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LUST &



RECEPTION

A seventeen-year-old's bond with an Italian sports car

By Kris Gove

When I found the car in the weeds, I should have taken it as a sign and left it there. But I didn't. I was 17 and of course I needed an 8-year-old, two-seater Italian sports car. So I bought it.

Well, my uncle bought it and I paid him back. My aunt thought we were nuts.

She was right.

Ignoring all rational advice, I convinced my benefactor to at least go look at the car with me (plus, he was the only one of the two of us who could drive a stick). When we arrived in the seller's back yard, the grass was door handle high, but I fell in lust immediately. Italian cars know nothing of love, it's always lust. Like getting hit by the Thunderbolt in *The Godfather*. I couldn't drive a five-speed yet, but I knew I wanted one.

The car was a 1981 Fiat X 1/9 Bertone.

I should have walked away.

Since I had no clutch experience, my uncle had to do the test-driving. He's a large fella however. So his head would clear, we had to take off the targa top off and stow it under the front hood. If I wasn't sold already, by golly that sealed the deal.

My uncle started the car and it stalled right

away. Started it again and it stalled again. Started, stalled. This time, he turned the key and held the gas to keep it running. It puffed smoke and whined, but eventually, it kept running on its own, even if a little rough. After he chatted with the seller a bit, and I encircled the car dreaming of twisty roads and high revs, it was time for a ride.

"Let's go blow out the cobwebs," my uncle said.

"Let's," I said. I was already strapped in the passenger seat.

The seller, an older guy, returned to his house presumably to get the title and a bill of sale because he knew, once we got back, we would buy the car.

He was right.

My uncle got the car out on a stretch of straight and mashed the gas. My uncle doesn't smile much, but he did that day. The tiny car spit out whatever it was choking on and screamed down the road. Now, to people on the side of the road it probably sounded like an asthmatic whisper from the smallest car ever made, but to us, when the mid-mounted four-cylinder was strapped to our backs, that sucker screamed like a Ferrari.

That was the best day I had with my Fiat.

The next nine months, not so much. This

was my third car and my first standard. After watching my uncle drive and getting a brief verbal lesson from my mother, I took the car out alone, determined to learn how to drive the thing. Apparently holding the clutch to the floor whilst exiting highway ramps at 80 mph wasn't the best way to extend the life of one's clutch. Inside of the first month, the car began its long, expensive relationship with a place called Autodyne in Beverly, Massachusetts. This place wasn't my first choice. It was my only choice. Of the 1.3 million other shops I called, none had ever heard of a Fiat X 1/9.

Judging by the time and labor put forth, the clutch was built inside the engine itself. Perhaps that's how those crazy Italian engineers got the engine and running gear to fit in a slot hardly larger than a carry-on bag. Several hundred dollars later, I got my car back and had a renewed sense of Italian sports car smuggerly. That feeling lasted a week, right up until my exhaust fell off.

Since my bank account had just been swept clean of all funds, this was about the time I started to learn how to work on cars – in a MacGyver sort of way.

Also designed with tiny dimensions in mind, my exhaust system was approximately 17 miles of rusty intestine jammed into a space the size of a soda can, which, coincidentally, is what I used to make the repair. Well, I used a few soda cans, several hose

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clamps and some stuff from the auto parts store that was supposed to shrink-wrap itself around the hot exhaust. What they didn't explain was that if you caught your hand betwixt the tape and tailpipe, well, your hand would be a permanent part of the repair.

That fix lasted me until fall. However, on a cool, snappy, crisp October weekend, autumn leaves falling about the land, I decided to go for a drive. My homework was done, my brother was annoying me, Zeppelin III was in the cassette deck and I had a car. A cool car. A funky Italian car with four inches of ground clearance, an engine tune that sung to the highest of automotive gods, perfect gauge layout and the underlying stench of sheepskin seat covers that had gotten repeatedly drenched from a certain leaky targa top. (And speaking of that top, that alleged selling point, there's nothing that shouts, "Good morning!" like a cupful of icy water spilling from the roof latch directly onto one's manhood on the way to school).

Anyway, back to the fall. Ahh, that perfect

fall afternoon. Blasting up 128, I planned on swinging up the coastal route to Manchester and then on to Gloucester. I safely stowed the roof, rolled the windows down, blasted the heat, safely nestled into my favorite jacket and sported my leather driving gloves. The soothing lull of engine had me in such a place that I even had to turn off my radio so I could better absorb the thrum of harmonious pistons swimming in Castrol GTX.

It was mid October, but the heat grew a bit strong, so I turned it down a little. Then I smelled a little something like maple syrup. I love New England! The heat was still strong on my Nike's and stone-washed jeans so I turned it all the way off. More maple syrup. Steam! Steam in the cabin! Smoke! What the...!?!

I looked down into the passenger side floor just in time to see a gush of neon green coolant squirting all over my carpet, my sneakers and my pedals. I've never seen a car hemorrhage so much Prestone in my life.

Then, like an avalanche on the Apennines, things just slid into a pile of cold despair. Two of my studded snows flattened at once.

One headlight didn't go up, then none went up. Then both went up and wore out the battery overnight – on their own. The hazards flashed alternately, like a school bus. The brakes went. One of the hoods no longer closed and the passenger door no longer opened. When I opened the trunk, I could see clear to the pavement. That, at least, explained my missing math book.

Alas, after much frustration and chronic savings account evacuations, I couldn't take it anymore. As much as it ripped my heart and squeezed my brain, I sold it – with full disclosure.

One week, I saw my old car whiz by, it's new owner happy, roof off, sun dappling in, radio blaring. He saw me and I got the thumbs up.

The next time I saw him, I got a scowl. A hard scowl.

And the finger.

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