

## AMAZON TRAIL

# Ford every stream

*The demise of a trusted friend—her '76 Volvo sedan—brings this writer to the life passage known as car hunting*

by Lee Lynch

**A**fter it was all over, someone told me that buying a car is one of life's major stresses, not far down the list from marriage and buying a home.

Now they tell me.

Some people can turn in a car every few years, or buy old clunkers to run into the ground, but for me, we're talking best-friend status. Constant companion. Freedom to roam the world.

All these months later I still get choked up talking about my '76 Volvo sedan, Spock. He was with me for 19 years, longer than any lover to date.

In the end, though, I couldn't care for him the way he deserved. The one good Volvo mechanic in town retired. The next best guy ran up \$1,000 in bills that last month, and my health insurance wouldn't cover Spock. I had to buy a car.

But what? I really loved that Volvo, but couldn't afford a new one. After two years of heroic rescues by Lover, emptying my bank account and fearing to wander farther than Super AAA would tow, I wanted nothing to do with used vehicles.

That decided, I faced the nightmare of car payments.

Fortunately, my employer pays me instead of giving me benefits. So it was simple. I don't get sick or take a vacation for the next six years and bingo—the car is paid off.

Well, it made sense at the time.

What would I buy? My only idea was the no-haggle cult-car, the Saturn. One day I parked Spock around the corner and slunk into the dealership. The Saturns were really cute. And about two tons lighter than my glamorized Sherman tank. Cars quickly lose their cuteness in a collision with a logging truck.

I had a feeling this wasn't going to be one of these deals where I walk into a showroom, fall in love and drive home in the car of my dreams. I spent that hot summer month memorizing *Consumer Reports New Car Buying Guide*. I lived, breathed and sweated cars.

What I really needed was a kind of "car parent" to tell me what to buy. My step-dad-in-law counseled me, but confessed, "I'm a GMC man." My mechanic echoed him. So I reported with great hopes to the nearest GMC dealership. No match. GMC must be a guy thing.

Lover is very out at work. Her old boss, Molly, has always taken a motherly interest in us. She teases me about spoiling Lover when I bring flowers. She gives us gruff mini-lectures about appreciating each other. Now this wouldn't be strange, except that in our radical-right town, queer couples don't get many straight mentors.

Molly goes her own way. "A Ford," she pronounced, in her best I-don't-want-an-argument manner. I couldn't explain that dykes like me don't drive new Fords.

Back to haunting the car lots, amassing stacks of slick brochures and mercilessly interrogating salespeople.

Lover, who had quietly gone out the year before and replaced her old car with its updated twin, introduced me to after-dark window shopping. It seems there's a ritual in this country of

meandering acres of auto barrens after the harassing sales staff goes home. We scanned price and options stickers by the light of the summer moon.

Soon, I had it narrowed down. Safety—at 50, mortality becomes very real. Low repair costs—lesbian writers don't keep cars 19 years for no reason. Roominess—I'd always had difficulty fitting bookcases and multiple pet carriers in my economy cars.

I'd entered my station wagon/minivan years.

The Toyota people took one look at me and wouldn't let me past their tinny Corollas. I was warned to avoid the local Dodge dealership. Honda wagons are as teensy as Saturns.

What was left? Lover's choice—the lesbian national car, the vehicle with a life span of several lesbian owners and an advertising campaign aimed at gays—a Subaru wagon.

I drove one, loved it, and went to talk turkey

with the salesman. Then his manager (this is the only dealership for a hundred miles) arrived for a good cop/bad cop routine. I walked.

More research. Big city brokers. Test driving.

Internet queries. I was so exhausted and confused, Nixon could have come back to life and sold me a used car.

So I gave in. I went to car-mom Molly's Ford dealer. They had what I wanted and made it affordable. Molly even called during the negotiations and told me to get the pretty blue one. As soon as I saw that minivan I knew her name was Large Marge.

Car-mom knew best. Menopause is no time to be politically correct about air conditioning. Middle age is no time to resist automatic transmissions or the power options made for bad shoulders and knees. And pride goeth before rejecting dual air bags, anti-lock brakes and anti-glare windshields that improve my fading night vision. For the first time in memory, even my own mother told me, "Daddy would have been proud of you."

One evening I pulled up in front of Lover's office. She's now on the management team with Molly. The employees filed out, ogling Lover's "friend" in Large Marge, and climbed into cars decorated with Christian fish magnets and Free Willie '96 bumper stickers.

In a minivan I literally sit above the crowd. Encased in such a symbol of economic solvency, I felt very adult, very respectable.

When Jed, one of Molly's underlings, came out he looked at the car, averted his eyes from mine in the usual I'd-rather-not-know manner, and conceded, "Nice van."

With the smugness of a black sheep who's the favored sibling anyway, I boasted, "Thanks. Molly picked it out."

Jed stopped in his tracks, a look of total confusion on his face, then scurried away.

It was suddenly all worth it: the conflicts, the expense, the political embarrassment of driving a shiny new Ford. I began to understand why buying a car is a major life stress. It's a rite of passage. A common initiation. Evidence of achievement and, even for a lesbian, of belonging.

I can't wait to show it to my in-laws.



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