

5-MINUTE MEMOIR

Tales From the Writing Life

Cars for Words

BY PAULA CARTER

I met Berry about a year ago, when my life was in something of a shambles. I was struggling to start a freelance writing career and had just moved back in with my parents. As an excuse to get out of the house, I swam laps at the local community center in the afternoons. • Berry did, too.

Berry swam with the help of a kickboard, slowly traversing the length of the pool. He swam up to me and introduced himself, announcing that he was 80 years old and had lived his whole life in our town. Then he asked about me.

When he learned that I was a writer looking for work, he became excited and shared that he, too, was a writer. That he had written for *Reminisce* magazine and had, in fact, won a car for his article.

"A car?" I asked. *I must be querying the wrong magazines*, I thought.

"Yep, it was a story about the summer I spent pulling gooseberry bushes in Idaho. 'Gooseberry Patrol,' that's what they titled it."

I swam a lap, all the while pondering his incredible success, and found Berry waiting for me at the start of my lane.

"It was a '66 Chevy, the car," he said. "I'll bring you a copy of that magazine if you don't mind. I'm not bothering you, am I?"

I said no and then headed for another lap. But talking to Berry definitely wasn't helping my freelance career woes.

When I swam back, there was Berry, still waiting. "Best thing I ever did. Otherwise I just worked for Harvester Works. But, I wrote a column for *Stars and Stripes*, you know. I was a vet, and they asked me to do it. Andy Rooney sent me a signed copy of his book because of that column."

I decided I was underestimating Berry—maybe he was a genius, a born writer.

The next time I went to the community center to swim, waiting for me at the front desk was a copy of *Reminisce* with my name carefully printed on it. • I paged through it—the articles were all by readers, stories of what they wore to college in 1956 and where they went on their honeymoons. It was a sweet



magazine. Berry's article was in it—along with a photo of him and a group of guys who worked for the U.S. Forest Service, pulling out gooseberry bushes to prevent them from poisoning the pine trees. Berry must have been about 17. He was handsome in a startling way—beautiful, really. The



story was somewhat hard to follow, with short choppy sentences, but I could see why he was proud of it.

As I flipped to the back of the magazine, I came across the submission guidelines and payment information. And that's when I learned about the car. • The rules stated that not all writers would receive a car—a 12-inch plastic Chevy coin bank—as compensation. Only the truly best writers would merit one. And Berry had.

I entered the pool area, and there was Berry, breaststroking in the middle of his lane. I got in the water and swam over to him and told him I had found the magazine. I thanked him.

"I've been thinking about you," he said. "If you're going to be a writer, I just want you to know, you're setting off to have a great life. Writing is a great thing."

As I swam I held on to those simple words and was buoyed.

Funny where you find inspiration.

Paula Carter is a freelance writer living in Chicago.



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