



Prelude to Adulthood

Buying that all-important first car was quite the experience

by **Jamie Schmidt**, Calgary

Like most teenagers, I could not wait to get my driver's licence. So strong was my desire that I overcame the dread of learning how to drive from both my father and the slightly unsettling driver's ed teacher at the local high school. The promise of independence trumped all fear.

Not long after obtaining my licence, I began longing for my own car. Sure, I had ready access to my parents' vehicle, but it was a maroon 1984 Mercury Lynx station wagon that was only slightly less embarrassing to drive than being "pantsed" in a school hallway. In retrospect, I'm convinced this wasn't a coincidence.

There was also a catch. My father is a meticulously practical man, and though he freely offered up the keys to the family car, this privilege came with the clear caveat that not only would I pay for my own fuel, I would also pay him mileage to account for the wear and tear I was exerting on this nadir of American automotive design. I was essentially renting the family car from my dad.

After a full year of this perceived injustice, I was so desperate for my own wheels that I set about persuading my dad, using his own rigid rationalism as my secret weapon. Armed with a calculator, an assortment of data derived from insurance com-

A sad ending to a good car. Many brochures and gas-consumption statistics my father kept on all his vehicles, I produced a conclusive four-page document justifying how I could afford to purchase and care for my own vehicle, using my accumulated savings and part-time summer wages from my job at the local hardware store.

My efforts may have impressed him, but he remained unmoved. It wasn't until the fall of my final year of high school, nearly three years into my driving career, and facing a daily commute to university on the horizon, that he finally relented and helped me purchase my very first car—a 1985 Honda Prelude.

I really wanted the bright red 1986 Pontiac Sunbird GT I first test drove. But it was classified as a sports car, which meant a \$3,000 annual insurance bill for a teenage male driver like myself, well over my budget.

Actually, I didn't even like my first car—at the beginning, anyway—mainly because it was grey and there's nothing more bland than a grey car, no matter how sporty the model. In hindsight, this likely explains why I can't find a single photo of my first car as it looked when I bought it. You'd think that would be the first thing any proud teenager would do, no matter how laborious photography was in the pre-digital era.

I do have many memories associated with that car, like the first time I took my friends out for a drive. It had a manual transmission, which made the car feel more like a race car in my mind—but also made it exponentially more difficult to drive for someone who'd never set foot on a clutch before. There were five of us crammed in there and at one stop sign, I repeatedly stalled the car. It took nearly a dozen increasingly humiliating attempts to proceed before I realized I was in third gear, not first.

I would eventually come to love that car, as one loves a first car, even a grey one. That's why I do have a picture from the last time I ever saw it. The photo was taken 25 years ago at a wrecker's yard, in a town where I had been working as a summer co-op student during my first year of university. It was the final day of my work term and I had scooted into the city for a few necessities when another driver, blinded by the sun, pulled out right in front of me. My Prelude was a write-off. The next day, I returned to gather some belongings I'd left in the car...and to say goodbye. ■