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CLUNK!

by Larry Freeman

I hate Clunk. Especially on this day! Today was a time for travel. Canadian geese were flying northward. I hurried to meet them. We had a salt-marsh dinner to share along the Carolinas' outer banks.

Clunk! Clunk! Two clunks demand attention. I try again, but the key will turn no further. This time there is no Clunk, just silence, and silence sits in lonely company.

When silence replaces Clunk, blood pressure ripples, droplets of adrenaline accelerate the heartbeat. The situation intensifies. Clunk is gone.

But where is Clunk? Clunk is not welcome, but it is preferred to silence. Clunk could help direct attention to loose connections, low batteries, a tired solenoid. Faced with silence, we might grow cold and old together. Clunk and I could be condemned to immobility.

With whispers of encouragement, I slowly rotate the key, and beg for Clunk's return. Fate has shrugged a favor. A miracle of sounds resound, whirl, followed by roar, action! The Palm Beach engine hums a GM tune. Silence is defeated. But what to do? Once warned, a wizened traveler should take heed. A small problem in town, unattended, could lead to major complications on a dark highway late at night.

I recalled Clunk's last calling. On a cold winter evening in a small Kentucky town, the starter accelerated out of control. The little motor ran in a dizzying tantrum, refusing to release the roaring engine. Gears, caught in the breach, screeched towards destruction. The starter's solenoid obeyed no commands from ignition's key. Out of control, it was finally silenced by a wide-eyed attendant who killed the culprit circuit by disconnecting the battery from ground.

Would that scene repeat again? The past repair part had been a rebuilt bargain, a homeless hobo cleaned up for public presentation. Who could know its character, or how reliable it might be? A part from unknown genealogy might be welcome for emergencies, but once on the road again, I

should have ordered the right part — a factory replacement. Today's substitute could be tomorrow's problem.

The campground bulletin board displayed a neatly typed card that offered motorhome repair on site. By noon, two enterprising mechanics had arrived. They listened politely as I diagnosed the malady of Clunk, and proffered foreboding fears that the "Kentucky Derby" of yesteryear might repeat again this afternoon. As the ignition key moved toward spring-load start, one stood beside the open engine hood, just in case.

When temptation invites, fate often accepts. Now the engine roars, and gears screech. The starter's gate has flown wide open. A race is on. Two motors, grinding down the track toward destruction, were reined in when one battery cable dangled dead and disconnected. Forewarned, the mechanic's remedy had been quick.

After a round trip to the repair shop to search storage bins where basic replacement solenoids and starter parts hang out, the two mechanics returned with a cleaned-up unit, refurbished and ready to be energized for duty. Later, with the Palm Beach humming, and the day in tow, I thanked my enterprising enthusiasts, and made a note to order an OEM part for prompt installation before this calamity could repeat itself again.

Now, with spirits high, hopeful eyes looked up to read tomorrow's fortunes from a cloud-flecked sky. Reservations still remained inscribed in tide lines etched in sands along the outer banks. There would be an Eva rendezvous, red wine, fresh-baked bread, celebration, and time to dine with feathered friends. We'd join the honking party folk to picnic by the shore. There would be crashing surf and starlight dreams. We'd gaze at the heavens and seek answers to life's mysteries. ✨

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Larry Freeman received the Tufts University Distinguished Service Award for service to profession and to community in May. Eva and Larry are spending the summer at home in Quebec. E-mail contrails@aol.com.