

The Pink Cadillac

In Memory of Lucille Pollack Nieporent '60

In the summer of 1959, Charles de Gaulle led the Bastille Day parade in Paris and I danced in the streets, in a haze of red wine, holding hands with a tall, lanky French intellectual from the Sorbonne. I was ecstatic. I'd planned my entrance to Paris for

more than two years, by cultivating an intense left-bank look at Rienzi's café in Greenwich Village, by reading political tracts on socialism at Barnard, by hanging a poster of Montmartre in my room, and by pushing books around Butler Library to save up enough money to buy a boat ticket to France.

In retrospect I see the trip as an antidote to the big cars, mink coats, and diamond rings overwhelming the Grand Concourse where my parents lived. In a letter home, which my father saved, I told them how "stupendous" it was to be on the road: "I hitchhiked through most of central and western England ... and met all types—farmers, truck drivers, intellectuals, middle-class families, aristocrats, bums ... It was interesting to hear them describe Americans—rush, rush, rush to keep up with the Joneses." "Money," I lectured my parents, "is a means to living and not an end. One obvious example is the English cars—small, practical, and maneuverable, using only a gallon of petrol for 40 miles."

As if in response, my parents waited for me at the airport in a pink Cadillac, their newest acquisition, with big tails and a black top. Not only did this make me feel profoundly, even painfully, alienated, but it also caused a practical dilemma. How could I, in my black stockings and French knot hairdo, carrying *Finnegan's Wake* under my arm, accept a lift from my father in this car to Milbank Hall? The alternative was an hour-long ride on the subway so I cleverly, or so I thought, asked my dad to let me out a block away. "No," he said, "if I give you a lift, I'll take you to the door." I guess he

figured that it was time I accepted who he was. I was nearly 20 years old, and there was also the small point that he was paying my tuition.

It was not until 40 years later, while waiting in the lobby of The Columbia College Club of New York for Lucille Pollack Nieporent '60 that this all came back. Having recently rekindled our college friendship, Lucille and I were meeting for dinner to reminisce. "What would she remember about me?" I wondered. From an oversized handbag she pulled out a gift that she said could only be for me. I couldn't imagine what that could be. Unwrapping layers of paper, I came upon the replica of a pink Cadillac—pure art deco from a show in East Hampton. I shrieked, right in the middle of the stuffed leather armchairs and portraits of distinguished white men from Princeton and Columbia.

But then my eyes filled with tears. My father died in 1987. If I could spend just one more day with him, I'd happily ride around in that pink Cadillac. It's in his and Lucille's memory that a replica of the car now sits in my office in the Brookings Institution in Washington. It's part of the inspiration I draw upon in writing my articles and books about the people in the world who are dispossessed and have no father to drive them to school in a pink Cadillac. ☒

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