

A Widow's Walk

If someone in high school had told me that I'd one day belong to a classic car club, I would have said they were crazy. Out of their minds. I mean, really. I've always liked to cook. Plant things. Nurture people. A car is an abstraction, a means to an end . . . usually to a grocery store, or a greenhouse or a place I can nurture people.

Of course, if they had told me that I was gay, I probably would have said the same thing.

At sixteen I took driver's education because it was required for graduation and because my mom needed someone else to go to the grocery store. We had a unique set-up for driver's ed at Midland High. There was classroom instruction taught by the shop teacher (naturally) and safety films like *Mechanized Death* for the shock factor. It was the same year *Evil Dead* and *Friday the 13th* came out -- the real thing paled by comparison. And then we had the "range."

The cooks who are reading this probably envision something with "Amana" and "Radar" tacked in front of it. Nope. This range was a huge slab of asphalt with streets painted onto it. It was the practice neighborhood before you drove on the real thing. Parallel parking, three-point turns, no chance to dent the merchandise. You get the picture.

The merchandise, in this case, was a row of gently driven used cars donated by local dealerships. Big ones. Lots of crush space.

We were each paired with a driving partner. I got the short straw. I mean, if we had drawn straws mine was the one that slipped from the instructor's hand and was now being ground into the range by his Thom McAns. My partner's name was Vince. Brings to mind the star quarterback, doesn't it? Six feet of dark, rippling, curly-haired testosterone in a painted-on Def Leppard t-shirt?



Nope. Think geek. Think Bill Gates at twelve during a national shampoo shortage.

We ambled onto the range where Vince emphatically declared that we wouldn't drive any manual shifters because his family didn't own one. Period. End of story.

I shrugged. I mean, a car's a car's a car, right? Four wheels, velour interior, lots of crush space. I didn't give a flip. That first day Vince chose a lovely Ford LTD for our learning pleasure. I think it was dark blue. It was hot. Asphalt on a July afternoon hot. I climbed into the passenger seat, sweated off ten pounds and aged fifty years. And Vince drove like he was eighty.

In the beginning.

Anyone who has ever strolled with me through a car show knows that I like quirky-ass cars. The finned confections of the 50s. Minis and SMARTs. VW Things. Beetles. It should come as no surprise that my choices never win Best of Show. I can deal with that heartache, but where did this affinity for weird wheeled wonders come from?

The first car I really remember from my childhood was a 1972 Ford Country Squire, purchased with the proceeds of Dad's rising pay check at Dow Chemical. Cool flip up seats in the back. Lots of room to get away from my brothers. It was a road warrior, made for family trips, for exploration -- or so it seemed to me. I was seven.



Family trips were not in my future, however, as my parents called it quits after eleven years. Dad left and bought a Gremlin. Brown with a white stripe and white interior. Maybe rust with a white stripe. Way used.

And so, with two households and one paycheck that didn't stretch quite so far, the promise of a solid, middle-class life was replaced by Tuna Helper, Kraft dinner and cars that just got you there.



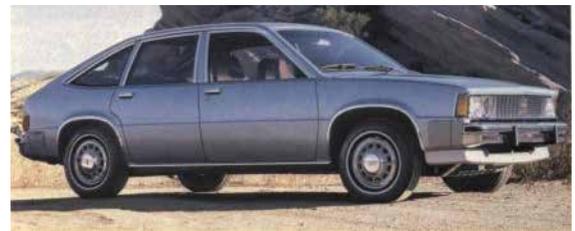
The Country Squire remained with Mom when Dad moved out. I don't remember the Squire going away, but I remember its replacement. Vividly. Wayne from the salvage yard pulled into the driveway in Mom's "new" 1976 Monte Carlo. Brown, tan vinyl top, beige-ish vinyl interior. Cool opera windows. And a hood that stretched to Port Huron. It had been rolled

and repaired, and it was a deal. For a couple of years, Mom had a stylin' ride and "shotgun" was the hot seat. In a good way.

The teenage years.

And then? Well, we're rolling into the 80s. Oil crisis. Mom drove fifty miles round trip to Saginaw General Hospital every day and gas was EXPENSIVE -- \$1.25 a gallon.

Mom needed a reliable car. There would be three of us in high school at the same time, which meant dates (as if), odd evening schedules (okay, drama club did throw a wrench into things sometimes) and after school jobs (yes, McDonald's). So, Mom went shopping and bought a brand spanking new (wait for it) 1980 Chevrolet Citation.



So, the Monte Carlo turned into a Citation. This was Cinderella's carriage after the stroke of midnight. If only. Silver with a red velour interior. Experimental sideways engine (thanks for that, General). In all fairness, it wasn't in the shop all that often though the stops it made were epic ones.

It did have tons of room -- a real five-Hoffa hatchback. We didn't take many family trips when I grew up, but the Citation did deliver us to Hilton Head, SC one summer. Picture this: four nearly adults, luggage, a giant cooler, three sets of golf clubs. It was a spectacle. Actually, it was a jigsaw puzzle . . . somehow, we had to get it all home. Frank (my packaging engineer), sadly, was not yet in the picture.

With three high schoolers in the house, another vehicle was required. Something simple that Mom could dedicate to the commute. A 1983 Ford Escort fit the bill

nically -- Mom's favorite color (red) with a gray fabric interior and a thirst for oil. No, thirst is the wrong word. Addiction is a better word. It was the ultimate "check the gas and fill the oil" car. And could the Ford dealership fix the oil leak? Yeah, some days. If they held their mouths right, and tossed the chicken bones in the right direction. Sure. And the folks at Kmart would say, "Mrs. Smith hasn't stopped in for her case of oil lately. Must have gotten rid of that piece of s***."



Did Mom ditch the OPEC mobile? Nope. Kept it past my college graduation in 1988. Six-figure odometer. I guess the oil leak just festered itself shut.

We did trade in the Citation for a somewhat larger mode of transport. Both Brian and I were going to Western Michigan, some three hours away, and we needed reliable wheels to deliver us there. Enter the government blue mid-80s Buick Century Wagon.

Mom sent her three boys to find this car. Mom, really? It was like shoving us out of the nest and onto the Ohio Turnpike. The salesman's baby granddaughter had already forgotten everything we knew about cars. But it looked good . . .



And it wasn't a bad car. The phantom electrical problem didn't strand us -- much. It was the kind of problem that, to quote my mom, "really makes women hate men." Problem? "Well, ma'am, it doesn't do it for me." Usually, you just had to sit by the side of the road for a half hour and it would start right up again. It stranded my brother Shawn more than me . . . it must have hated Spartans.

Working man.

So, I graduated from college without ever owning a car. It was refreshing in a way; it created an urgency for self-reliance. The WMU ride board was my ticket home and I didn't use it much: Thanksgiving, spring break. I went to Western because it was the furthest major university from Midland without leaving the state (the U.P. doesn't count). Don't get me wrong, Midland is a great town. For Republicans.



I should note that I did have one car, briefly, in college that my grandmother handed down to me. A 1974 Plymouth Satellite Sebring, brown with mustard vinyl interior. She had bought a new Omni (another carriage to pumpkin) and my brother lived off campus. We nicknamed it "The Bomb" either because it looked like one or we thought it would become one. It was a fun ride: big V8, torpedo-shaped, undivided greenhouse when the windows were down. Pretty cool. It died soon after we got it and was towed to the junkyard. Damn it.

Mom associates the Sebring with the only car commercial she ever remembered. Something about a Jewish mother bragging about her doctor son's new "Bering Sea." Sebring. Bering Sea. Okay, I get it. It's not quite an Adobe or a Mercury

Mistress (for you *Saturday Night Live* fans) but it's sorta cute.

I visited my grandmother years earlier with my driver's permit and she let me drive the Satellite from Pittsburgh to Erie where she lived. She taught me to bet the horses at twelve-years-old and had a beer every night before she went to bed. She was a great lady and that was a great automotive memory.

So, back to post-college . . . and back to Midland, where my vote on anything was pretty much null and void. No matter. I returned to work sales at Erb Lumber until my portfolio was done and I could market myself. The Erb folks needed someone for data entry in the Redford office. Yeah, I can do that. Take the company 1980 Volkswagen Rabbit Diesel pick-up. Cool, I can do that too. It's a stick. Can't do that. Damn you, Vince.

"No worries," said Kent, a fellow salesman (the star quarterback, six feet of Nordic, rippling, blond-haired testosterone in a painted-on Metallica t-shirt type - but I digress). "I'll teach you." I wish. One lap around the block and he said, "Got it?" Sure. Shades of Mom shoving me from the nest, this time onto I-275 at rush hour. I learned quickly.



My portfolio finished, I shopped it in Detroit and got my first design job in the Ren Cen. Big City. Bright lights. Tiny paycheck. And I needed wheels. So, at 22, I bought my first car. A 1987 Plymouth Horizon, white with a red fabric interior. And a STICK! Driving that Rabbit turned out to be a lot of fun.

The Horizon was a great car that I could get anything into: groceries, plants, my first boyfriend (okay, it was a couple of dates but at least he was finally the right gender). And the intermittent windshield wipers were fantastic.

I experienced everything Detroit had to offer in that car. There was pollution (white, I discovered, turns to beige and still looks good as long as you don't touch it); violence (my rear window was targeted by a BB gun); and I lost it in an 11-car pile-up on I-94.

Fortunately, by that time I had met Frank L. Markus, car genius extraordinaire and partner of twenty years. Since then, cars have been a blissful non-issue. We replaced the pretzeled Horizon with a 1991 Honda Civic EX, burgundy on burgundy, which we bought from a fastidious "family" member who designed window displays for Hudson's. How many times was I clocked in the head by the retractable seat belts? A lot.



Next up, a 1995 Infiniti G20 -- champagne with a parchment interior. Frank insisted on a car with anti-lock brakes and air bags. A car's a car, right? Tell that to the Horizon. When you're hit by a school bus, an air bag or two comes in handy.





And we come to my present day ride, a 2005 Acura TSX. I bought it at two-years-old from another "family" member from Atlanta (gotta love the Interweb) with the commission check I received for a Gayle's Chocolates sale to Buick. I suppose I should have bought a Buick Enclave, but after seeing 250,000 Buick logos in semi-sweet (not to mention experiencing the Buick wagon with the Frankenstein complex), I wasn't ready.

So, the auto-centric reader might surmise at this point that I hate American cars. Nope. That I hate ALL cars? Actually, "hate" is a word I never use -- it's too angry. Too terse. Cars are simply objects. I choose cars based on color (that sound you hear is product planners throwing nooses over the nearest tree), utility (will it take me from A to B in relative comfort) and durability (it needs to last a decade). My mom bought cars based on price at a time when cheap meant problematic. The Horizon? Great utility, tons of space, little need for a bath unless I brushed against it by mistake. Those foreign cars? They fit the bill at the time, though as much as I like purple, that burgundy Civic felt really, well, winey after a while.

As for the quirky car thing, I guess I just appreciate some cars for their intangibles: the Monte Carlo with its epic hood; my strong emotional connections with the Satellite; the current Cadillacs with their not-like-anything-else-on-the-road styling. And the SMART car? Because it's totally fun, cute and different (and Frank cringes).

For you auto widows out there, a car's a car's a car, right? I submit that the cars in our lives help define us. They are visceral. Like your siblings, your childhood home and your dog, the cars that drive into your life affect you. They drip oil on your driveway, they block your view of the azaleas and, sometimes, they transport you on an adventure.

Vince, you frigging nerd . . . thanks for the memories.