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First Love

Bill Elgersma

Fourteen is a lousy age in a male's life. Being fourteen invites a semi-human to don the hair shirt of maleness and all of its accoutrements and pretend to be civilized. Any type of simulated war game, devices that fire projectiles, activities resulting in destruction, and matches and lighters are about the most interesting things in life. Being stuck in a morphing body that changes at the speed of death is both messy and dull.

Girls are a curiosity—a sort of necessary inconvenience getting in the way and showing up at the most inopportune moments. They want attention while boys want to hang out with friends, jump off cliffs, off-road bike on mud trails, and play one more inning, one more quarter. Decisions about allegiances between friends and girls have much less to do with actual loyalty than repercussions of not acquiescing to demands for attention. Boys don't know what they are doing, but know they are supposed to hang out with girls, and they do—all the while brutally conscious of big ears, long noses, huge feet, cracking voices, and pimples.

They have come to realize that their mothers wrestled them into the shower for a reason, so hygiene is no longer an issue—they are not the stinky kid from grade seven, but they are not suave. Negotiating the art of kissing is a puzzle that no manual will ever explain and very few boys have considered. *Which way do you tilt your head. How long does this salivatory exchange occur. What if your teeth bump.* We come away more puzzled than we started. There are no hormones involved, just an obligatory oral transaction that keeps us from having to face the girl and ask, "What's wrong?" "What are you thinking?" or "Are you mad at me?" while

wondering if we can get home in time to play one more round of baseball before dark. Infatuation is just around the corner, but sweating palms and fish kissing simply add to the list of reasons why playing tanks is better than a girlfriend.

By the time we hit driving age, no wonder that for many, especially those living in geographic isolation, a mode of transportation bonds a love few girls can crack. A car doesn't appear to want attention; it doesn't require a shower and clean clothes. Conversations do not need to be thought out in advance to avoid awkward silences, and when it gives the silent treatment, only the mechanic can answer what is wrong. At the spur of a moment an idea becomes a reality without a need for friends, explanations of destination and estimated return times, and feigned alliances to another's joys and frustrations. You just drive—a tank of gas and air in the tires. That is sixteen.

Growing up on a farm thirty miles from high school, a sixteen-year-old kid needs a set of wheels—at least this kid did. Hitchhiking home from school after basketball practice hoping and praying to get there in time to do chores—the stipulation for permission to be involved in sports—created almost more stress than playing was worth. And so a car became the order of the day. But unlike current culture, any set of wheels would do, just something that got in and out of the city. Status, as a byproduct, had more to do with actually *owning* a car than owning a *nice* car. This purchase was a practical necessity to maintain a life beyond the farm, but it came at a price. At sixteen, doing more than one thing can be taxing, so the delicate balance of car and girl was impossible, particularly when the car in question was a 1966 Volkswagen Beetle. I chose the car.

The Bug—the real Bug—was not a status symbol. Commonly and affectionately known as Hitler’s Revenge, this was the car of my youth, an odd combination of curves and planes that set it apart from all other transportation in its time. No one sought to emulate it; its very existence screamed of poverty, life on a shoestring, or student. The classifieds in the local paper that categorized cars by dollar amount were filled with Bugs in the *\$500 and under* column, and for those who had money, this car was not an option. However, considering Thoreau’s mantras—“*cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage*” and “*It is life nearest the bone that is the sweetest*”—those who drove Bugs in Southern Ontario in the ‘70s knew something about life nearest the bone that Thoreau never experienced. Bugs can do that for a person.

When a kid is sixteen and has car on the brain, there is no reasoning, no objectivity, no critical analysis, just a blind, devoted dedication. Perhaps that is why at eighteen, when the thrill of the car has worn off, the same infatuation is directed toward women with many of the same results. The ad said *1966 Beetle, good condition, \$275* and a phone number. I was in love. My palms sweated and my hands shook as I dialed the number—well aware that my father would take issue with the cost of a long distance phone call, but I couldn’t help myself. A voice on the other end confirmed its availability, and I was in a relationship.

Turning onto the street somewhere in the downtown area of the city, I looked up to see the car sparkling in the fall sun. It had been repainted a metallic blue that danced with the sun’s caress along its body lines. I was smitten. The owner met me at the curb and handed me the keys, with a few words. Dumbstruck by its beauty, I simply nodded to his drone. A test drive was unnecessary—I could feel the symbiosis between the car and me.

In a state of paralyzing bliss I thumbed the door handle, and it reluctantly depressed, but I missed that. I also missed the physical drop of the door as it swung open to invite me in, just as I missed the movement in the door post along the line of rust that trimmed the bottom and explained the drop. I seated myself behind the wheel; my brother climbed in the other side, and I turned the key. I would like to say the engine roared to life as a good cliché would suggest, but I would be wrong.

Today, I think *wheezed* would be a more accurate verb. I knew nothing about compression and even less about the sound of a strong Bug engine when it turned over, so I coaxed its asthmatic heart to life and sat there in pure ecstasy. Had Helena Veenstra, the grade-twelve heart throb who turned every grade-ten boy into a quivering mass of jello, said “hi” to me in the school hallway, it would have paled in comparison at that moment. I had wheels, freedom, independence—nothing to do with being a man or a status symbol. I just didn’t have to stick my thumb out and hope for the kindness of strangers. And I didn’t have to wonder if my haircut looked dumb, my clothes matched, or I smelled like the barn.

Lessons at sixteen are indelibly stamped on a kid’s brain, especially relative to first loves. As I pulled away with the title in hand, I failed to notice the puddle of oil where the car resided or the blue plume that followed me as I shifted through the gears. For anyone who smokes a pipe, the similarities of lighting a pipe and shifting that Bug were striking. Beyond blazing a trail, I quickly discovered the horsepower limitations of this car. Hamilton is a town that borders Lake Ontario at its southwestern banks and is split by the Niagara escarpment. This geographical feature physically separates those who live on the “mountain”—upper Hamilton—from downtown by a vertical drop of 360 feet rolled out in pavement like biscuit dough to permit travel in even the most inclement lake-effect snow and slush. Several accesses to “uptown” were available but none particularly sympathetic to a tired and neglected Bug engine of 50 hp—when new. Fortunately, the traffic flow on the chosen access was heavy, and shifting down to maintain speed was the only logical choice, so the revs from the engine made sense. When I gained the summit, the smell of a hot engine and heat pouring out from under my seat were a little alarming, but the trip home, although uncomfortable, was uneventful. However, I slowly began to realize how little I knew about the car or cars in general.

Once home, I proudly parked it on the yard, determined to figure out how to cut the flow of heat that threatened to bake my rear end to well done and melt my shoes to rubber puddles. What I learned in time is something that Bug owners in any salt-seasoned area of the country discover

quickly: these cars are hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Because the engine is in the back, German engineers designed tubes through which the heat from the engine could be distributed throughout the cabin by a fan that also cooled the engine. The idea is ingenious, but an average salt distribution of 100 tons per inch of snow in Toronto made short work of the heat in those cars. Designed to eliminate ice from the roads, the salt also eliminates structural integrity from cars. The body design includes ledges where snow and ice and salt reside in copious amounts. True, in time the snow and ice melt, but salt also melts metal, and the ensuing rust eats through the heat channels under the doors first. The sign of a veteran owner who drove in the winter was the ice scraper lodged on the hand grip (there was no dash) to scrape the inside of the windshield while keeping the no-draft window—that little window at the front of the door—open to allow breath to escape. Failure to do so resulted in accumulated frost on the inside of the windshield, obscuring vision. Rookies used credit cards to scrape, and their fingers froze from snow shavings that only melted from the heat of their hands. We sneered at their whining.

Varying creative solutions were attempted. I mounted an unshielded, three-bladed fan to the inside post of the door. Entering the driver's seat was both a skill and art form, and when the fan was spinning, fingers and face were strategically positioned so as not to get propellered. A few bloody gashes taught me to pay attention. It was ugly but effective. When the fan was on, a cleared section approximately eighteen inches wide drifted across my windshield, and on winter days with rare sunshine, the path grew. A classmate who struggled with the same problem was more adventuresome. Tony mounted a small propane torch on the open glove compartment lid with two hose clamps. When the window frosted over, he simply opened the torch's valve and took out his lighter. The concept seems primitive, but fire has been effective for thousands of years. Although the heat of the flame charred the plastic sandwiched between the safety glass, frost was not an issue. However, when oncoming traffic met his car in the dark, the yellow-blue flame flickering up the windshield caused many to swerve just a little as they passed, and although few girls accepted his offer for a lift, his cigarettes were easy

to light.

The fact that the engine was in the back also meant that the trunk was in the front, an obvious but not carefully considered point. Yes, the gas tank was front and center, and until 1968, owners who wished to fill their tanks had to open the trunk lid. However, the potential for being barbequed was not the issue—the way the hood sealed was. Because of continual use, hoods were never a tight fit. Those who drove Bugs in wet weather knew enough to wrap anything important in plastic or not store it in the trunk. However, cold weather was a different story. Most of us found that two large blankets rolled up and jammed against the fire wall was protection from the piercing wind that came through both the radio and speedometer head. However, the air leakage could never completely be contained, and our knees froze. But love is a beast unto itself, and we compensate—mittens, hats, and a sleeping bag for the passenger were practical necessities stored on the back seat. For longer trips, a down mummy bag with a drawstring around the neck made the trip almost comfortable.

It didn't take me long to figure out that "good condition" suggested in the advertisement was a relative term. A few days into proud proprietorship I needed fuel, and after ten frantic minutes attempting to locate the gas cap, I began pumping. Three dollars filled the tank, and love rooted just a little deeper—beautiful and cheap. However, upon pulling away, I was met with the strong odor of gasoline. I got out and opened the hood to see if I had put the cap on wrong, but nothing seemed out of order. I fumed my way home and, once there, began my search for the problem. Close examination revealed the seam of the gas tank rusted through and gasoline seeped enough to rewire the brains of those who thought about lighting a cigarette while I drove. It became a half-tank car—anything more and *Eau du Gasoline* became the fragrance of the day. On the up side, this meant a dollar-fifty to maintain my independence. Life was good unless those who borrowed it thought they were doing me a favor by filling the tank.

As in most relationships, everything was cute, early on. So the car smelled like a gas can. Three pine air fresheners, a lavender-scented wicker basket hanging from the mirror, and careful refueling corrected that. A sweaty back from the perpetual sum-

mer heat that poured out from under the back seat was a little inconvenient, but with both windows open and the no-draft windows strategically set, I could get fresh air all the way up my sleeves and through my shirt. Later in the fall before the real cold hit, it was sort of like having heated seats—just like a Mercedes.

But like all infatuations, the chinks materialized. The first misgivings I had about the car came during a trip to pick up eggs from a farmer on a gravel road a few miles away. The rain had fallen for several days, and Lincoln County was not known for road maintenance. The puddles demanded serious piloting, and although tacking to the best of my ability, I was forced to navigate a developing lake on the passenger's side while the driver's side skimmed the opposing shore. Much to my dismay, the speed of the vehicle combined with the angle of tire and depth of puddle created a tsunami in the front seat. I was drenched. The salt that so effectively eliminated snow and ice had also eliminated any metal between the floor board and the inner fender on the passenger's side. I had a gash traveling the length of the passenger's floor that took on water like a cardboard box in a bathtub race. Ferrying the car to higher ground, I watched the water recede; and when I returned home, I crawled under it to inspect the damage. Along with the gash, the battery, which is located under the back seat, had eaten through the floor boards, and an additional gaping chasm beneath the driver's seat threatened to have my *derriere* sanded by the pavement. Fred Flintstone was becoming a reality.

But early love can be like that. There are moments of doubt to be reconciled. And it is blind—sometimes way too blind—because little compares to the resolve of the infatuation of youth. Our dogged determination to make things work, even when the logic to lead us forward does not exist, is admirable. We justify; we acquiesce; we concede. I went to the barn and found some steel. Then I went to town and bought adhesive-backed carpet. While none of this kept out the water, it did stop the showers, and life was good.

So the body was a little rough. Given its environment, the car wasn't actually that bad. Even the guardrails rust in that part of the country, so a few holes should be expected. They didn't keep me from driving. The car actually only kept me

standing twice, the first time within a month of owning it and while I was still blissfully unfamiliar with German engineering. Responsible Bug owners know there are two lights in the speedometer head. Before the engine is started, both lights must come on, and the driver must see that they illuminate. The one is for oil pressure, and the other is connected to the charging system. Both of these lights are vital to the life of the vehicle. If the oil light comes on while you're driving, either the engine is low on oil or, internally, something has gone seriously wrong, and immediate attention is needed. The other light monitors the generator that charges the battery, a system designed to cool the engine at the same time. If that light comes on while you're driving, the fan belt may be broken, which will cause the engine to cook.

I didn't know any of this. While I was puttering home from school one evening, the car simply died on the side of the road. I was about twenty miles out and puzzled. There was enough fuel, and I knew there was enough oil. That is when I discovered the lights. The former owner had failed to mention that the generator did not charge, but the light had never illuminated, either prior to starting or heading down the highway, and I was too in love to think about checking anything more than signal lights and tires when I bought it. For a while I had noticed the car was turning over quite slowly prior to starting. It moaned out two revolutions and coughed to life. I should have heeded my sense that the headlights were faint, but I attributed that to the notorious six-volt charging system that existed until the following year. Here I was, dead on the side of the road, in the dark—cell phones hadn't been invented. I stuck out my thumb and began to reflect on our relationship.

The second time I was left standing gave me a clear indication of the car's health. About nine months after the purchase, much more informed and adept at repairs thanks to the library's import manual, I became acutely aware of the value of ball joints relative to front-end suspension on vehicles. I was coming out of the parking lot of a dentist, twenty miles from home—everything was twenty miles from home—when I felt this physical thump as the driver's front corner seemed to sag. Fine, a flat tire. This is an easy fix. But when I got out and looked, the tire was okay. Then I went to the front

of the car to eye it head on and discovered that the entire wheel assembly appeared to be sporting a sixty-degree angle from top to bottom. The ball *joint* was no longer a joint. Much like a broken limb, the wheel hung in space. Had this occurred at a reasonable speed, the entire assembly would have broken away, and likely the car would have dived into oncoming traffic. I put it in reverse and backed into a parking space and stuck out my thumb, slowly realizing that love can be both dangerous and fickle.

Certainly there were other lessons learned over that two-year relationship. The carburetor received a monthly teardown because of the rust in the gas tank, and in time an education in torquing the heads and setting the valves kept me busy, but these were labours of love. For six months the brakes did not work—that is the brake *pedal* didn't work. However, youthful infatuation breeds resourcefulness and often trumps caution when money and independence are at stake, so when I noticed that the brake pedal was going to the floor, I went to option B—hand brakes. The hand brake is strategically located between the driver and passenger, and through time and experience I found that if the distance was gauged accurately, between downshifting and holding one's thumb on the button of the hand brake and applying it judiciously, the vehicle would come to a stop without incident. Being cut off in traffic was not an option, and main arteries were to be avoided at all cost. Roads that required stopping on hills, stop-and-go traffic, parallel parking, lending it to others—all no's.

The strategy worked well until my father went to move it one day. I heard it sputter to life and bolted from the kitchen table in time to see him drive into the side of the barn. His eyebrows disappeared into his hairline and—\$165 in brake repair later—returned.

When I reached eighteen, the car got boring. No matter what I fixed, we weren't getting along.

The door now dropped a full inch upon opening; a small rink formed on the passenger's floor in the winter, depositing the passengers in a heap as their feet slipped out from under them. Its demise was humanely decided one Saturday morning. My brother had borrowed it the night before, and when I turned the key the next morning; it lurched forward. It was supposed to be in neutral. I put in the clutch, started it, and let out the clutch. It went forward. I went to shift, but it said no. I strongly suspect he'd been street racing and, attempting to beat someone off the line, speed-shifted and snapped a fork in the transmission. The car was stuck in second, and the decision was made for me. I took it behind the barn and told it to look into the sun.

Since then, I have owned 26 Bugs—some for parts, some for looks, some just because life can be kind of lonely without a little aggravation, sort of moth-to-flame-ish. But in all of it, none stacks up to that first love. By far it was the worst Bug I have owned, but little is necessary to trigger those now fond memories: the comforting smell of exhaust and gasoline fumes absorbed by the vinyl and horsehair upholstery in old vehicles, the blinding glare of an early fall sun on a dew-laden windshield that will not clear, and engines that wind over too long before they catch—traumatizing at the time. The memories arrive most clearly on bitterly cold winter days—when my ears and fingertips freeze easily because of the frostbite from those heatless cars. And I embrace the numbness and consequential bite with some sort of perverse pride. When the sun shines at twenty below—and it doesn't matter whether that is Celsius or Fahrenheit—I can't help but smile with some sort of wistful nostalgia. *This is a good Bug day.*