy mid-March forenoon nullifies all color outdoors.

As I watched my wife's car, which gets excellent gas mileage, by the way—as I watched it disappear behind the woods on our driveway, my spirits sagged, and the landscape played its part. Everything in it seemed so unrelievedly dreary that I didn't even bother to look out the window again until a moment past ... when I was stopped in my figurative racks by the plain, unpainted fence, of all things, around our compost pile.

In his unfinished autobiographical poem *The Recluse*, William Wordsworth speaks of the mystical energy residing, if we are open to it, in “the simple produce of the common day.” Those words somehow lodged themselves in my head over sixty years ago, but I can go for long stretches of forgetting their accuracy. I need a metaphorical slap in the face now and again, and I just felt one.

We built that crude fence a while back to ward off marauding bears. We believed the enclosure had no other purpose than, precisely, enclosing: it was strictly functional. Just now, however, its bare planks are emitting an uncannily bright gleam amid the general drabness. I remember watching an eruption from Mt. Etna in Sicily some thirty years ago, and the flare from our fence's boards, as I behold it now, puts me in mind of the fabled mountain's volcanic lava.

Struck by the shine of those planks a few moments back, I whispered something incongruous into the empty living room: “They don't make Oldsmobiles anymore.” The remark came to me altogether involuntarily.

My wife will be home soon, her beauty and humanity if anything more precious to me than when she was in her twenties. My grandson is one of eight grandchildren, each so profound a joy in my life that I could never have predicted it as a young man. Thanks to Bernie Sanders and others of like mettle, backlash against the odious excesses and transgressions of Donald Trump and his cohort of crooks and fools seems to be shaping up. Things may be brightening, after all.

It's almost seven decades since I witnessed Joey Marsh sliding away from Allen's Drugstore with a pretty companion or rocketing up Addison Pike with some pretender

sucking that Olds's exhaust, and it's been only ten minutes or so since I was staggered by the radiance of a backyard fence, of all things. Maybe the huge gap in time accounts for what I'd answer if our grandson asked about an Oldsmobile now. Who knows? In any case, I might wonder aloud why in the world—this suddenly breathtaking world—someone would ever yearn for a Rocket 88, whatever its color.



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