

CARS **by Carolyn Kirsch**

Mamma called her Betsy. She had a running board. Betsy meant we were going somewhere; maybe a drive-in movie with popcorn, coca-cola. I'd fall asleep on the dog's blanket in the tiny back seat. When we got home Daddy would carry me gently into the quiet house.

High school juniors, giggling, feeling emancipated. My best friend Linda and I slept in the used Studebaker Firebird that first night...my very own car. White, sleek with fins. Perfect!

BAM! Other side, CRASH! SPIN! Shrieking, hair flying, turning the wheel to avoid the others in the distortion of revolving colored lights. Gaudy bumper cars doing what they do so well. BOOM! Smell of cotton candy and firecrackers in the air. Carnival is in town; I can forget everything else.

The cheap window seat of the railway car is foggy, streaked, as I pull away, headed to NYC. Leaving Pensacola...physically, emotionally, hopefully forever. Mamma running alongside the slowly moving train crying, calling my name. Me waving, I blow kisses to reassure her I'll be back. The whistle blows loudly. I never go back.

That little girl grew up, became a Broadway dancer. She also became a functioning alcoholic. "Never drink during the day, or before going into work but when the curtain comes down I'm on my own." Bon vivant, party girl, libertine. The 60's brought me a long way away from ballet class at Miss Bernice's Dance School on Palafox Street. I became involved with high profile, intelligent men who called for me in limousines, laughed at my irreverent sass and made love to me, as I willingly loved them. A free spirit. A high ride, those days, which I don't regret. Reminiscences of exciting times..... I would be sad sitting here (almost 80 years old) and not having these memories in my head.

White stretch limo cruises to the steps of The Plaza Hotel. I hear the underscoring of 'Jaws' in my head. Tourists take pictures as I traipse down those stairs in my Belgian Lace wedding gown, trying not to fall, physically or metaphorically. The smell of bouquet gardenias in the car. I don't remember the ride to the United Nations church. I remember precious little about the marriage and that's as it should be.

In the full Metro North car, advancing towards unknown territory, I tangibly feel resistance in my chest. Turn around, go home, ignore, deny. Cancer. The cells are replicating with every mile covered as the walls of Sloan-Kettering slide into sight. Click, clack, click, clack. Still, I'm carried irrevocably through diagnosis, surgery, chemotherapy, radiation and recovery. Fourteen years ago. Grateful for that train ride. Click, clack, hooray!

Now my favorite ride is a carousel horse, painted in wild primary colors, with nostrils flared, teeth bared. Hurdy-gurdy music galloping through my ears. Allows me to roam my own landscape as I envision it, on this day, at this time. The cacophony, the mysterious lift of the horse. The steamy air as I fly through it. I honor the memory of the literary cat Mehitabel as she said: *"There's a dance left in the old dame yet!"*