

Cindy Martin
150 Peter Creek Pass
Tumbling Shoals, AR 72581

1,491 Words

Ghosts Memorialized

A Short Story

by

Cindy Martin

I stood at Pontiac Point overlooking the wreckage, and recalled the incident one Friday night in September fifty years ago. That was long ago, and I had undergone most of the blessings and losses that passing time deals to all generations. Couples were married, children were born and reared, and loved ones had passed on.

Ellie was Daddy's powder blue, '53 Pontiac Chieftain with enormous whitewalls on the tires, a huge trunk and a back seat big enough to suit any teenage boy's dreams. Kager Gray, my Daddy, loved that car; he had an almost spiritual relationship with her. He washed her every weekend, whistling as he dragged out the water hose, wash bucket, sponges and chamois. He lovingly caressed Ellie, and polished her until he could see himself in her chrome bumpers. This was the first brand-new car that Daddy had owned. He and Momma had saved for nearly three years for the down payment, and Daddy happily traded the keys to his old, rusty beater that had broken down nearly every week, and leaked an assortment of oil and other mysterious fluids. Daddy passed peacefully nearly twenty years ago, and after 47 years of marriage, Momma followed him only two weeks later.

Logan was my younger brother. Always the prankster, he was frequently getting into some kind of trouble. One time, he carved his name, in his best penmanship, into Ellie's right front bumper. Daddy turned sheet-white when he saw the deed, then he turned red, then he turned purple. He didn't say a word, and we thought that Daddy was having a sort of fit, or seizure, or something. Momma, stepped in right away and helped Daddy into the house. We kids stayed outside in the yard fearful that Loren would be sent off to some home for incorrigible children while Momma and Daddy worked things out. From inside the house, there was yelling and then there were soothing words. Afterward, all Logan got was a three-week grounding. Momma was full of kind, understanding mercy, and it was never more evident than that day.

Logan turned out to be our family's biggest hero. He was drafted into the Army at nineteen, and died two years later in 1975 during the Saigon airlift, otherwise known as Operation Frequent Wind.

Emily and I were high school sweethearts. After high school, I took classes at the community college and earned a certificate as an electrical technician, and Emily went to the beauty college. In 1967, she and I were married at the Baptist church out on the highway. Soon afterward, I landed a job at North Carolina Power and Light, so we moved away to Charlotte. We had a fine life. We bought a small ranch-style house, raised two fine boys, and enjoyed the births of our three grandchildren. Emily died just last year from complications associated with multiple sclerosis. Her death resulted in sadness and melancholy leading up to my trip home, back to where I grew up, and back to the memories of my youth.

As I stood on that overlook, I thought back on the day of *the incident*. I was a senior then at Heber Springs High School and head over heels in love with Emily Johnson, an ebony-haired beauty on the pep squad. I had a date that night with Emily. It would be perfect. We would start the evening with a movie. "Lawrence of Arabia" was playing at The Gem, and Emily always swooned over Peter O'Toole. This flick would set the mood nicely. After the movie, Emily and I would drive up to Lookout Point on the top of Sugarloaf Mountain to watch the moon rise and hopefully have a little romance. Daddy said that I could borrow Ellie. "But, be careful not to get her scratched up with any of that greenbrier, and don't park under any sappy trees, and don't go slamming on the brakes too hard, and ..."

In preparation for the evening, I stole a bottle of Momma's *medicinal* muscadine tonic that she kept hidden in the back of the storm shelter behind the jars of peach preserves. I carefully wrapped it in the red, Razorback blanket that we used while watching football games

on those cool fall nights, and gently packed the contraband in back of Ellie's big trunk. I preened most of the afternoon in front of the bathroom mirror. I showered, shaved, applied fresh Butch Wax on my flattop and donned my favorite, lucky denim shirt. Then, Ellie and I set out to pick up Emily.

The movie set just the right romantic tone. After the movie, we headed off toward Sugarloaf. I parked the car in the gently sloping gravel parking area about halfway up the mountain's stone-faced south side, taking care to avoid any clawing greenbrier or sap-dripping trees. From the trunk, I removed the bundle of homemade wine and the blanket, and we set off hand-in-hand up to Lookout Point. Lookout Point was a popular spot for local teenagers looking for adventure and passion. The point overlooked the parking area providing a clear view of the vista surrounding Heber Springs and was a spectacular place to identify constellations and watch falling stars. In a clear spot next to the graffiti-covered rocks, Emily spread out the blanket, and sat down beside me. The September night was cool, and I remember the smell of Emily's shampoo as she snuggled close to me for warmth. We embraced and kissed. Just as I was about to get to second base, Emily snapped her head up and cried in alarm, "Jake, I think the car's moving!" In my romance-addled state, I must have forgotten to set the parking brake and put the car into gear. Sure enough, Daddy's beloved Ellie was beginning to roll down the incline toward the ridge overlooking town. We sprang up, hearts exploding, and raced down the path toward the parking area. We arrived just as Ellie plummeted over the precipice and began to roll, over and over and over, abruptly coming to a stop resting against an oak tree.

I cried, "Daddy's gonna kill me!" We ran over to the wreckage. Ellie was lying on her roof with her wheels pointing into the air. One tire was still spinning. Her windshield had a large crack extending from one side to the other. Dents and scratches were everywhere, and her

rear left fender had been completely torn off. I knew that Ellie was totaled. I was devastated; her end was like the death of a family member.

We hiked to the highway and caught a ride home from a neighbor in a passing car. He dropped Emily at her house first, then took me home. I walked slowly up the walk and climbed the steps up to the front porch. I paused to take a deep breath before opening the front door. Momma was sitting on the sofa watching the Johnny Carson Show, but mostly waiting for me to return safely home. Daddy had already gone to bed. Momma took one look at me and her face grew solemn, "Jake, what happened? Jacob, is everything alright?" I slowly told her what had happened. She remained quiet for some time, then once again showed her kind and understanding mercy. "Let me break the news to Daddy, and you go on up to bed."

The next morning, Daddy and I drove over to Sugarloaf to take a look at the wreck. Daddy stood silently next to Ellie and took in the sight of her upturned chassis, and broken windows. He lovingly stroked the chrome bumper that he had polished every week for so many years. Daddy pulled out his pocketknife and silently carved "Kager-N-Amanda" into the Ellie's fender next to Logan's inscription. Daddy was mostly silent as he pulled open the passenger door and climbed inside. A few minutes later, he emerged with the rearview mirror in his hand. "It's good to have something to help us look back on the memories," he said as he shoved the mirror into his jacket pocket.

Now, fifty years later, I stand looking at the wreckage for a few more minutes. I hike over to the wreckage and place a hand gently on the rusted fender as I reach into my pocket. Taking out Daddy's pocketknife, I carefully and tearfully carve, "Jacob and Emily" into the rusty blue paint next to the carved names "Logan" and "Kager-N-Amanda." I turn away and hiked back down the Tonawanda Base Trail, leaving Ellie to lie rusting at Pontiac Point on this cool

September day. The names of the Gray family are lovingly engraved on Ellie's fenders like a headstone over the family memories. The wild blue indigo, the yellow false foxglove and the goldenrod surround the memorial like flowers on a gravesite.