

Car woes keep driver guessing

Marsha Henry Goff

When my car has performance problems, I take it to my auto dealership, explain the problem in detail to the service manager and allow him to drive it to see for himself. The real problem, however, is that as long as a male who knows something about automobiles is behind the wheel, all my cars perform perfectly.

We once owned an old Caddy (still have it, as a matter of fact, because—in spite of the hail damage—Ray likes the way it's shaped) which left me stranded on the highway so many times the troopers knew me by name and the AAA dispatchers, by voice. Cruising down the road at 60, the car would begin to knock and shake, lose power and finally sputter to a stop.

My friend Estel, who was with me on at least three of those occasions, had the opportunities to freeze with me in winter, steam with me in summer and—when the car quit 30 miles from home—to get up-close-and-personal with a tattooed tow-truck driver named Big Bob. Squeezed in between Big Bob and Estel, I sweltered in the 98° heat of the unairconditioned cab and wished mightily that Big Bob's mom had instructed him on the merits of deodorant. Just when I thought the situation couldn't get any worse, he lit up a cigar.

After the longest 30-mile ride of my life, the three of us pulled directly into my auto dealer's garage. Two of us gratefully climbed out and hiked home. Bright and early the next morning the service manager phoned and said cheerfully, "We can't find anything wrong with your car so you can pick it up."

"Trust me on this one," I said. "When I'm towed in by a foul-smelling, cigar smoking tow-truck driver who spends the entire trip talking about tractor-pulling contests, there's darn well something wrong with the car!"

"Well, it performed perfectly for our mechanic," he said. And that's the trouble with cars. They're sexist! They usually choose to break down when a woman—accompanied by another woman—is behind the wheel. I think cars have an uncanny ability to detect estrogen in the driver's seat.

All males—especially husbands—seem to think women's car performance problems are imaginary, at best, her fault, at worst. Take the time that the Caddy started its sputtering routine on the highway when Ray was my passenger. Feeling vindicated, I said, "See, I told you something was wrong with it!" As we lost power and coasted to a stop, Ray coolly asked, "What did you do to it?" Then—and I swear that this is true—he got behind the wheel, restarted the Caddy and drove us home without a single problem.

One year, five tows and 8,000 miles later, on our way to the airport, the Caddy's engine apparently forgot that it was Ray who was driving and began knocking and losing power. But did Ray pull to the side of the road and stop? No, he did not. Though

limited to a speed of 35 miles per hour, he kept right on driving—urging the car onward while questioning its parentage—because there was no way he was going to miss our flight to Las Vegas!

I won't tell you exactly what happened when we returned home, took the car to our dealer and the mechanic told Ray he could find nothing wrong with it. But I will say this: it wasn't pretty!

In desperation, I appealed to my on-line computer service's bulletin board on automobiles. A mechanic in Arizona identified the sensor that was causing the problem. Ray bought the part, installed it and the car worked perfectly. Then, because he couldn't resist tweaking the mechanic who had failed on so many occasions to diagnose the problem, Ray took the Caddy to the dealership and explained how he had fixed it. The mechanic's comment: "This has obviously been a problem for some time, but I would have used a genuine GM replacement part."

That might explain why we now drive a Chrysler!