

CAUTION: VIRGIN DRIVER

A New Driver's Attachment to His First Car

By Clint Hall

You kept your chin raised high because you no longer needed to use your bus pass. You just got your driver's license. Now all you needed was a car.

If your parents weren't wealthy, chances are you alone had to buy your first vehicle and if you weren't wealthy that first vehicle was one putt and squeal away from rotting in a wrecking yard. That was the beauty of it, though, wasn't it? When something popped or ticked or shuddered or squealed or ground like a stick dragging through rocky gravel you got to play the 'what the hell was that?' game. This was usually a frightening and sometimes expensive game.

Some of us basked in our newfound independence and severed ties from tedious house life and thought we could fix our vehicle ourselves, although sometimes the cost of fixing the vehicle exceeded the purchase price. But in any case we just wanted to peek under the hood. Where was the harm in that? Chances were we would be the last owner anyway. The way a car motor operates is far too complicated for the 16-17 year-old brain to fathom, but we could drive, so we could do anything. The hood came up, pieces of the engine came out and before we knew it we had a newfound respect for automotive mechanics. And an empty pocket to boot.

The world was spinning, you now had responsibilities, and you must take care of this machine as if it were a pet dog. Your dog had to be kept healthy, and well fed, and your parents couldn't always look after it. If it made a mess in the driveway by say . . . kicking up plumes of dirt and scattering gravel from an excited or angry debarkation, you

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had to clean it up. If your animal got hurt, say . . . backing into a fence post or tree in the late hours of the night, you must make sure there is no evidence to be seen in the morning. Evidence was one thing your car had a lot of. Evidence of misdeeds, incidents and accidents, recorded mementos of the times you hurt it, or treated it badly.

You parked too close to the high curb, you knew it would be a tight squeeze getting out of your door, but you could manage it. You turned off the ignition, remembered to take the keys out so you don't lock them in again, unbuckled your seat belt, took off the removable faceplate of your tape or CD player, stored it under your seat (bad idea, but clever in your young mind) and swung the door wide open, confident that you haven't forgotten to do anything before exiting your car. The sound of thin gauge steel grinding against rough concrete was a horrifying sound to say the least. Sure, your paint job wasn't chameleon metallic with flames and dragons superimposed on the sides and hood, but you didn't want your baby to be hurt anymore than you had to. You gave her a dent and probably a scratch, and you cried a little on the inside.

Your car felt lopsided and dragged to one side all the time causing you to refill your new tires (which looked ridiculous on a beat up car) more often than you probably should. Since you were still paying off those new tires, you didn't want to worry about other costs, like the \$40 or less it would cost to get the tire patched. Just kept refilling it with air every time you could remember and it would be fine, right? What was the cause of that leak, though? It was possible that it was just a little gouge, perhaps from a shard of glass you had driven over when you were in a bad part of town, but that would've been too easy. After all, these were *new* tires, so it must be a two-inch long screw. Sure, the tire leaked slowly at first, but you didn't see that screw and when that screw popped out .

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. . you were screwed. Your tire pressure got real low real fast, and there wasn't any way to stop it. So now you were ready to shell out the \$40 or so to get your tire repaired, but that would be easy. The tireman, or whatever he calls himself, showed you a handful of black powdered rubber from inside your tire and told you your new tire had to be thrown out. You prayed that the doughnut in the back (aptly named as we've all had bigger ones at coffee shops) would bring you the rest of the way home. Your tears on the inside couldn't match those tears of joy coming from your credit card company as you loaded another charge onto that poor piece of plastic.

So you had been waiting all your life to get your own car, to put it on the road and legally drive away into the sunset, but it wasn't as easy as you planned, now was it? That's all right though, because you have learned a lot of important things about purchasing a vehicle and maintaining that vehicle no matter what happens to it. There were times when the stress was getting to you and you were ready to buckle under the pressure – like your suspension did – and just give up, buy another one. You hated your car when you had it, but don't you miss it now that you've left it? All the memories of coming home late after a night of partying, using the backseat as a home-away-from-home, getting to know yourself by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. You think your second vehicle will be even better, but it's always that first one that you remember. At least you can still visit her in the wrecking yard.