

## Willy

Willy wasn't always a member of our family. He was born around 1951, and his early childhood was spent with some other people. Then he came to us, and our family was complete.

Willy was our car. He was really a Willys Jeep, but he liked to pretend he was a car, and we never disillusioned him. He was grey all over. His shape was all straight lines and right angles; the only curves were the wheels. He was tall, which made him easy to find in a crowded parking lot, and thin, which made him easy to squeeze into tight places.

Wherever we went in the city, Willy took us. We would puff along the Outer Drive, and as other cars zoomed past us, their drivers would slow down to leer at us. The less snobbish ones would grin and wave. Wherever we lived, Willy soon became a standing joke in our neighborhood.

Willy was part of our way of life in the city, but it was on our summer camping trips that he became a real personality. We'd pile him up with our two tents and the food baskets and the big axe. Our father would arrange the sleeping bags on top of everything, so we could have a "pajama wagon." Then we would start. Our father and mother would drive, and we kids would alternately fidget, play "Roadside Cribbage," and doze to a lullaby of roars and bumps. Every few hundred miles we would have to stop to have the carburetor fixed or a new muffler put in or a tire patched. But we never minded the repairs; after all, Willy was working harder than any of us.

We would take the new tollways whenever we could, but it seemed sort of risky. I mean, we always felt that a car like Willy wasn't really allowed to go on those expressways. With a bold air we would jerk up to the tollbooth, and then we'd drive away quickly, before the toll collector could call our bluff. The speed limit would be something inconceivable like 70 miles an hour, but 50 was just about Willy's limit. He could do 55, but his pain would be so vociferously expressed that we didn't make him try it very often. Then after our father made the top carrier out of an old bookcase, even 45 miles an hour was stretching it a little.

During these years, Willy was a member of the whole family, but last summer, in the back mountains of West Virginia, I acquired a special relationship to him. It was during that camping trip that my father started teaching me to drive. I had already had a few lessons in my uncle's modern car, and I was amazed at the difference. True, Willy's driver's seat would give you a backache after five minutes; true, all the controls became untouchably hot after three minutes; true, the lurches and bumps were absolutely appalling from the driver's seat. But in Willy I felt that I had a sympathetic friend. Together, Willy and I would try to turn the S-curves my father had marked off; together we would round the old dirt parking area for the fortieth time. And when my father let us go on the road, I'm sure Willy felt as much inner satisfaction as I did with a job well done.

The story of Willy's death is a sad one, which is sort of hard for me to tell. Very simply, he was sitting under the El tracks a few weeks ago; someone dropped a cigarette on the tracks; and Willy, the tracks, and everything else in the vicinity were soon in flames. I went to see his body the other day, and it was a mess. But it didn't bother me, because I knew it wasn't really Willy I was seeing. I guess the Allstate Company, with their hundred and forty dollars of insurance for him, didn't think he'd been worth much. But we knew better.

Sue Hodge