

Dinah Won't You Blow

Dinah is more than just a friend. She is a companion, a confidante, a soul mate. We've been through many adventures together, both good and bad, and we're connected in a way that comes from only the strongest of bonds. I rarely go anywhere without her, and she seems to have a hard time doing anything without me. We're two peas in a pod, Dinah and me, and I couldn't imagine having made it to this point in my life without her.

She first came into my life when I was a senior in college and since then, she's seen me through all-nighters in the library, senior project research, my first apartment, road trips, job interviews. I had to say good-bye to her, temporarily, when I went to Chile and one summer when I came back to Alaska, but I could always count on her waiting faithfully for me to return. She is as loyal as a girl could hope for, and I dread the day that I know is coming when I will have to let her go.

Dinah is my car. An '89 Volkswagen Fox to be exact. There is some debate over whether she is tan or silver—the paint lost its shine long ago, if it ever had any—and the left front panel near the headlight is a different color completely. Her color, whatever it is, is perfect, though, because it's similar to the dust and mud that cake most Alaskan cars, which is lucky for me: she's only been washed five or six times in the three years we've been together.

She's rather boxy in appearance, not aerodynamic in the least, but I don't mind. The fastest she's ever gone for me is 80, and I'd be afraid things would start to fall apart if I took her any faster. I picture a cartoon in which I find myself with a gas pedal and a steering wheel at the head of a trail of auto parts and pieces that extends behind me down the road.

I remember driving with my college roommate from our apartment to campus one

morning with the heater on full blast. We heard a snap, and when the air came back on, it was accompanied by a high-pitched rattle. I was particularly frustrated with this—it was just one more in a series of creaks, groans and clanks that seemed to start right when I inherited her.

“Aww, man,” I whined. “There’s always something new going wrong.”

“Well, at least we’re still warm,” Alexa, my roommate, said. “Not bad for a free car!”

My grandparents had first bought Dinah in Bullhead City, Arizona, where they had a vacation home. They lived in California, but they spent a lot of time at “The River,” and Dinah’s first home after coming into our family was in a carport at a mobile home on the banks of the Colorado. My grandparents attached her to their motor home so they wouldn’t have to drive their 24-footer through the narrow streets of small town America, and they found Dinah was perfect for it—she is light, easy to drive (even without power steering), and puts gas-sippers to shame. Sometimes I marvel that my grandfather could even fit inside—he was lanky and long-legged, and she is squat and skinny. But he managed, and very well, too. Dinah has seen more of the country than I have, and I’m the traveler in the family.

After my grandfather died, my grandmother thought about getting rid of all the stuff they used together, but that she wouldn’t use by herself, like the RV. Dinah’s fate hung in limbo for a good semester before I got word that she would soon be mine. Grandma was giving her to me as an early graduation—and Christmas, birthday, and any other holiday she could think of—present.

On the day we met, my cousins had picked me up at the airport. I was flying back to Portland to start my last year of college, and I stayed with them for a few days until Alexa and I found a place to live. Dinah was sitting in their driveway waiting for me, so I took her out for a

test drive. I was impressed with the way she zipped around, despite the lack of power steering. I had learned to drive stick shift the year before, and I was feeling pretty good about my skills. I only ran into problems when I tried to back out again after our little spin—I couldn't find reverse. I had heard there was something different about VWs, but nothing I tried worked. Not forward, that was first gear. Not backward, that was fourth. There were only four gears, so at that point I was stuck. I tried shoving harder. No luck. I tried side to side. Nothing. I screamed in frustration, and slammed my fist down onto the gearshift and felt it move down and forward. Warily I let the clutch out. Reverse!

She took my roommate and me apartment hunting that first week, frequently getting lost on the narrow, hilly drives that define Southwest Portland, and we discovered a lot about our town that way. So much, in fact, that throughout the year, we would take roads we knew would get us lost, just to see if they would lead anywhere. We found an apartment within a week, but we couldn't move into it right away, so we left our stuff with the cousins, gathered up our other friends and spent the weekend at the coast.

On our way back, full of sand dollars and beach sand, I was introduced to one of the many joys of car ownership when Dinah's radiator exploded at a stoplight.

"Oh, shit," I said, as I heard a pop and a hiss and then saw steam escaping from under the hood. I couldn't get the hazard lights to work, but the cloud rising from the front end seemed to be a good signal that I was in trouble. We called a friend of ours, who had AAA coverage, and had her come and call a tow truck. We sat on the curb and waited, waving people on who stopped to offer us help.

"Dinah, won't you blow, Dinah won't you blow..." Alexa sang.

"Hey shut up. That's not funny, Lex."

“Sure it is. You should call your car Dinah.”

“No. That’s stupid name. I don’t want to be reminded of this every time I drive somewhere. She’s a Fox, we should call her something foxy.”

But Dinah stuck. For days afterward, while she was in the shop, people came up to me to offer their sympathies and share their own breakdown stories.

“Hey, heard about your radiator. Bummer. I broke down last summer, had to hitchhike into town. This real sketchy dude picked me up, it was weird.”

“Yeah? Well, looks like you made it back ok.”

“Yeah. So, how’s Dinah doing? When do you get to pick her up?”

“That’s not her name! On Tuesday.”

That first semester passed fairly uneventfully after that. Dinah and I spent our time getting to know each other. I learned how to maneuver into a tight space without power steering, figured out how to get the visors to stay up and out of the way even though they didn’t hook onto anything, came up with a fix when the lock on the passenger door fell off, and got used to the creaking when I stepped on the clutch. I decorated her with a Lewis & Clark College decal in the rear window, a dog with a bobble-head on the dash, and an Alaska Sea Life Center sticker on the bumper, because it was the only one I had. She acquired several dings and scratches in the door panels from the tight fits in the LC parking lots, and I started to notice her smells and rattles, and whether they were different than they had been the day or the week before.

I went to see a friend after I returned to Portland from Christmas break, and when I pulled up he came out to meet me.

“What happened to your taillights?”

“What? Nothing. They’re fine.”

“No, they’re not working at all. Your headlights were on though, so it’s probably just the bulbs. They’re easy to fix.”

I went to the auto parts store, got bulbs, and looked up in the manual how to replace them. It didn’t work. I called my dad to make sure I did it right; we had matching manuals that we both referenced whenever I had a problem.

“Turn to page 36, Britt,” he said. “Did you do all that stuff?”

“Yes, that’s the page I was on.”

“Ok, try replacing the fuses. That’s on page 12.”

I tried the fuses. They didn’t work either.

“Ok. On page 120, it shows you how to replace the headlight switch. You’ll have to call up the Volkswagen dealer and order one, but it shouldn’t be too hard to change.”

He was right, it wasn’t hard to change, but it was expensive. Unfortunately, it still didn’t solve the problem.

I headed down Barbur Blvd with Dinah one night on my way home, and stopped at a Subway to get a sandwich because I didn’t feel like cooking. As soon as I turned into the parking lot I saw red and blue lights flashing behind me, so I parked and waited, watching the cop’s reflection in the restaurant windows. The guys working the late shift at Subway took turns cleaning the front tables and trying to watch me without being obvious. Another cruiser pulled up to the curb, and two officers got out.

“What is going on?” I thought. “Three cops for taillights?”

When the first cop finally came to my window, I asked, “It takes three of you guys to pull me over? What’s the deal?”

He looked hard at me. “They’re just here to talk to me.” He pointed to the papers I had handed him. “Explain this to me—why are all these documents different?”

“You want the whole story? I’m a student here in Portland, but I’m from Alaska, so I don’t have an Oregon license. My grandparents bought her—”

“Her?”

“The car, I mean. They bought *it* and gave *it* to me—they live in California but have property in Arizona, so they registered it there.”

“Ok, but who’s this?” he asked, indicating my insurance form.

I was indignant. “That’s me!” I said. Progressive was the only company that had been able to get my name (hyphen in the first name, not the last) and my current address written correctly on all their documentation.

“Did you know your taillights are out?”

“Taillights? Both of them? Really?”

“Yes. You know that’s a violation of the law.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, since this is the first time, I’m only going to give you a written warning, but you need to get this taken care of right away.”

“Of course. Thanks.”

He gave me my paperwork back, and all three cops drove away. I took a deep breath, and got out to get a sandwich.

“So, you get a ticket?” Three pairs of eyes stared at me as I walked up to the counter.

“Yeah. My taillights are out.”

“Hey, you know, I work at Jiffy Lube,” said a guy eating in the corner. “We can take care of that for you. We don’t just do oil changes.”

“Oh, really? Thanks.”

I paid for my sandwich and took the back way home.

We didn’t fix the problem until Dad came to visit me in the spring for my graduation. By that time, I had been pulled over three times by Portland police, but never got a ticket, and I had spent far more than a student could afford on bulbs, fuses and headlight switches. Dad took one look at the fuse box and said, “Hmm. What’s in there now, a 3? Let’s try a 5.”

He stuck the new fuse into the old slot, and the lights came on.

Somewhere around the beginning of spring, I went to a party, but before I went, I tried to teach a friend to drive a manual so he could take me home after I’d had too much to drink. While we were stalling and starting and learning not to pop the clutch, we lost first gear. Dinah had suddenly developed an aversion to complete stops, or so I told him. I had to teach him to start from second, and to do a California roll, and I don’t think Dinah was too happy about it. She protested loudly every time we gunned it, but reluctantly she went. First gear came back, but she developed a grind whenever I put it into second, so the next day I took it to the one shop I could find that was open on a Saturday, but they were about to close, so they wouldn’t look at her. The mechanic did tell me that some casing had probably slipped, and that it should be fixed, but the benefit from fixing it didn’t really outweigh the cost. That was enough explanation for me; I got used to the grind.

Dinah went back into my cousins' garage for that next summer. She was lonely, so I made sure my cousins were giving her love, and that the oldest one had finally learned to drive a stick. That fall, when I decided to go to Chile, I flew to Portland for a visit, and Dinah and I drove from Portland to my grandmother's town outside of Los Angeles. We took the long way, through the mountains, and Dinah was so happy to have escaped the confines of my cousins' garage she speeded the whole way. Fortunately, other cars, and cops, were few and far between, and her taillights were working, so I really wasn't worried. We camped overnight, but I was too chicken to sleep outside without a tent in a public campground, so I spent half the night trying to recline the seat: I had to *screw* the seat back into a flat position, instead of using a lever and pushing it down. The chair was surprisingly comfortable, however, and I woke up early the next morning refreshed and as eager as Dinah to get onto the open road. I passed a hitchhiker that day who was darn cute, and I would have stopped, but Dinah was packed so full of stuff that I barely had room for me.

She sat in my grandmother's driveway for the six months that I was in Chile, and she pined for me the whole time. My grandmother gave me periodic updates, and my aunt would take her out for a spin every once in a while, just to make sure she didn't get too stiff. I taught my Chilean students about Dinah in English, and laughed about her with my friends in Spanish. I hoped Dinah was proud to be remembered in two languages, because though I missed her, I had no intention of leaving South America unless I absolutely had to.

Six months later, I did return to the U.S., but my reunion with Dinah had to wait—I went straight to Alaska, while she had to spend a little more time in Grandma's driveway, until my parents came down to pick up the RV my grandma had finally decided to get rid of. They hooked Dinah back up in her old place, and towed her up the Alaska Highway to Seward. Dinah is

hardier than she looks, but that trip took a toll on her, and soon after we were reunited, Dad and I had to replace her rear shocks. We also replaced her clutch cable, which no longer creaks, and fixed her passenger side window, which wouldn't roll up. Now, I just can't roll it down.

She turned 15 this year, and she's really starting to show her age. The cold gets into her bones, and as a result, she doesn't like going out in minus temperatures. Only when I think of that do I ever feel a twinge of guilt in bringing her out of the desert and into Alaska. Her engine likes to quit at stoplights on below-zero days, and I've mastered the art of stopping with the E-brake while keeping one foot on the clutch and the other on the gas. We've figured out how to work together, Dinah and I, but as in any relationship, we've figured out how to push each other's buttons. She doesn't make a sound if I leave the lights on, and in the past, I could feel her taunting me as she watched me running around the parking lot looking for someone with jumper cables. I got my own set of cables when I finally tired of pleading with people to help me, and since then, I haven't left the lights on once.

My current roommate, however, did leave the lights on, and I used my cables for the first time trying to jumpstart her one morning. I got everything to work again, except for the stereo. On sunny days, on long drives, she really doesn't need a radio. She doesn't have an air conditioner so I have to roll the window down, and at 65 miles an hour, it's hard to hear much of anything, let alone Dinah's fuzzy, blown-out speakers. However, in Anchorage traffic, there isn't anything I want more than a stereo, so I can sing my off-key heart out and pretend people can't hear me. Now that I think of it, maybe Dinah's stereo shenanigans are actually intentional.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her quirks, Dinah will always be my beloved first car. She hears my dreams about the future; she hears my worries with the present. She can feel my frustration, my doubt, my guilt and my pain, but she also takes part in my joy, my exhilaration,

my giddiness and my love. She has driven, and been driven by, me and many of my friends and family, because she is a car to be shared, and she has remained loyal and true. Her days are numbered, though; I can feel that, in her mind at least, there's no going back to the zippiness of youth. Sometimes I joke that I will trick her out for street racing, but she doesn't think it's as funny as I do. On that last day, which may not be soon but that we both know is coming, I will take the lei off of the rearview mirror, and peel the AMH sticker off the back bumper, and say goodbye for the last time. I might even sing.

“Dinah won't you blow, Dinah won't you blow...”