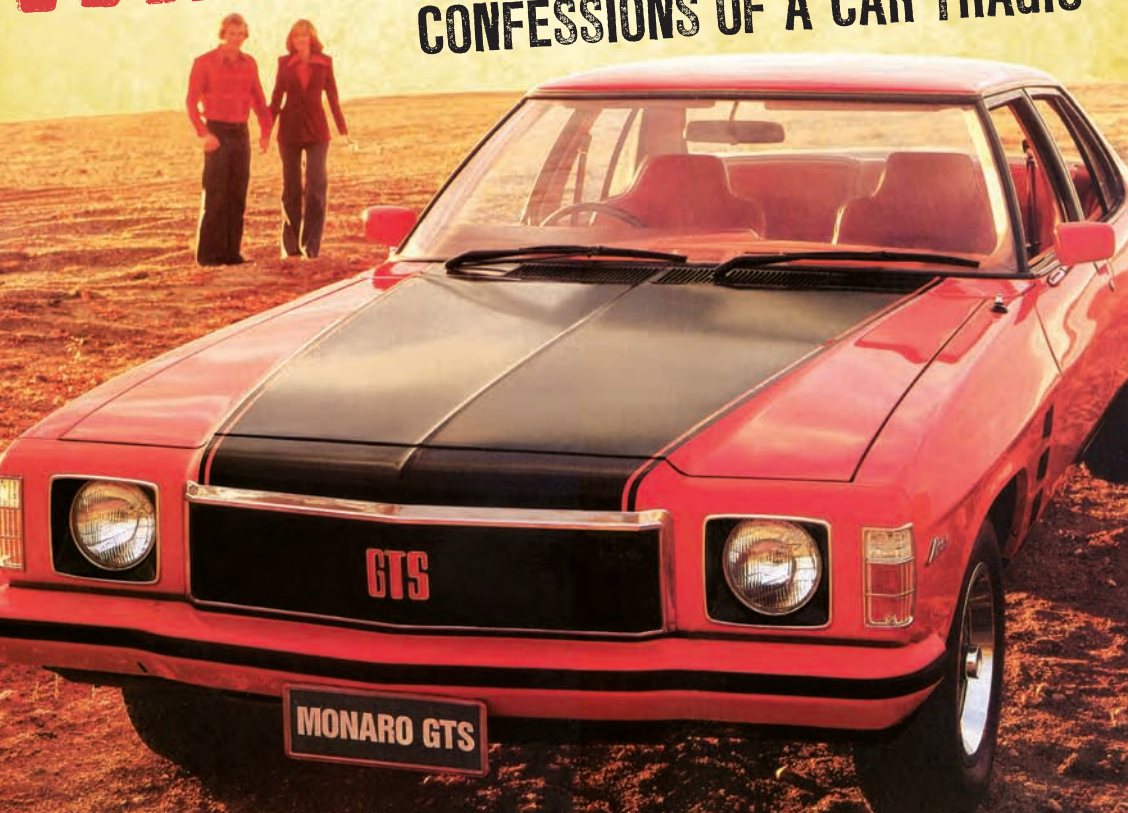
JOHN M. WRIGHT

MY OTHER WIFE IS A CAR

CONFESSIONS OF A CAR TRAGIC



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1 WRoXanne

Resting in the garage now, my turbocharged all-wheel drive Subaru WRX still crackles from a fast drive home but will be entirely silent in minutes, how could anyone prove she isn't animate?

For car tragics, the word 'driven' holds a treasure chest of meaning. The world is full of driven people but most car tragics are happier behind the wheel than squirming in the passenger seat. For many, indeed, their passion is the art-cum-sport of driving. I have heard of one man who raced at Le Mans in the 1970s and still goes to enormous lengths to avoid being driven by anyone else, trusting only himself, conscious no doubt of every apex, every swing of the tachometer needle.

Others, however, are happier in overalls than oversteer, dreaming Concours d'Elegance rather than Targa Tasmania. They may sneak down to the shed after dinner to finish polishing the underside of an early model Volkswagen Beetle. They care more for ignition timing than lap times.

But while some car tragics prefer restoration to driving, many others relate more closely to the racing driver standing helmet in hand while someone else does the dirty work. Think Steve McQueen in *Le Mans* and the unforgettable lines 'Racing . . . it's life. Anything that happens before or after, it's just waiting.' Those few words conveyed the meaning of the movie (and, I suspect, much of McQueen's own life). I was about 37 and had just begun circuit racing when I first understood exactly how that idea worked. My little racer was a thirteen-year-old Alfetta complete with rust and torn upholstery but in a reasonable state of tune. The lap times I had managed were quite good. I invited a fellow driver, who had never been behind the wheel of an Alfa but was a specialist in Mazda rotaries, to try my car. After just three

laps he was within a tenth of a second of my time. Although he never went quicker, he proved to me that it is about the *driving*, and nothing to do with 'knowing' your own vehicle. No matter how bonded I may have felt with the Alfetta, I enjoyed no privilege of ownership. My embarrassment in recounting this story now is that it had taken me so long to learn that the art of driving exists independently of brands and favourites. It also explains the adage of the famous racing driver arriving at a circuit for the first time with only two questions: what's the lap record and which is the direction of travel?

For many, the obsession attaches to a particular marque of car or even one particular model—a Ford Falcon GTHO Phase III perhaps, or an Armstrong Siddeley Star Sapphire. As I write, I imagine a doctor of about my own age in some leafy Melbourne suburb picking up a fountain pen to begin a letter to the Jaguar club magazine. 'I'm so sick of all this tosh about BMWs,' he writes. 'Why can't those ill-informed motoring journalists understand that our cars are the finest in the world?' My dear doctor, I reply in my imagination, if you owned a Rover or an Aston Martin or even a Humber you would feel exactly the same way. (And by the way, will you be free for lunch next Wednesday at the Naval and Military Club?)

Despite belonging to too many car clubs and for all different reasons, I have no patience with one-marque fanaticism, which might explain why I generally own up to ten cars at any one time and rarely double up on brands.

One friend likes to apply to me Clive James's description of himself as a 'group of people'. I just feel like someone different when I'm driving my beautiful red Jaguar XJ Series III Sovereign from the person I am when the tachometer needle of my Brock Commodore touches 6800 in fifth down the straight at Phillip Island. Or when I throw my backpack into the blue Rangey and head for the Victorian high country.

How does a lifelong love affair with cars start? How young can you be? Could it be at age nine months when you instinctively grasp that the car in which you are being driven is uncool? I was born in Launceston's Queen Victoria Hospital in March 1950 and was driven home in the back seat of my parents' black 1948 Chevy. Apparently it had a green headlining. My mother thought this was a significant factor in determining my favourite colour. 'You were always happy in the back seat of the Chev,' she would say through my childhood, 'but when your father bought this car, you cried every time you travelled in it.' Mum believed it was the cream headlining that explained this emotional response. But I reckon I must have already sensed my Dad was driving into old age in a black Armstrong Siddeley Whitley.

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I have never rebuilt an engine nor have I raced at Le Mans, but as my darling wife Jennie likes to tell me, life often seems to be all about cars. Consider my silver Subaru. She still sits outside the garage after a recent 4500-kilometre return

trip from Queensland (where we have lived permanently since August 2006) to Melbourne. A 'short' engine occupies some of the boot (try this trick with a Commodore V8!), but at least I've taken my racing bicycle off the roof. What would my WRX say if she could find human speech? 'Fair go' might be a start.

When I bought this MY00 (model year 2000) Subaru Impreza WRX three years ago, the odometer showed 152,203 kilometres. I have added more than 57,000 to that and almost every single one has entailed some pleasure, even if just a semi-conscious awareness of that pulsing exhaust note, like a rhythm in the blood. My WRX is well familiar with the main thoroughfares between south-east Queensland and Victoria's Mornington Peninsula. She has made nine return trips, a recent one to be fitted with a more powerful engine and turbocharger.

WRoXanne. Yes, I know it's a silly name. Wrexes are meant to be WR (World Rally) Blue. Absurdly, an old song line—misremembered (it should be 'Roxanne, you don't have to put on the red light')—came into my head: 'Roxanne, you don't have to put on the red dress.' Wear the silver instead.

This is not the first time I have owned an MY00 Wrex, but this time it's for keeps. The previous time, I had bought a nicely run-in one, Mica Red in colour, but it never left suburbia. You cannot truly appreciate the merits of a hot Scooby without going beyond the subdivisions. From the beginning, WRoXanne was accumulating the kays. When

I took delivery of her, we lived in a townhouse where you could walk into the house from the garage. The car was parked, put to bed, game over. But it was *crackling* in the garage only metres away from us.

I believe that my obsession with the Impreza WRX dates back to one particular drive. The occasion was testing for *MOTOR* magazine's 1998 Performance Car of the Year (PCOTY), an award won by the Porsche 911 in its then new water-cooled 996 guise. Common practice in such multiple car evaluations is for the judges to spend maybe an hour or two at a time in each contender. I was lucky that day because I scored the WRX in Omeo for the twisty drive to Dinner Plain. The magnificently serpentine road was slicked with rain.

I had never had a driving experience like it at the time; how I could move that car around on the road, while rapidly making ground on two-wheel drive vehicles, including the 911. The Falcon XR8 was nowhere in this hunt. Eight years later, when I watched our poodle-shitzu cross Mr Bo Jangles lose traction on the polished floorboards and go into initial understeer before recovering into a perfect four-wheel drift, how could I help but remember the road to Dinner Plain?

It might seem strange that I waited until 2000 before I bought my Mica Red car and then until January 2006 before parting with $19,700 (drive away, no more to pay) for the Wrex I would quickly come to know as WRoXanne. The truth is I started out with mixed feelings about the WRX. My first drive was back in 1994 after I'd spent a fortune

fettling my old Alfa (105 GTV 2000) for Targa Tasmania. Collecting my Italian thoroughbred from the mechanic at last, I was eager to test its expensively new-found performance. A friend was to follow me in the Wrex because I had to get it home, too. A privilege of the motoring journalist's life is access to a steady stream of brand new cars to drive for a week. I had just collected the Subaru and noticed only that it was (a) ugly and (b) seemed to accelerate quite hard in the lower gears.

At the wheel of the Alfa I was ready with full throttle through first and second gears at every opportunity. Behind me the white Subaru with its gawky grille and oversized fog lights never shrank in the mirror; it was the faster car and effortlessly so. But no Subaru was beautiful, was it? The Impreza WRX had no pedigree. It had a cost-cut feel. (Some years later I read that power windows were fitted only because they saved weight, the WRX's mission in life being to win the World Rally Championship.) The seats were trimmed in the same sort of material that haunts army disposals stores. Largely ignorant of Subaru's changing brand values, I was ill-disposed towards the marque. Why, I wondered, should I take this WRX seriously?

The first Subaru I ever drove was a truly nasty dark-brown two-door 1974 model—ugly, claustrophobic, noisy, slow and bearing no kind of comparison with anything made in Europe at the time except perhaps the lamentable Fiat 132. (Don't write an angry letter. This is only a book.) Subaru was branded in my head as inferior, a kind of pretend car.

Conventional automotive wisdom used to be that the Japanese industry never invented anything, but copied very well. The Subaru imitated nothing but should have, except that Europe had never combined all these ingredients for anyone else to copy. By 1975 you could get a horizontally opposed engine with four-wheel drive and a wagon body. The turbocharger came later. The WRX wrapped technological uniqueness—brilliance—into a disarmingly plain shape. Oh yes, you could also get it as an even more repellent looking little wagon.

Somehow I held onto that negative feeling for four years, that fast though the Wrex palpably was, it was vaguely nasty. Then I became one of the judges in *MOTOR* magazine's Bang for your Bucks competition. By that stage I was over my Alfa Romeo obsession. I was, as it were, between lovers. Can I admit now that I was quite proud of my significantly modified 1996 Ford Falcon XR8 in that lovely Navy Blue? Rear-wheel drive was one of its advantages, but I was finding new appeal in the idea of an all-wheel drive, turbocharged four-cylinder sedan.

The horizontally opposed or 'flat' four-cylinder Subaru WRX engine may owe its inspiration to Volkswagen and Porsche, but the application is arguably more logical. It is difficult to grasp how compact and light this 2.0-litre engine is, until you pick up a short motor and load it into your boot. Then try picking up the engine from any other modern car! Both its light weight and compact size work in Subaru's favour. Whatever weight there is stays low in the

front of the car with a horizontal bias, significantly reducing the centre of gravity. Subaru uses a north–south layout, so that the driveshaft extends in a straight line from the front of the engine through to the rear wheels. Horizontal opposition of the cylinders has led to the term 'boxer', because this is precisely what the pistons do; punch out from the centre of a block that is immensely strong and rigid. The engine takes up so much less space than a conventional in-line four that it does not overhang the front wheels, which makes for more balanced handling with less inclination to understeer. And the short, forged crankshaft does not require huge balancing webs. So it is not only remarkably rigid but spins much more freely. There is no denying that this is a more expensive style of engineering, but it is now an inherent part of the Subaru brand, as is all-wheel drive. (And should you upgrade the engine to a later model STi unit, you can transport the old block home in the boot.)

And so I approached the 1997 WRX with more respect. There was a chance, I thought at the time, just a chance, that I might change my mind on acquaintance with this latest model.

Inside, first impressions were of the white instrument faces, the gorgeous Nardi steering wheel (a driver's airbag not yet included), the grip of a rally bucket seat, the heart attack-red bonnet scoop. Then the invitation of steely bitumen on the way to some love shack.

Was I in love yet? (No, just getting undressed.) Nail the throttle and listen to the guttural flat four spool into tune,

then almost at the speed of thought you're through first into second, the rate of acceleration slowing only slightly as you clasp third. Can the price of such knowledge really be just $39,990? With almost the urge of a house-priced Porsche 911? And a shorter stopping distance from 100 km/h? *How long* has this been going on? I had spent so many thousands making my XR8 go faster and handle better but I felt sure that this diminutive Japanese tin box would leave it behind on both counts, on any road, wet or dry, but especially wet. Thus you begin to reconsider the essence of automotive design.

I remembered the '94 model. Army disposal trim, little wheels, no lowdown torque, plain steering wheel and Nardi a mere name in your dreams. Charisma lay only in the go not the show, which was not enough for me with my fussiness. I was deep in my Alfa phase.

Why had no-one except insurance companies made a law against the WRX? Who could need more? Why would you want to 'chip' one or get an exhaust or do anything to it? (Then again, why wouldn't you, speed being an endlessly intoxicating drug?)

They say if you lay all the world's economists end to end they will never reach a conclusion. It's sometimes the same with motoring writers. But that year saw unanimity. All four judges rated the 1997 Subaru Impreza WRX not simply the best in its class (the cheapest class) but the best Bang for your Bucks car across the whole field.

But how did we arrive at our findings? Where did we drive the cars? I won't disclose the location of our road loop because I still remember the people coming out of their houses with angry looks on their faces, but we did use an almost traffic-free public road replete with sensational corners. And then we used the Phillip Island racetrack. Only the BMW M3 lapped more quickly than the Wrex. And it cost almost three times as much.

After the competition I placed an order for a Subaru Impreza WRX only to cancel it just weeks later. I was reflecting on the kind of use to which the car would be put—suburban commuting with maybe 20 kilometres of 100 km/h driving in a straight line at either end. The seats would be good for a rally but not for the daily grind. The ride would be hard. I would never be able to exploit the car's performance. Space would always be at a premium.

Then came PCOTY and the drive from Omeo to Dinner Plain. I was back on the phone to long-suffering Nick Senior, then PR manager now general manager of Subaru Australia, and former motoring journalist. (On the light plane to the Hunter Valley in 1990 for the Lexus launch, he calculated the fortune I had lost on cars. Hell, that was in 1990, when I hadn't even bought the Rolls-Royce!) I ordered the Mica Red car, although I shouldn't have wavered from my original impulse to choose World Rally Blue. And, would you believe, when I got it, all those original misgivings returned. It was a long way to Omeo. The best corners I encountered were roundabouts, tackled enthusiastically when there was no

other traffic nearby. But I didn't know then that the time would soon come when I would be driving 50,000 kilometres per year.

My Subaru Impreza WRX is an invitation to the Mount Panorama of the mind. But, brilliant as it is, it is not and never would be the only car to call my own. You see, for the true tragic, one car is never enough.

2 Flash Harry: chasing Jaguar tales

night would fall about the time we joined the road out of town
driving home from grandparents in Launceston
to Exeter, at seventy miles per hour in our English saloon

'seventy', said my mother 'is how fast an African cheetah
can run flat out, when it's hunting (or being hunted) like lions and tigers'
four years old, I had yet to hear of Tasmania's luckless 'tiger'

I'll come right out with it. I slept with a car in January 1970. The night I took delivery of my very own Jaguar, I drove to the beach at Torquay and slept on the back seat even though I had a tent. What else could you call that but tragic? Uncomfortable, perhaps.

By January 1970 I really should have known better than to risk purchasing a 1949 Jaguar Mark V with a mostly undocumented past. But I didn't know better then, and my darling wife Jennie would probably say I still don't. When Toyota launched a new model Corona in 1973 the advertisement read: 'When your heart says Europe, but your head says Japan.' Mostly, I listen to my heart, a notably unreliable organ. When my head has whispered Mitsubishi as my heart shrieked Milano, the Alfa Romeo invariably won. But no, dear reader, I don't advocate my practices. Here is a classic case of 'Do as I say, not as I do'. As a motoring journalist I'm paid to counsel others on car purchases. In the old days I even suggested Sigmas and Pulsars, Magnas and Skylines. More recently, I have been a great advocate of Subarus, a somewhat grudging admirer of Lexuses and Land Cruisers, and a loving enthusiast of just the right elderly Jaguar. So what's new?

I'm still cranky when I think about my father buying that Armstrong Siddeley Whitley. How could he have chosen such a naff car? In a land of unsubtle, utilitarian Holdens, my so-English father had bought an Armstrong Siddeley. All these years on, when I see an early Holden I hear the voice of Ben Chifley, while the English car evokes Neville

Chamberlain declaring 'Peace in our time!' 'The bloody silly fool,' my mother said as if that optimistic prime minister had been her intimate. Sometimes she spoke to my dad as if he was that idiot Chamberlain, who hadn't been able to read his watch in 1939.

Back then my father was retired. He drove his already gleaming black car 20 miles or more to Launceston to get it polished, although more likely he was taking any excuse to escape from my mum for the day. I picture him being overtaken by roaring Holdens.

The best cars I could think of at age five were Jaguars and Ford Custom V8s. I couldn't believe that Dad had originally intended to buy a Jag but chose the Armstrong Siddeley because it happened to be available for immediate delivery from a showroom five minutes' walk from my maternal grandparents' house in Clarence Street, Launceston, where a boring cream Holden lazed in the garage.

You could see why the Armstrong Siddeley had lingered in the showroom: anyone with that much money would have bought a Jaguar. Like all of us my father hid whatever buyer's remorse he may have felt in a boxful of arguments. As well as the immediate delivery, another advantage he claimed was the absence of the Flash Harry image associated with Jaguars in those early postwar years. A Jaguar was not quite the thing for a gentleman, he said, although some gentlemen seemed to get away with it. I knew what he meant, though, when twins Adrian and Julian K arrived at my sixth birthday party. Their father had a handlebar moustache and drove a

faded Mark V Jaguar. He looked as silly as the bloke in the 'Jag lag?' ad in *Modern Motor*.

If a polite guest were to flick through my oldest photograph album, they might seize on a snap of me, aged almost twenty, standing beside my own black Mark V. 'Was this your first car?' they might enquire. And I, in turn, would try to explain that there is really no such thing as a first car because cars inhabit we tragics' lives long before we own even a scale model. But looking again at the photo, I can see why they might have asked the question because I appear about thirteen and a half. In absurd purple pants and a cravat, with hair to my shoulders, I look like a cross between a youthful member of KISS and the Earl of Hampshire. I no longer remember who held the camera into which I smiled so optimistically, although I have revisited the scene at the corner of McIlwraith and MacPherson streets, North Carlton, opposite the Melbourne General Cemetery.

I was only six weeks short of twenty that late January day in 1970 when I took delivery of my 1949 Jag from a rundown residence in a western suburb of Geelong, where it was doubtless the grandest old car within miles. The Jag was about 90 days older than I was. And it had taken me six weeks of university vacation work in a Spotswood factory to accumulate the $200 necessary to transform a 1954 Holden FJ Special into a 1949 Jaguar Mark V. ($200: a nice lunch for two and modest tip, these days.) For six weeks, I dealt with a small company car fleet, allocating the new silver-grey XR Ford Falcon 500 first to this person, then one of the several

HR and HK Holden Specials to that one, and so on, making sure the cars were filled with fuel, and their mileages logged. It was mostly about cars but without any driving.

With the last of the $20 notes to complete the Jaguar purchase in my wallet, I jumped into my Holden (GGB 661) one Friday evening for the last time. I surrendered that car without even a gesture of faux regret. The Jag was mine at last. From the moment I had seen OE 396 in the Erskine River camping ground, I had set my heart on purchase. The price was $375 ONO. I tried an ONO, never having enjoyed the luxury of one before. 'Would you accept my Holden and $200?' I asked the owner. He would!

That Jaguar was childhood revisited. The cravat was another piece of nostalgia; Dad used to wear one in the 1950s. So many of our particular preferences can be traced back to the headwaters of infancy and one doesn't need Freud, Jung or D.H. Lawrence to grasp what remains an essentially Jesuitical truth: the first seven years coalesce chemicals for the formula of individual personality. And that piece of my life's puzzle was not really about a Jaguar very much at all. It was more about that particular black Armstrong Siddeley with my father at the wheel on the swooping road between Launceston and the West Tamar valley. I would lean forward from the back seat into my mother's perfumed warmth. Chanel No. 5. Despite my misgivings about it, that Armstrong Siddeley felt as much like home to me as did our house (which I can barely remember). On the familiar, familial, journey, the dashboard gauges glowed yellow, the

speedometer needle hovered around 65. In my mind, I urged it to ascend to 70, 75, maybe 80. In my memory, it is usually a winter's night. Some years ago I was moved to write a poem about the thylacine and inevitably found myself writing, as well, about the Armstrong Siddeley.

Then, when Dr (not Flash) Harry Fisher with his immaculately parted white hair and navy blue blazer with four gold buttons on each sleeve came calling in his brand new black Jaguar Mark VII to take my father and me on a drive to Greens Beach, I fell in love with a car for the first time. I had a platonic love for our Armstrong Siddeley, but this was a precursor to adolescent infatuation. Any possible comparison between our staid car and his brand new Jag was doomed as I sat on my father's lap (seat belts then being only for aeroplanes), watching the mauve-lit speedometer needle edge past 90 while another needle on an unfathomable 'rev counter' (our car having no such gauge) pointed at 40. My whole world now existed in the warmth of that car with its rich cowhide smell and growling engine, the drenched paddocks of rural Tasmania invisible beyond.

My sweetest memories of Tasmania are about speed. Although my usually unspeaking father often had the wheel, my mother happened to be the faster driver. There was an afternoon when our car was being serviced and the garage proprietor lent my mother his sparkling red 1954 Austin-Healey. She took me for a drive and on one straight stretch of winding road we reached almost 100. Later I came to

associate this day with Grace Kelly driving her Sunbeam Alpine in *To Catch a Thief*.

When I took delivery of the Jaguar, bought with my own hard-earned money, I joined the communion of automotive saints. Reality—details such as the fact it was basically an old shitbox—barely ruffled my dreams. The mechanically weary Jag was no faster than my duck-egg (Mosman) blue Holden, a fact I discovered within two minutes of leaving Geelong. But it had the counter-clockwise tachometer, the long bonnet crowned by a large leaping chromed Jaguar mascot, 'four-on-the-floor' (in 1960s vernacular), bucket seats and a cocooning charm. I was literally on my way to Torquay but actually on the Road to Nowhere.

The Road to Nowhere can be almost anywhere. It is fast, with switchback too-blue-Subaru corners (an imaginary stage of the World Rally Championship), Porsche straights (in your mind's eye, checking the brake lights of Jim Richards' 911 as a convoy of press cars hurtles down Tasmania's east coast) and rock faces off which bounces V8 redline music. It could be across the top of Mount Panorama, Bathurst, 1985, Peter Brock in his VK Commodore racer, or maybe Grice and Bailey blitzing all comers in their Chickadee-sponsored VL the following year. (I was there both times. I'm still there, on occasion, in spirit, remembering the steep walk downhill to the pits, through the lengthening shadows and the huge anticlimax after the race is over and the sounds of racing engines and screaming tyres have quieted.) That's like childhood, too, when the guests have all gone home

after your first real birthday party, aged five. The Road to Nowhere is the racetrack of the soul, a road where it doesn't matter if you are going in the wrong direction, as long as the gearchanges are perfectly executed and each apex is as finely judged as any line of a short poem. ('Tiger, tiger, burning bright in the forests of the night'.) I didn't know all this at nineteen. But I was at home in the old Jaguar, falling asleep on the back seat to the sound of the rolling ocean.

After that first day came the anticlimax. Dreams and memories usually outperform the real thing. This might explain why I have now owned more than 120 cars, some of them twice. In fact I owned my FJ twice, having sold it to my friend Roy, and then buying it back again before the Jag overwhelmed me. My overriding memory of that Holden is of trying to coax it past a flickeringly indicated 85 miles per hour on the roads of South Gippsland. (I had wrapped purple cellophane around the instrument lights in search of old-Jaguarness, the memory of the trip in Harry Fisher's Mark VII. It was an effective and cheap trick.)

After such a strong beginning the OE 396 was almost a disappointment. Too much hope was invested in it. One night, speeding home in the small hours from Benalla, I saw the oil pressure gauge drop to zero. But the engine still sounded strong. What could I do on a deserted Highway 31 when my warm bed in North Carlton was a long way off and trucks were not highly illuminated and visible like they are today? I stopped, opened the quaint two-sided bonnet, saw, or rather *didn't* see, in the dark, without a torch let alone tools or

any knowledge of what to do with them), anything wrong so proceeded at 70 miles per hour, resigned to getting the oil pressure gauge replaced or some wiring fault remedied. There was a hint of death rattle as I reached 49 McIlwraith Street—a problem that would be left for much later in the morning. (I remember parking the Jaguar in the centre of the wide street beside a pale yellow Bristol 405, a car of little real interest to the market in 1970.)

I sold that Jaguar for $75. Right now, in the same condition with an engine rebuild in its immediate future, I calculate the value of a Mark V saloon to be considerably beyond $20,000. You don't pay that for an Armstrong Siddeley Whitley. This is a niggardly point and my father has long since left the debating table. At any moment, every car has its value, a dollar number to conclude a classified advertisement. Prices are relative but stories are absolute.

Oddly, perhaps, I now reckon I got my money's worth out of the Jaguar Mark V. It provided me with a new perspective on motoring at the start of the 1970s. The Mark V was only ever intended by Jaguar to be a stopgap model and its basic design was pre-war. Details such as the two-sided bonnet and the huge four-spoked steering wheel gave it a truly vintage feel. The interior was amazing, actually much more luxurious than the contemporaneous Armstrong Siddeley's. Looking back I can see much in common between the 1985 Jaguar I currently own and that 1949 model: call it Jaguar DNA. You sit very low in both, cocooned in a personal tunnel, separated from the front passenger by a fat transmission

tunnel. The Mark V had a wonderful gearshift with a great feeling of mechanical precision to it. There was a growl to the lower gears that was, to my young ears, quite cat-like—that is to say, like the growl of a jaguar. So it was a car that felt almost animate, alive in your hands.

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Of course, the Mark V was never going to be the only Jag on which I would waste money: once bitten, always bitten. Even when I owned it for those few happy months before the drive home from Benalla, I used to stare admiringly at Mark VIIs. They were just that bit more modern, more luxurious, faster, but they seemed to retain all the charm of previous models. And in 1970 they were still not very expensive. From memory, a good Mark VII cost about $700 at the time. Eventually I got one, but it was six years later and it was not a good example. It was—to use a technical term—a shitbox. And the bloke who sold it to me was obviously dodgy. This remains a mystery to me now, how it is that I can proceed with a purchase despite misgivings. I don't do it so often these days. But back in 1975, not all that happy in love or flush with funds, a cheap Mark VIIM seemed, briefly, like a good idea.

My mate Lindsay Dyer loved Jags and must have thought I was an absolute wood duck when I rattled up to his place in Lilydale mounted on my dismal Mark VIIM. 'It's running on three and a half cylinders,' he told me. Lucky it still was, really, given the fact that it seemed to have arrived in Lilydale

literally under its own steam. When a car will only go for 15 minutes or so without boiling, then even a trip from the inner to the outer suburbs becomes an adventure. In stupidity. Lindsay—maybe two years my senior but knowledgeable in the arcane area of the underbonnet—advised me to sell the lagging Jag to anyone who would give me even half of what I'd paid; blessedly, I now forget how much that was.

Three years later I bought my next Jaguar and this time Lindsay was the vendor. He actually had two Mark IIs for sale. The one I wanted to buy (of which more in a subsequent chapter) was a 3.8 manual in pearl grey with a red interior, 1962 vintage, I think. Who could credit now that he wanted just $2300 for it? Yes, that was 1978! But it was still more than I could afford at the time. So I bought the other, a 1962 2.4 automatic in dove grey with matching leather. I paid him $1000 plus $58 for a roadworthy certificate and called it a present to myself on turning 28. That was also about the time that I got my Master of Arts (car purchasing philosophy not included) and I was feeling pretty good. Naturally, I trusted Lindsay absolutely. He was the man from Repco who came over to our flat and repaired our FJ Holden by torchlight back in 1972. Every car I bought I would take out to Lilydale in constant pursuit of both his approval and his mechanical assistance.

As I write, it is coming up to 31 years since I took delivery of the Mark II 2.4. It deserves to be numbered among the best cars I have ever owned. Although it was painfully slow from a standing start, on the open road it had the capacity

to cruise all day at 80 miles per hour. I remember one day sitting on about 70, with the window wound down and the sound of that so-sweet short-stroke version of the XK engine the only company I sought. How special, too, it is to have that chrome leaping Jaguar to mark your progress through the landscape. Sure, it wasn't a 3.8 equipped with a manual gearbox with overdrive and wire wheels (although my car did have overdrive which I remember as being less than reliable). But the point was that to drive the 2.4 was to experience much of the pleasure of one of the hero cars of my childhood. At the 1962 Melbourne Motor Show I pestered the man at the Jaguar stand for 'literature' and came home with brochures for the Mark X and the Mark II. The latter was full of images of these smaller models in landed gentry settings. One car was red. Another was a lovely blue that I think was called Cotswold. For years I looked out for a Mark II in this colour but never saw one. But I got to travel in a red 2.4.

Michael L's father, Bill (you'll meet both of them again in the 'Teenage crime' chapter) had a red Mark II 2.4, of which he was justifiably proud. It was a manual with overdrive and had wire wheels. Michael and I had opened the bonnet to admire the XK engine while Mr L was doing a hill climb in his K3 Magnette which we had towed out to Templestowe. Once we had finished looking at the engine, we failed to secure that elegant panel. As we cruised home, the speedometer occasionally indicating 80 miles per hour, the wind got under its leading edge and the bonnet suddenly flew

open, ripped right off its hinges and soared clean over the car to come to a crumpled rest on the bitumen. It was exciting from inside the car and would have got people's attention in following vehicles, had there been any, but questions were asked by Mr L. We boys attempted to reassure him that it wasn't our fault, but I am sure he was unconvinced, this being, after all, the first time the bonnet had ever detached itself from the rest of his beloved Jaguar. I rode back in the small boot of that Mark II, clutching the bonnet for dear life. Whenever I see a bonnet begin to quiver in the wind, I recall this unfortunate afternoon. Often I stop to make completely sure it is secure.

I lost touch with Lindsay Dyer before I moved to Sydney in 1980. He would have been a good man to take to New Rowley Motors in 1989 when, on a whim, I decided the time had come to buy a Jaguar XJ6. I evaluated three different ones, all of which were around $30,000 and seven years of age. Why then did I continue, when I learnt that all of those cars tended to rust around front and rear windscreens? Because they were XJ Jaguars.

The first road test car I ever had on the industry standard one-week loan was a metallic British Racing Green XJ6. That was right at the end of 1981, just as I was starting out as a motoring journalist. The test car had a flat battery and I seem to recall some other difficulty. But I remember writing about it: 'Come home, Jaguar, all is forgiven.' How could you help but love it? Maybe *you* could; I couldn't. Barry Lake was one journalist with a less than glowing view.

When I was working with him at *Modern Motor*, of which he was the deputy editor (and later editor), he got stranded somewhere out near Castlereagh when the warm Jaguar would not restart. I think he had to wait an hour or so before he could coax the benighted thing back to life.

When the time came for me to choose a Jaguar to call my own, I somehow managed to overlook such glitches. What must have stuck in my memory all that time was the comparison test in *Wheels* in 1971 (I think) when Peter Robinson and Mel Nichols compared the XJ6 with a BMW 2800. Robbo chose the Jag but Nichols plumped for the BMW, a mistake he acknowledged many years later in English *CAR*. At the time I owned my Mark V, I'd see almost new XJs—the one I most remember seems to have been dark blue and had black and white number plates beginning KJ-something. I remember it cruising up Johnston Street towards the University of Melbourne where I was an undergraduate. What success had its owner met with, I remember wondering. That navy XJ6 with its underbody still shiny new seemed to be the pinnacle of automotive achievement. Incidentally, I did come to own one of those big pre-7 BMWs in the 1980s, of which more later . . .

My friend Roy Carey owned a strangely mushroom-coloured 1969 XJ6 in the mid-1970s, by which time the Series II had arrived. His Series I still struck me as about the best car I could imagine.

The Series III was current, of course, during my first several years as a journalist. Other test cars followed that

first BRG example. In the *National Times* of 5–11 July 1985, under the heading 'Grace under pressure' (from the Nobel Prize citation for Ernest Hemingway), I wrote:

> I have never found it easy to be dispassionate where Jaguars are concerned. There is an inherent romanticism in the traditional walnut and leather gentleperson's carriage that tends to overwhelm logic. With earlier versions of the XJ6, however, logic managed to argue a plausible case every time the bloody car broke down.
>
> In 1985, close to the end of its epoch, the Jaguar has finally matured. Back in the '50s and '60s, a couple of slogans were used (often concurrently) to promote Jaguars. One was 'a special kind of motoring that no other car in the world can offer'. The other was 'Grace, Space and Pace'.
>
> I believe that the current XJ6 can safely be called special. In its particular blending of old school luxury and contemporary dynamics it is unique: simply the best contemporary vintage car money can buy. It is unquestionably gracious, reasonably spacious and adequately pacious.
>
> In a motoring world thick with wedges and computer technology, the Jaguar represents a fine example of the Hemingway ideal: here, indeed, is grace under pressure.

So by the time I bought the 1985 Sovereign, now my most cherished classic car, I'd had a long experience of the breed from when they were resplendently new to when they were

carelessly and deeply aged. I had owned several when I acquired this Sovereign. Preparing to drive away from the Jaguar specialist from whom I had made the purchase, I said that I'd probably see him soon, 'when it comes in on the back of a truck'. He wasn't amused and neither was his offsider. The next week it came in on the back of a truck. He paid. My theory is that with any old Jaguar you have to get the electrical problems out of the way earlier rather than later.

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In the spring of 1989 I found myself shopping for yet another Jag, spending an afternoon with Arthur at New Rowley Motors on Sydney's lower north shore choosing between three marginal XJ6s, one silver with red leather, one dark blue (but it didn't run well) and the third, which I bought. My new acquisition was Damson Red but it was the aftermarket wire wheels that were the clincher, enabling me not to worry about the crazed paintwork on the bonnet. The car was quite a fair example for a 1982 model. I spent some money on it over the months of ownership and it did deliver great joy. Then I sold the red Jag to a fellow Hash House Harrier, Roger, and he copped all the trouble. At least he had the slight compensation of being able to whinge to me about it on our Tuesday night runs. There we would be, battling up a hill in Bronte or following a trail through the bush on the north shore with occasional glimpses of the city lights or the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and poor Rog would

be telling me about the Jag's latest bid for its share of his income. His beard seemed to get greyer each week.

The Damson Red XJ6 was the first of several XJs for me. One of the best was a white 1985 Vanden Plas, for which I paid $16,250 and sold reluctantly some weeks later for $16,500. My income had just plunged about 15 per cent and I decided the Jag had to go. It had done 160,000 kilometres but drove perfectly. I have to report that I much preferred it to the BMW 635 CSi I owned at the same time. Even though I'd done Targa Tasmania in the Bee-Emm, the Jag always felt classier and looked a heap better. By this stage, I understood that despite road testers' rave reviews of these six-cylinder Jags, they are not fast. They are not *about* being fast. But a 635 CSi always laboured under those pretensions. (In the Targa, I reckon the BMW was only a few per cent faster at best than the Alfa GTV6 in which I'd taken third in class the previous year—1992, the inaugural event—and slower through the tight bits. Worst of all, I'd actually traded the Alfa in on this black BMW, with which I fell in love at first sight, and out of love some months later. The visual proportions are wrong, I reckon. The wheelbase is too short for the overall length and there is too much front overhang. And that straight six—despite the romance attached to the configuration—could never sound as breathtakingly sweet as the Alfa's V6.)

Amiable former National Party leader Tim Fischer once observed that he would happily own a 1985 Series III XJ6 but not one built between 1979 and '82 inclusive. That's

precisely right. I have owned two '82s and two '85s. They may as well be different cars despite virtually identical specifications. Early Series III Jags simply weren't made with love or care and no amount of elegance can hide it. The US magazine *Road & Track* featured a memorable road test of a Vanden Plas model in July 1984 headed 'Mercy! The quality is not strained', invoking Shakespeare to make the point that previous XJ test cars had broken down but this one was great and so was another they tested just to make sure.

Remarkably, I also got away almost scot-free with a 1977 Series II Daimler Double Six for a few months in 1991; but I reckon that car was the exception to prove the unreliability rule. After the Rolls-Royce experience I'll come to shortly, I guess the Daimler seemed like a low-risk purchase. It was also a low-excitement machine in my view when compared with the six-cylinder XJs. It had very tall gearing combined with a quiet engine for newfound serenity at highway speeds, but I prefer the exhaust note and sheer character of the XK engine, and the low overall gearing accentuates the car's essentially vintage character.

The second 1982 XJ6 came in 2003 when I once again craved the company of a Jaguar and bought a bargain basement example ($6500) which I drove until I could afford to upgrade to a nice 1985 example, which I still own. Of course, the Prince of Darkness can strike on occasion and my beautiful red Sovereign has elegantly ridden two tow trucks (electrical problems both times) in four years. 'Have

you ever seen a car that looked more beautiful on a tow truck?' I remember asking Jennie.

The Daimler had to keep company with a Diamond Blue Mercedes-Benz 300SEL 6.3, which remains one of my all-time favourites. I actually wrote a comparison test between this pair of treasures in *The Best Car & Sports Driver* magazine. While the Daimler was quiet and unfussed—somehow remote—the 6.3 lived in your pulse, in something like the way my WRX does now.

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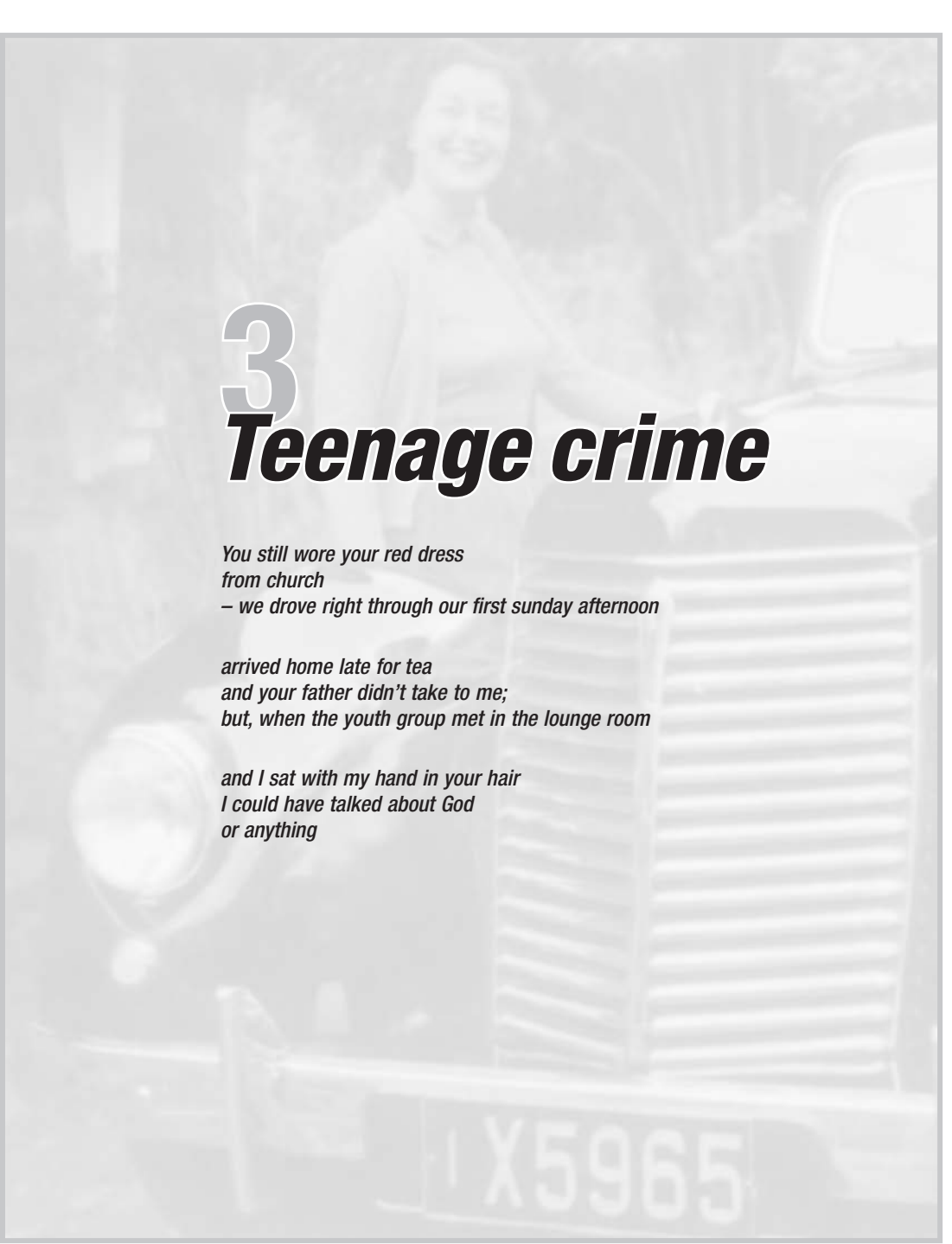

3 Teenage crime

You still wore your red dress
from church
– we drove right through our first sunday afternoon

arrived home late for tea
and your father didn't take to me;
but, when the youth group met in the lounge room

and I sat with my hand in your hair
I could have talked about God
or anything

I was fourteen when one day my father said he was going to teach me how to drive. What amazed me about this was that Dad, a retired judge from the Burmese High Court, would do anything so palpably illegal. But his thinking was simple: it is beneficial for people to be taught something well over a long period, and that's exactly what he did for me. He had taught people how to fly aeroplanes. Dad was the kind of person who thought about how things could be done well and then how they could be done better.

We took off in the cherry red Mini from our holiday house in Lorne—the last time I looked (some years ago), the sign I had hand-lettered in 1962, 'SALWEEN' after a river in Burma, was still where we had hung it—with Dad driving, up the winding road to Deans Marsh and beyond. I knew that road so well from the pushbike jaunts I had taken since 1963 that I even had names for some of the corners. There were distant views of the sea.

Somewhere near Birregurra, Dad pulled over. How it infuriated me the way he did this! Dad didn't do what most people did: indicate, put their foot on the brake, and stop. No, he did what Kevin Bartlett accused his Channel Nine Camaro of doing at Bathurst ('This car doesn't stop, it just slows down!'). He lifted his foot from the throttle and simply let the car coast to an ever-so-gradual rest.

The first few minutes were predictably painful. Dad had an exercise I had never heard of before and I'm the only person I know of to employ it since. He wanted me to learn to drive the car as slowly as possible, balancing clutch and

throttle. 'Any bloody fool can put his foot down hard,' he'd say, 'but driving really slowly takes learning.' I learnt why so many inexperienced drivers have trouble parking.

It was always going to be a long wait from Birregurra at fourteen to L-plates at seventeen. In fact, Dad did not give me many more opportunities to drive in the meanwhile, although I became expert in the art of reversing the Armstrong Siddeley, and sometimes the Mini, very fast down the drive at 3 Cochran Avenue, Camberwell, driving close to the nearest side, which I could see, so that the far side would take care of itself. (Have you ever noticed that some people cannot back in a straight line? And that everyone reverses *back*, rather than simply reversing?)

I also engaged in teenage crime. Several of my friends were (almost) equally crazy about cars. There was Michael L and someone McCarthy and others whom I have forgotten. It seemed like a simple enough plan to borrow a set of car keys and thus a car, while the unsuspecting owners slumbered in their middle-class dreams. If anything, the reality was, in my case, even easier. It was a matter of rolling the Armstrong Siddeley quietly down the drive, and then down the street, Cochran Avenue descending slightly towards the east as it distances itself from Burke Road's southward plunge to Toorak Road, Glen Iris. We used the Armstrong Siddeley, which I wouldn't let any of the others drive, to learn about 'fishtailing' in that pre-donut era. It was a painfully slow car, which was just as well.

So was the Morris 1100 owned by Mrs McCarthy. I drove it one night along Toorak Road, smack in the centre over the tramlines, between Toorak Village and Glenferrie Road. It was flat-knackered, the speedo indicating 76 at 3 a.m.

Bill L's (Bill being Michael's father) government-supplied white HR 161 Special was significantly swifter. Neither Bill nor the State Electricity Commission knew that his Holden would be driven one night by three miscreant teenagers. I don't remember trying its top speed but it fishtailed more effectively than the Armstrong Siddeley.

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, we were never sprung. Later, I believe Michael L turned to a life which seemed to involve more organised and lucrative crime, also involving motor cars, but I was never sure. But he did seem to get surprisingly rich quite quickly, apparently something to do with driving cars interstate and selling them at a big profit. When I had adolescent boys in the house myself decades later, I always hid the car keys.

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I came up with a plan to get my licence early. The legal age in Tasmania was seventeen. Why couldn't I go over there, using my grandparents' 12 Clarence Street, Launceston address and get a licence? Amazingly, Dad agreed. But first I had to spend some time with the L-plates behind the wheel of either the Armstrong Siddeley or the bottle-green Peugeot 404 which had replaced the Mini. I did this, then headed down to Launceston and took some driving lessons.

A young man from the driving school rocked up in a white HR Holden Special 161 manual. I practised hill starts in Launceston where you really do need to slip the clutch in first gear to get the revs right to take off on one of those surprisingly steep slopes. (What did they do in Geelong for a hill start test?) As for the car itself, I was quite familiar with it after my experience in Bill L's similar machine. You know, I never minded an HR Holden, especially after it gave me that ticket to ride! After just a couple of lessons, my amiable instructor organised the test. It was a breeze and much of the stuff I knew remained undemonstrated.

Freedom was then mine in the guise of a dove-grey 1955 Vauxhall Velox with red seats—my grandfather's pride and joy, which had probably never been over 55 miles per hour. That is, until I got my hands on its slippery, thin-rimmed steering wheel.

My very first experience in it quickly became frightening. My cousin David had his mother's 1960 Hillman Minx and we ventured to the Longford racing circuit (a public road, of course) to see which car was quicker. Going downhill towards a sharp bend, the Vauxhall's brake pedal went instantly to the floor with no retardation. None. Somehow I got around the corner. Later it transpired that the wrong brake fluid was used when the car had been serviced a few days earlier. But I'm still trying to work out why the problem didn't manifest itself immediately.

Of course, even at the best of times a 1955 Vauxhall Velox doesn't stop very well. Or go very hard. Or go around corners

quickly. At speeds over an indicated 70 miles per hour, it is also fairly difficult to keep pointed straight as you bounce over back roads somewhere out of Launceston. I guess its rudimentary suspension was tuned for a load of four adults rather than one skinny, over-excited teenage speed fiend. The highest reading I saw was an even 80 (the magic number from childhood), gauged at the middle point of the speedo needle's overwrought wavering. That I didn't kill myself is some kind of wonder, all the time my grandfather trusting me in his precious car, solo, not to go beyond 50 miles per hour. What on earth was he thinking? My grandfather was not a motoring enthusiast. He had no need for speed and perhaps insufficient imagination to understand the nature of his grandson's speed lust.

I drove the Velox back to Madron, the house where I had spent a few years as a young child before we moved to Melbourne. Of course, it was no longer called that. But all the roads were full of memories; of the hubcap that departed from our Armstrong Siddeley at 70 miles per hour, of the scarlet Austin Healey, of Captain Love's green Twin Spinner Ford, of the first Volkswagen on which I ever set (astonished) eyes. I can't say that the Vauxhall was much of a companion. The body roll must have been frightening to behold. The red vinyl seats looked like leather but weren't. There were no seat belts, so whenever I drove around a right-hand corner quickly, I found myself sitting in the middle of the bench seat and leaning over to the right to continue steering. The brakes were shocking, even when they worked. (Which way would

the Velox pull this time?) But I covered hundreds of miles and went parking with a girl (red-haired Sally) for the first time. On that occasion, I almost got the car bogged, down by a river, which would have taken some explaining given I was meant to be at a concert. (We were there briefly but decided to give everyone else the slip.)

Not long after my dream of a holiday, my grandfather reported that the Vauxhall's engine inexplicably began burning oil. I felt guilty but said nothing. My father, of course, quizzed me. I was somewhat sparing with the details that constituted the truth. Sadly (and in my teenage mind the events are almost connected—that it was somehow my fault) my grandfather would only live one more year. We nearly inherited that Vauxhall but my father changed his mind, probably because we just didn't need another car. (How can you ever *not* need another car?) Perhaps, it occurs to me, he just didn't like the idea that I had thrashed it up and down both sides of the Tamar River. Perhaps he didn't want to be old like my grandfather. Somehow a Vauxhall Velox was the automotive territory of old men.

I was just seventeen but I had a driver's licence and my friends didn't. We were never quite sure of the legality of this but I got to drive in Victoria without displaying the L-plate. There were no Ps in those days. Did I show off? I most certainly did. Stupidly, I did so with my father in the front seat and my mother in the back, when I picked them up on returning from Tasmania after my grandfather's funeral. By this time I was eighteen and had a surprise for them on

the front lawn. I couldn't wait to get home to show them the Austin Sheerline that Simon Ball and I went halves in for $35 each. It had yellow New South Wales plates but no actual registration. It could reach 70 miles per hour down Pine Avenue, Camberwell at 10 p.m. on a week night. We watched the salesman's eyes shift around in his head as he told us about the car, how it had just been driven down from Sydney. He seemed pretty pleased to be selling it so easily. Even then that must have been illegal, allowing two eighteen-year-old boys to drive off in an unregistered and definitely unroadworthy old shitbox. Austin of England! No wonder the Poms are just about out of the car business. And what a weird mixture of qualities the Sheerline offered. Riding proudly at the front of its long bonnet was the same winged A for Austin sported by the Austin A30 my father owned from 1956 to 1961 (when he traded it on the cherry-red Mini). The leather seats were huge and comfortable. There was woodwork everywhere. It had a crude truck engine and a four-speed gearbox operated by one of those fashionable early 1950s column gearchanges which lacked any precision. In fact, compared with the old Armstrong Siddeley, still resident in the garage, it was a four-door truck with luxury fittings. To the best of my knowledge, Sheerlines are still not highly prized by car collectors. When new, I guess they were chiefly company cars for managing directors, occupying the same kind of niche in the market that would later be filled by Humber Super Snipes and Imperials; Britain has always been an automotive world of its own, with even

more precisely articulated social stratification than found in 1950s America during the postwar boom, when doctors drove Buicks and young families aspired first to a Chevy and then a Pontiac.

The Sheerline was a whim, an absolutely wonderful, youthful whim. What drugs were we on? None! Amazing! I already owned a car, a perfectly respectable two-tone grey 1960 Fiat 1100 (of which more later). Yet even that wasn't my first. It is in some epistemological way difficult to define what constitutes one's true first car, but convention states that it is the inaugural vehicle to carry one's own name on the registration certificate, which would have eliminated the Sheerline. Besides, that was a joint juvenile venture. The first car with my name typed on an official piece of paper was a 1957 Peugeot 403, mid-grey in colour, registered GTV 720, and the irony has only just struck me, because in 1968 GTV was more associated with Channel Nine than high performance cars. (Or have I misremembered the number plate, unconsciously dialling in later fantasies? I don't think so.)

I cannot explain to you how excited I was to get the 403. It was almost the most beautiful car on earth. Mine alone. Mine. Have a look at that dashboard, those seats. I can still smell the interior. Although I did not fully appreciate its merits at the time, the 403 was one of the world's great mid-1950s cars. *Road & Track* magazine included it in their top seven for the period. The steering was completely direct and accurate. The comfortable ride was matched by

sharp handling. You could drive a 403 virtually flat out from obscure Point A to far-flung Point B in a manner you would never have dreamt of in a contemporary Holden, say an FE. But it would be some years before I came to realise all this, behind the wheel of other men's 403s.

All was not right, though, with the Wrights' 1957 model. It was by no means right. I had owned the 403 for about a week when I realised it had consumed more than 2 pints of oil. Although it went well enough and emitted no rattles or knocks, that engine was ready for a rebuild. My father had bought the car, using what was ostensibly my money saved up in a passbook account from early childhood, from the dealership which had sold him the 404. He had trusted the salesman to find him a good one and had not bothered with any pre-purchase inspection. Well, the retired High Court judge soon came out of retirement and got on the phone to the dealer principal; we got our money back.

If I had at the time—now it was no longer mine—any quibbles about the 403's qualities, they had to do with the lack of performance. The salesman had accurately described it to Dad as a gutless 404. I guess its acceleration was about the same as my grandfather's poor old Velox (zero to 50 miles per hour: leisurely). So when my father's friend Gordon H announced he was trading his Fiat 1100 on a Fiat 125 (oh dream, the Fiat 125!), it seemed like a good opportunity. We reckoned a 1960 Fiat would perform about the same as a 403, maybe better.

It did. And that Fiat always displayed a kind of zestful, eager character. I think it punched above its weight. Despite having just 1.1 litres, its performance was similar to 1.5-litre models such as the Morris Major and Austin Lancer twins. ('Lancer is your family car answer' went the ad, but who the hell had asked the question?) The appeal of the Sheerline was its big engine, which meant speed. It also had a wooden dashboard and leather seats. But it was as if, at eighteen, I had learnt that one car is rarely enough. Or, more to the point, that one *kind* of car is never enough.

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My parents had not been amused when they saw the big Austin parked on the front lawn between the liquidambar and the path up the left-hand side of the house. Details of their displeasure have vanished but so did the car, and in very short order.

I don't believe there was any connection between my brief period of ownership of an oversize 'Austin of England' and departure from the parental home. But I think there was only a short period between these events. With my own income and not living under 'our roof', I was more or less free to begin to indulge a lifetime's addiction as fully as I could afford to. Later I would learn that if I couldn't afford it, I could just borrow. By the time I was 27, I was going bald and working two jobs to support my car-buying habit. But I'll get to 27 in a few chapters' time.

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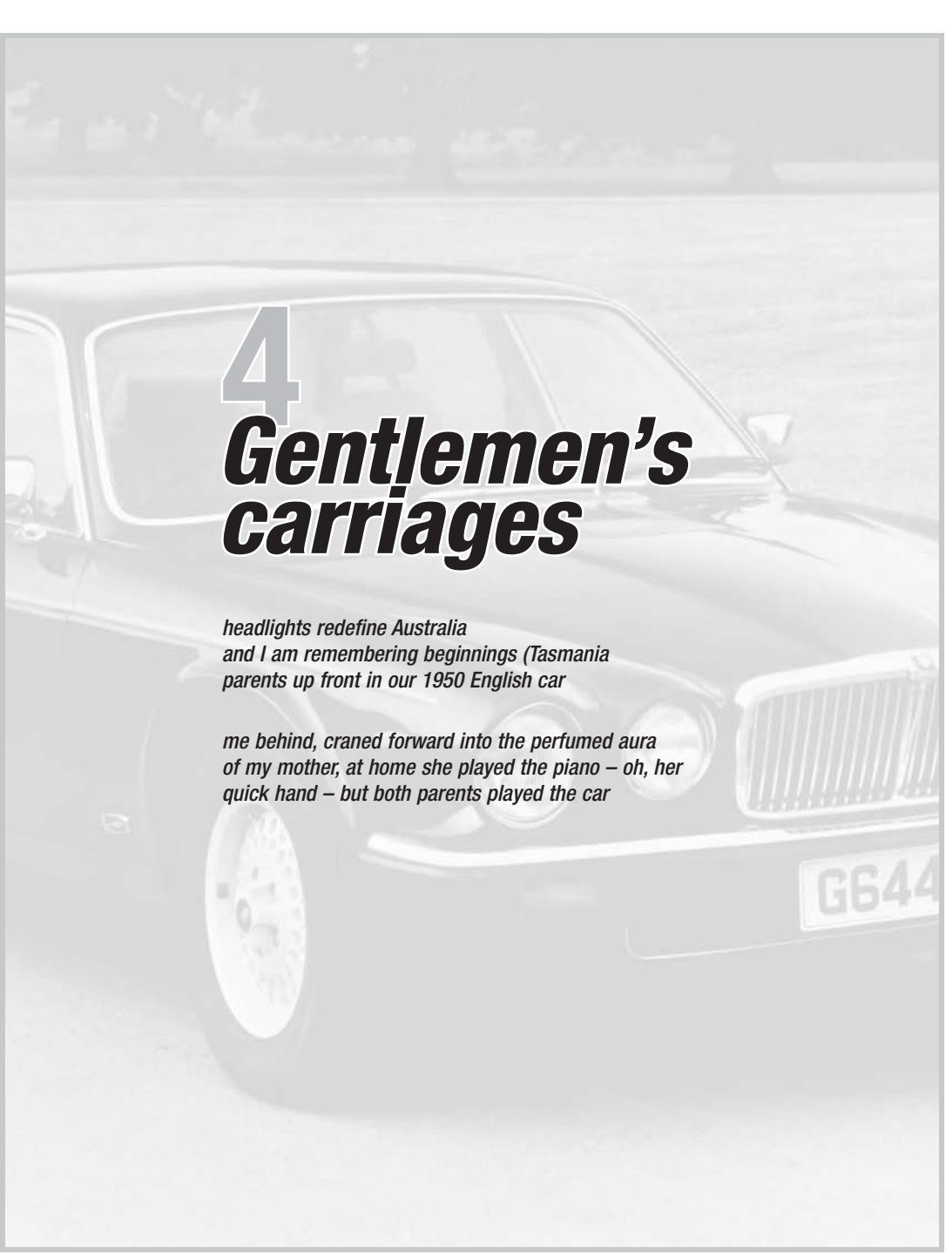

4 Gentlemen's carriages

headlights redefine Australia
and I am remembering beginnings (Tasmania
parents up front in our 1950 English car

me behind, craned forward into the perfumed aura
of my mother, at home she played the piano – oh, her
quick hand – but both parents played the car

To say that the Elephant Grey Armstrong Siddeley Sapphire 236 provokes strong memories is an understatement. The way I feel when I slip into its green driver's seat, look at the beautiful wooden dashboard, slide the choke control across to full, turn the key, push the starter and then hear that smooth old straight six start up—oh so smoothly!—is beyond a simple adjective. Memories of my parents come back to me as I recall an era when the country was closer to the city, roads were quieter, there were mile posts, and the Armstrong Siddeley was one of the finest and most exclusive cars money could buy. (We used to call it 'the Armstrong', never 'the Siddeley'. But aficionados only ever abbreviate the double-barrelled name to 'Siddeley'.)

On 31 July 2008 Jennie and I embarked on the Armstrong Siddeley Outback Tour in Athol Bo Diddley, our rare 'Baby Sapphire'. It would prove to be the case that my experience would be more enjoyable than hers. On more than one occasion Jen asked various other participants what exactly was the appeal of driving huge distances in an uncomfortable old car. She obviously had a point. But to have taken our BMW X5 would hardly have been in the spirit of what was only really an adventure because it was undertaken in vehicles in which such a journey might have been demanding even when they were new.

We take so much for granted in this postmodern era. Even the idea of a car without air-conditioning (especially north of about Wollongong) seems strange to many. But I remember when the brakes of a brand new Holden

would fade if the car was driven at any kind of speed down a mountain road, when small cars battled to better 100 kilometres per hour, when heaters were not standard equipment, and when you could hit your head on the wooden dashboard of the Armstrong Siddeley when your mother braked suddenly on the way to school (doing 70 miles per hour, one time, I remember, down Ferndale Road, Glen Iris) because seat belts were the stuff of aviation not motoring.

I love doing this kind of exercise. When I am driving the Sapphire 236, I am in the mid-1950s not the 21st century. I judge the car's performance not against more modern machines but in the context of its contemporaries. So, to be specific, I think how superior the 236 is to an FE Holden and how much better it handles and stops than a 1956 Ford Customline. And when Penn Bradly slips past doing maybe 80 miles per hour in his gorgeous Sand over Sable Star Sapphire, his car whispering effortlessly while ours revs hard even at 65, I decide that this is not the finest car Armstrong Siddeley Motors produced.

Anyway, we completed the Armstrong Siddeley Outback Tour without too many dramas beyond a tendency to overheat and a minor electrical fire. A direct consequence of the former—exacerbated by the latter—was that the interior of the car was, for Jennie, almost unbearably hot. I had the chance to try the two other Baby Sapphires and, although both were a bit warm, they weren't as thermally challenging as our 236.

One of the smaller Sapphires was a 234 (named Gloria) and the other a 236 manual with overdrive. I was thus able to confirm my suspicions about the weirdness of Armstrong Siddeley product planning in the immediate postwar era. But, in some respects, the quandary in which the old firm found itself was common to British car manufacturers. Austerity prevailed with wartime measures continuing much longer into British peacetime than in Australia. It must have been easy to design rather too much modesty and conservatism into cars conceived for the late 1940s and early 1950s, in marked contrast to what was happening in the booming United States. Let's consider the case of Armstrong Siddeley Motors (ASM).

Located in Parkside, Coventry, only a very short distance from the Jaguar factory at Browns Lane, Armstrong Siddeley emerged from World War II in a position of considerable strength and looking to the future. The parent company, Hawker Siddeley, had produced a number of successful fighter planes that had seen distinguished service during the war. While most British firms had contributed to the war effort, few would acquire such rich associations with the Battle of Britain as ASM.

This was the first of the British manufacturers to show a range of all-new cars designed for the postwar era. Many makers just reheated their pre-war offerings (and maybe added some salt and pepper) but ASM took a big punt on the new. On 11 May 1945 the Hurricane two-door drophead coupe and the Lancaster four-door saloon were announced, both

named after the company's aircraft in what would become an Armstrong Siddeley tradition. These models combined a modern overhead valve 16 RAC horsepower, a 2.0-litre, six-cylinder engine with elegant razor-edge styled coachwork, a beautifully crafted and classically English interior, the choice of conventional four-speed manual transmission or the innovative Wilson pre-selector arrangement controlling the same number of ratios, and outstanding road manners (the term 'dynamics' yet to have come into currency in 1946). But high performance in its own right was not on their agenda and, at the time, it was not considered necessary for a 'quality' car to be especially fast; it was not *what* the machine would do that mattered, but *how*. Armstrong Siddeley's priorities were smooth, quiet, refined running, comfortable and stylish accommodation, understated elegance and what would today be termed excellent dynamics. Where something of a 'Flash Harry' image might attach to the Jaguars that emerged from Browns Lane, no-one could level that slur at the products of Parkside.

The 16 hp Armstrong Siddeleys were certainly not conceived as sporting cars. From the time of their launch, there was a widespread feeling among industry insiders that they were underpowered, that ASM had gone the wrong way in a kind of hysteria of austerity. The wood and leather was evident, but these cars were less powerful than many upmarket 1930s machines. The disparaging term 'gutless wonders' was used retrospectively by John Densham, who was ASM's Experimental Engineer from the late 1940s until

the mid-1950s. Even the revised 18 hp unit, introduced with the Whitley model at the 1949 Earls Court Motor Show and standardised across the range, was only ever going to be a stopgap measure. And Donald Bastow, author of *W.O. Bentley—Engineer*, wrote:

> Armstrong Siddeley's immediate post-war car, which was in production very quickly, had a 2 litre six cylinder push rod engine and three body styles of which the roomiest was the Lancaster Saloon, a four door, 4–5 seater. It was generally accepted in the industry that the engine was not powerful enough for the size and weight of car.

Why is Armstrong Siddeley mentioned in a biography of W.O. Bentley? The following W.O. Bentley episode confers no glory on Armstrong Siddeley. He was employed there as a consultant and his brief was to develop an all-new car. Internal memoranda proudly described this as the 'AS Bentley'. But his contract was not renewed, probably because his ideas were deemed too radical and too expensive. Cyril Siddeley seems to have held the view that Bentley did not understand 'our customers'.

Meanwhile, Bentley had overseen an entire new engine, which was very similar in key elements to the 2.5-litre six-cylinder unit that powered the first postwar Lagonda 2.5-litre saloon. This new engine was a 3.0-litre twin overhead camshaft design, which gave a top speed of 95 miles per hour when fitted to an 18 hp chassis. Had that engine been

applied to the Whitley, Lancaster and Hurricane from, say, 1950, those stylish cars would surely have continued to sell in strong numbers until an all-new model was ready. With a lusty 3.0-litre engine instead of the old 2.3 and the other costs of the vehicle well and truly amortised, one would have thought ASM could have brought a revitalised range to market at a sharp price. By 1952, the Whitley was not only looking like yesteryear's car but it was significantly low on performance in Jaguar's brave new Mark VII world.

As for the Sapphire, Bentley had nothing to do with it. The fact that ASM was able to conceive such a fine car without his input merely invited reflection on what might have been achieved had he been given the opportunity to lead the team. (I'm imagining a seriously high-performance car with even more rakish lines than the Sapphire.) That the Sapphire, and its (supposedly interim) successor, the Star Sapphire, were as good as they were, is the best single aspect of ASM's postwar history.

In the decade from 1955 to 1965 the British automotive industry changed dramatically, but for those who cared to read it, the writing was on the wall before 1950. Several small but strong manufacturers had either dropped out of the car business altogether or been subsumed within larger companies. Names with a proud history vanished from the new car price lists in the back of *The Autocar* and *The Motor*. Lea Francis, Daimler, Lanchester, Lagonda, Alvis and (arguably saddest of all) Armstrong Siddeley had all made 'quality' cars but due to varying combinations of

circumstances retired hurt from the business. At ten years of age, I was very upset by the demise of the firm which had made my father's (our) car. It is easy to say that they were victims of competition from stronger rivals, notably Jaguar and, at the top end, Rolls-Royce, but there was more to it than that in most cases, and especially where Armstrong Siddeley was concerned.

By the end of 1949 ASM had a good range of designs, all built on the same chassis and featuring similar styling themes. The Typhoon fixed hardtop coupe joined the range for that model year. Below the waist it was identical to the Hurricane. There was also a pair of coupe utilities, one being an early crew-cab type, which were aimed primarily at the Australian market. At the 1949 Earls Court Motor Show an entirely new four-light saloon of close-coupled design, the Whitley, made its debut. It boasted a larger 2.3-litre (18 RAC hp) engine, which became standard across the range. This unit was principally intended to improve torque and the 18 hp Armstrong Siddeleys exhibited outstanding top gear flexibility and excellent acceleration in the most commonly used speed range of about 30–65 miles per hour. Brake horsepower climbed from 70 to 75 and top speed was also up by 5, from 75 to 80. With taller gearing the cars would probably have had sufficient power to go slightly faster, but top speed was of little consequence to British motorists in the austere early postwar era. Nevertheless, they were still underpowered when compared with rivals from Jaguar, Alvis and Daimler, among others.

Did the Armstrong Siddeley management have inside information about Jaguar's forthcoming Mark VII saloon? Would they have cared? The 18 hp range had to soldier on until the arrival of the brilliant Sapphire, which was shown in 1952. Comparisons were made between the two fast and elegant Coventry luxury saloons. However there were, in the end, many more differences than similarities. Where the Jaguar could be seen as wearing its twin overhead camshaft heart on its sleeve, the Armstrong Siddeley Sapphire was more restrained. Indeed, Armstrong Siddeley had deliberately failed to maximise its power output, in deference to its traditional customers who were not interested, Cyril Siddeley believed, in buying an overtly sporty machine. So the old thinking lingered on and, in a sense, the Sapphire was not intended to be a rival for the Jaguar. But it was a superior car in most measurable respects and had nothing of the Jag's 'Flash Harry' image attached to it.

With just 120 brake horsepower from its 3.4-litre engine, the Sapphire hid some of its light under a bushel. But the US export market was important to most British carmakers in the 1950s and the Sapphire was given twin carburettors and 150 horsepower for that context: it was warmly welcomed, despite the fact that, as one contemporary US road test noted, there were no traditional Armstrong Siddeley customers on that side of the Atlantic. But it would have made better marketing sense to have given the Sapphire all the help it could get from the start and, if management had been keen

to get 120 brake horsepower for their new car, what on earth could be wrong with going for the whole 150?

Even though the company had a strong following in Britain and understood its customers, the cars themselves were good enough to win over the hearts and minds of a diverse range of buyers—one US enthusiast was Le Mans racer Briggs Cunningham. The Sapphire sold strongly in the United States until about 1955.

ASM executives remained deeply conscious of what they saw as their traditional domestic market customers and this had never been so apparent as it became in 1955 when two different versions of an all-new, smaller Siddeley were introduced. One used a four-cylinder version of the new Sapphire engine, the other a reworked 85 brake horsepower edition of the old 18 hp unit.

Was there nervousness at Parkside about these cars? Certainly they represented quite a departure. It is a little difficult otherwise to understand why they acquired the name Sapphire, just like their much larger and more expensive sibling. Management wanted the success of the larger car to rub off on the new smaller models. This necessitated a renaming of the 'real' Sapphire which became the Sapphire 346, following the logic applied to the new cars—3.4 litres, six cylinders. But the public quickly and disaparagingly christened them the 'baby Sapphires'. Effectively, ASM had redefined itself as the Sapphire car company!

A quick review of the specifications shows Armstrong Siddeley's thoroughly confused (and even more confusing)

product planning. The 234/236 models were smaller than previous Armstrong Siddeleys and rather more austere, while their styling was, from any perspective, unusual if not downright risky. It is sometimes said that the front and rear sections of the car were the work of different designers. Confusing too was the marketing strategy as Armstrong Siddeley Motors went for a world first, not in creating four- and six-cylinder versions of the same basic car, but in making the four-cylinder variant the high-performance model. Go figure, as the Americans might or might not have already been saying in 1955!

Part of the idea was that the four-cylinder Sapphire 234 might bring a new kind of customer to the marque, for this was intended to be a luxury sports sedan. Maximum power of the hotrodded four-cylinder version of the Sapphire engine was 120 brake horsepower, just five fewer than delivered by the Sapphire 346. There was a tachometer incorporated in the instrument panel. The 234's top speed of 100 miles per hour was accompanied by lively acceleration. Overall performance was comparable to the Jaguar 2.4.

And what of the Sapphire 236, to whom was it intended to appeal? This car was aimed at what the Armstrong Siddeley management saw as its traditional client. The 236 was intended to be a gentleman's carriage—dignified, smooth, not too fast, understated. You absolutely could not imagine this car being sold in the United States. It went on sale after the Chevrolet had been equipped with a high

compression V8—and the Chevrolet was at the *bottom* of General Motors' pecking order.

The 236 became the first production car to offer the option of Lockheed Manumatic transmission. Radically new in 1955, Manumatic was dead within a few years as real automatic transmissions came to provide the alternative to a clutch pedal and gear lever. This novel arrangement dispensed with a clutch pedal but still required the driver to change gears via a conventional floorshift. By pressing down on the knob during changes the driver actuated the clutch. To engage first or reverse, the driver simply pushed the lever. The change itself was identical to that of the manual car. Overdrive was offered as an option with the manual transmission and the Manumatic but all 234s had a clutch pedal. Perhaps the single most remarkable difference was that the 236 did not get a tachometer. There was no empty space where that dial might have been fitted but, rather, a different treatment had been devised comprising a fussy arrangement of lights and switches. This must have cost plenty for such low-volume cars. But it reflected concerns that Armstrong Siddeley's conservative clientele would have disapproved of so overtly sporty a gesture as the inclusion of a rev counter!

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And so back to the 2008 Outback Tour. Using tyres smaller in diameter than the original crossplies, my 236 required almost 4250 rpm in top gear for a genuine 70 miles per

hour (113 km/h). By contrast, 234-Gloria would be doing 93 miles per hour at the same engine revolutions in overdrive top, which represents a colossal disparity. ('But you weren't actually doing 93 miles per hour, were you?' asked anxious owner, Richard Tonkin. I wasn't.) While Gloria dispatched western Queensland effortlessly at 65–70 miles per hour, Athol Bo Diddley ran hot and uncomfortably close to its maximum speed of just 78 miles per hour—it might be 81–82 with the right size tyres. As for the 236 equipped with overdrive, it felt like a different car from mine, thanks not to the presence of a clutch pedal but the additional gear ratios. It would not be capable of reaching a speed anywhere near 93 miles per hour (let alone the 234's genuine 100!), but at a true 70 it required just 3000 rpm. Incidentally, the combination of Manumatic and overdrive was also on offer. And, at least in theory, customers could specify their 234 or 236 with the Wilson preselector (always called 'preselectric' by Armstrong Siddeley) gearbox.

With the 20/20 vision of hindsight, it is quite clear that the 236 was a silly mistake on several levels. The first was timing. ASM introduced just the 236 at the 1955 Earls Court Motor Show. Witnesses, including those from within the bosom of the company, report how embarrassing the response was to the new car. While crowds thronged to the Jaguar 2.4, the 236 attracted negligible interest. By the time the 234 was introduced the following year, much of the damage had been done.

Perhaps most of those few buyers who did choose a smaller Armstrong Siddeley initially misunderstood the differences between the pair. Early sales favoured the six-cylinder car but quickly petered out, and the 236 was dead before the end of 1957, an impossibly short production run. The 234 soldiered on into 1958.

The 236 was intended for a customer who had become an endangered species. It was neither fish nor fowl. That gentleman depicted in the advertisements was shopping elsewhere. (Just imagine going to all that trouble *not* to incorporate a tachometer—or, as the English liked to call it, a 'rev counter'—in the 236!) In terms of luxurious accommodation, a Rover 90 was preferable. Where there was evidence of skimping in the 234/236, such as open cubby holes instead of proper gloveboxes, the Rover exhibited magnificent detailing. The Armstrong Siddeleys handled better and had the same kind of engineering depth but they did not exude equal quality; at the lower end of the 'quality' car market this was vital to sales success. In addition, demand for a quality car with average performance was already disappearing (unless it happened to be a Rover for the local doctor). Besides, the 234/236 shape had none of the elegance of the Whitley it was misguidedly intended to replace. You could call the Rover staid but stately; the Armstrong Siddeley Sapphire 236 was merely staid.

There was no doubt that the 234/236 models displayed better handling balance than the 2.4-litre Jaguar with its too-narrow rear track, but first you have to get prospective

customers to drive the car. Perhaps, if ASM had produced only the 234 and not yielded to the suggestion of one of the ASM directors that he should be able to wear his Homburg in the rear seat (a request that was said to have led to a raising of the roofline), sales might have been better. If the 234 could have been shown at Earls Court in 1955, with a lower roofline and sporting the optional wire wheels (tellingly, not offered on the 236), just maybe it would have attracted the interest it deserved. Gloria offers a great driving experience for a mid-1950s model.

And so, somewhere on the long road to Longreach, I arrived at the reluctant conclusion that Jennie and I were travelling in the car that, more than any other, drove ASM out of the automotive business. In the company of those Sapphires, Star Sapphires, and Gloria, ours was absolutely the poor relation.

While history records that the Manumatic did not become the new style of gearbox, observers of the automotive industry will be struck by its similarity to some 21st-century transmissions, where there is no clutch pedal and the gear lever itself is used to engage the clutch electronically. It's a case of going forwards into Armstrong Siddeley's past.

In a way, though, these smaller Sapphires represented a distraction from Armstrong Siddeley's main game, which was, and would remain, the Sapphire. It arrived just two seasons after the Jaguar Mark VII and it redefined Armstrong Siddeley's luxury/performance balance, especially in twin-carburettor 150 horsepower guise. By 1960 when manufacture

ceased, Jaguar still persisted with a much more refined and powerful version of the car introduced a decade earlier. This was the Mark IX, which by most objective criteria was no match for a Star Sapphire. Absolute performance was a little better, but handling and quality certainly did not match the Armstrong Siddeley standard.

It is even more revelatory to compare the progress of the big Jaguars and Armstrong Siddeleys through the 1950s. In 1950 Parkside still had its 18 hp models and these were clearly outclassed by the new Jaguar Mark VII. But consider the progress that took Armstrong Siddeley from the 1950 Whitley to the 1959 Star Sapphire and contrast that with the evolution of the Mark VII, which was outstandingly advanced at the time of its launch, to the Mark IX which was essentially rather more of the same but with higher performance and disc brakes.

Where the smaller models damaged Armstrong Siddeley's bottom line, exactly the reverse occurred at Jaguar. The Mark II revision to the 2.4/3.4 Litre cars was extremely effective in translating Jaguar's proud sports car record into the saloon market. By contrast, the 234 and 236 models were discontinued after just three largely unsuccessful years. The last batch of 234s were discounted heavily in order to sell them. As former Armstrong Siddeley salesman, Geoff Owen, has noted in his memoir *Turning Back the Clock*, a 234 (its gawkiness notwithstanding) at the same price as the mass-produced MG Magnette was a remarkable bargain. There

can be little doubt that ASM lost a great deal of money on the entire exercise.

The failure of the smaller Sapphires probably precipitated the decision to cease car manufacture. It was already becoming difficult for smaller makers as the international industry began to form itself into increasingly larger conglomerates. For a maker to move from one main model line to two and then have the second one effectively fail in the market would obviously be expensive. A total of 1406 (806 of which were 234s) were produced.

There was just one more new model to come, although others were in the planning process. The beautiful Star Sapphire with a reworked 4.0-litre version of the existing six-cylinder engine, running through a Borg-Warner automatic gearbox, was introduced at the 1958 Earls Court Motor Show, where it won a gold medal in the 1300 to 4000 category from the (already anachronistically named) Institute of British Carriage and Automobile Manufacturers. The Star Sapphire was in fact a sublime gentleperson's carriage.

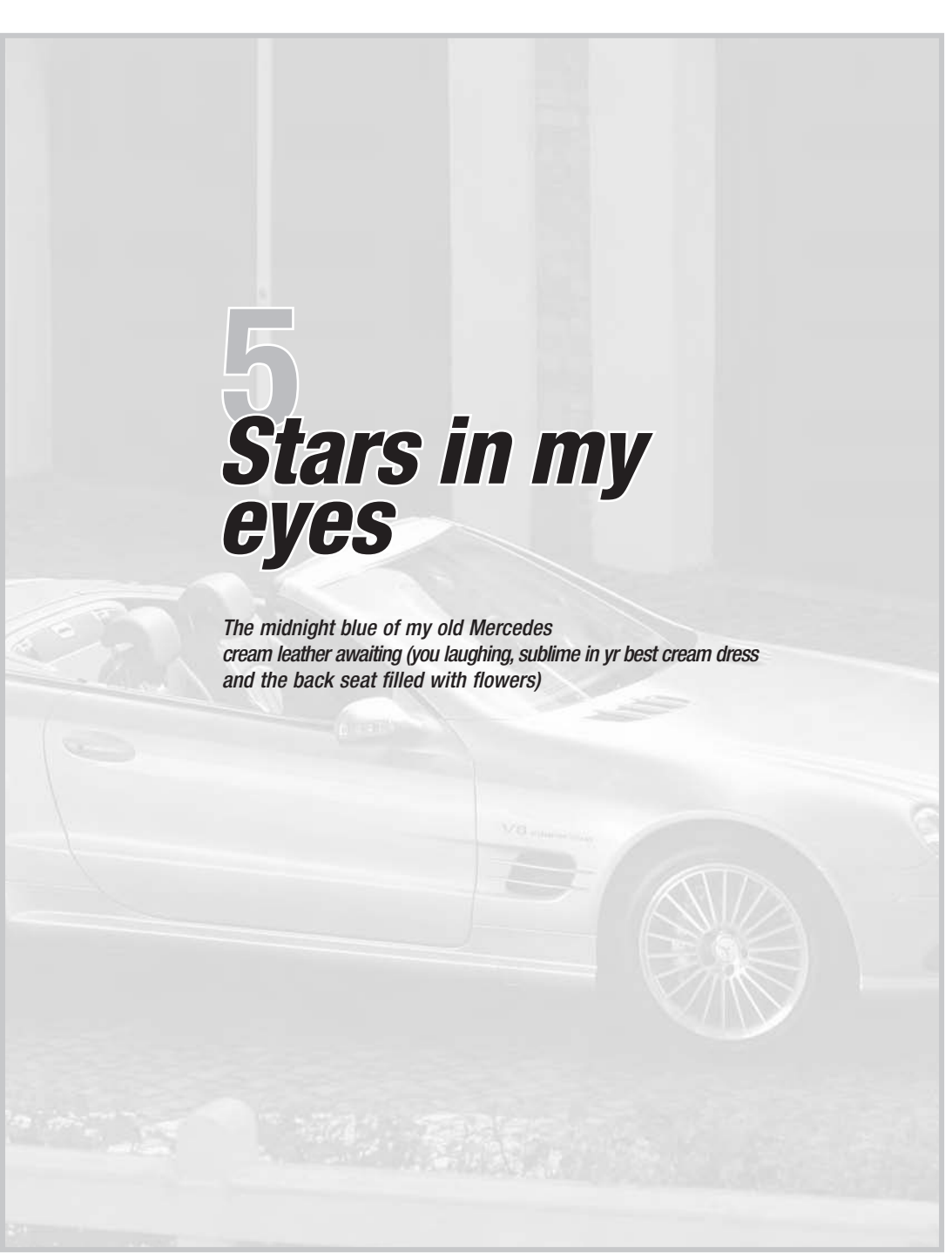
A total of 981 Stars, including 77 Limousines and one prototype quad-headlight Mark II model, were produced before car manufacture ceased on 31 July 1960. Sales were not up to expectation and Hawker-Siddeley decided to focus on its main game, the aviation industry. Years later, the view among former Armstrong Siddeley engineers seems to have been that the success of Jaguar's cars and the marque's wonderful XK engine, with all its Le Mans heritage, were what really killed ASM.

Regardless, there is almost universal agreement that Armstrong Siddeleys were mostly excellent vehicles. The 234/236 models were confused in identity because of poor product planning but the original Sapphire and its Star Sapphire descendant were marvellous motor cars, much cherished by their owners and likely to be valued highly by forthcoming generations.

Certainly Armstrong Siddeleys were subtler and more discreet cars than their Browns Lane rivals—more of an acquired taste. They were possessed of superior driving dynamics compared to most rivals (including Jaguar) and at the same time they exuded a special kind of English charm redolent of the coach-building era. So, in the final analysis, an award to the Star Sapphire from the Institute of British Carriage and Automobile Manufacturers was a perfect match. When I feel disappointment about the failings of my Elephant Grey 236, I take comfort from this bigger Armstrong Siddeley picture.

5 Stars in my eyes

The midnight blue of my old Mercedes
cream leather awaiting (you laughing, sublime in yr best cream dress
and the back seat filled with flowers)



At age nine, in 1959, I began reading *Wheels* magazine. The gorgeous Mercedes-Benz 220S Coupe appeared in the very first issue I saw. With its gracious curves flowing back from the proud radiator grille, this car made a deeper impression on me than the numerous others that filled the magazine; voluptuous was the word but I couldn't reach it at nine. So when a Cabriolet variant of that same model went under the hammer at Shannons' inaugural Brisbane International Motor Show auction in February 2008, I was transported back 48-plus years. Why was I not surprised when the maroon Cabriolet raced past its reserve to sell for $170,000?

Before I read about the 220S Coupe I was already half in love with the big 300S pillarless limo, just about the only car on the road that my English father would concede as being significantly superior to his own Armstrong Siddeley. Despite a body shape that dated back to the early 1950s, by the end of that decade the flagship Mercedes sedan still looked gorgeous. One of my mother's friends, Nan Smith, had one—cream with rich red leather, maybe three years old. In December 1962 her husband traded in the big 300 without telling her, on a new American Ford Fairlane, a surprise Christmas present. Well, it certainly was a surprise. New, as Nan already knew and as my parents would use this occasion to teach me, is not always better. I had never even ridden in her 'Adenauer Mercedes'. It was at about this time that the 600 Grosser was introduced, an unimaginably grand and plush machine, rival to the Rolls-Royce. I had a burgundy

Corgi scale model of the Pullman limousine edition, with yellow seats. Because it would otherwise have been too big, this 600 (the Pullman version) came out in smaller scale than Corgi's norm. I also had a dark grey Dinky 220SE. Actually, I've still got both, as well as a cream Corgi 220SE coupe. The fact that Mercedes-Benz was such a favourite for the die-cast industry suggests the marque's growing status in the 1960s. (By contrast, there were very few Armstrong Siddeleys offered in scale form between 1950 and 1960.)

The first one-to-one Mercedes I experienced from the inside was the 220 'finny' (a nickname it acquired retrospectively when fins had declined from favour). By the time I came to drive a neighbour's 220S in 1968, I was already familiar with the effortless way these cars covered rough roads and dispatched corners. I loved the white steering wheel and looking out over the three-pointed star. There was magic in that curious vertical speedometer with its moving column of colour, especially as it climbed towards the magic 100 (*miles* per hour).

In the early 1960s the 220SE was clearly the standout luxury sedan for discerning enthusiasts. The added 'E' stood for *Einspritz* (fuel injection). Although not the fastest four-door on the market, the 220SE offered tangibly superior quality and the height of European styling fashion with its vertically arranged headlights and gestural tailfins. Easy victory in 1961 in the second Armstrong 500 (forerunner to the Bathurst 500-mile race and later Bathurst 1000) did its image no harm whatsoever. John Youl had been leading

the previous year's race by several Gippsland miles when his 220SE rolled. Its patented in-built safety cage doubtless contributed to his lack of serious injury because roll cages and full harness seatbelts weren't part of the deal in 1960.

I spent plenty of time as a passenger in these sedans. One of my grown-up Tasmanian cousins bought a cream 220S in about 1966. Hartwell L, father of a friend, had a dark grey 220SE in 1967 (second car, an EH Premier). I still remember staying at their house in the Dandenongs in the winter of, I think, 1966, when it snowed. (A red Holden HR Premier cruises down that stretch of memory lane, a car just glimpsed. I hadn't seen a red one before so it must have been 1966 and just a few months after the HR's debut. It's funny how such things stick in your mind when you are a juvenile car tragic.)

In 1963 Daimler-Benz delighted enthusiasts with two very different but equally impressive new cars. The so-called Pagoda Roof 230SL remains a masterpiece of coupe design, while the 600 Grosser ended forever any claim Rolls-Royce had of making the finest car in the world. Journalist Jerry Sloniger in his report for *Wheels* quipped that the chauffeur would have to be willing to lift the bonnet manually (as power assistance was supplied for virtually every other function). Both the 230SL and the 600 were unmistakably and indelibly Mercedes.

Of the numerous Mercedes I have owned, four stand out in ways which, taken together, explain the special allure of the marque. Oh the first! It was a 1972 300SEL 6.3 in

Diamond Blue with cream leather and lavish woodwork. I fell in love on the spot. The performance was electrifying, while the fuel consumption was, well, attention-getting. Here surely was the world's sweetest hotrod to make a mockery of crude local muscle cars that presumed comparison. The air suspension delivered a beautifully soft ride but the 6.3 was still a driver's car with a penchant for final oversteer, and it did not suffer fools gladly. When you really hooked in, as I did, for example, in the Collingrove hill-climb stage of the 1991 Dutton's Grand Prix Rally, the loaded swing axle would tuck under to produce sharp oversteer. Of all the cars I've sold, this is among the ones I miss most. Actually, I owned it twice. The dealer had promised me that if I wasn't happy he would take it back for what I'd paid ($15,000). After some weeks, worried about the vagaries of its air suspension and the way the car dragged its tail up my unsealed drive, I changed my mind. Later, seeing it still there unsold at the dealership and with the story that its suspension had been fixed, I succumbed again. What other car could I buy that would stir the soul like this one for just $15,000?

I wrote this editorial in *The Best Car and Sports Driver* magazine which reflects the way I felt at the time of my initial purchase:

> I have added to my almost embarrassingly long list a car which excites me more than any previous conveyance on which I've duly paid the transfer or initial registration. Let's call it Car 71.

Not surprising, I guess, that Car 71 should electrify my spirit, making that first journey home one cooling Friday night more urgent (not in speed but in sheer desire to get home to share the news). Not surprising in the case of someone suffering a disease which consists in owning characterful and sometimes downright odd vehicles. But I was surprised by the level of excitement. After all, having bought so many cars before, driving home on a Friday night in something different to call my own was no novel experience. Believe me, in this case it's the car that's novel. Cast your mind back to 1968 if your biographical data permit so long a leap of memory. A fast car then was an XT Falcon GT or a Holden Monaro GTS 327. Further into Fantasyland were those dreamweaving Ferraris and Lamborghinis which melded phenomenal performance with minuscule usability. Everything seriously fast as in sub-17 second quarter-mile times and a top speed beyond 120 (yes those numbers looked formidable 23 years ago!) was overtly sporting. In 1968 a Q-car was a Falcon GT sans the stripes and decals or—at a more upmarket level—an HK Holden with the 5.0-litre Chevy engine and two-speed Powerglide tranny on the tree. And who would have credited the boxy little Alfa Giulia Super, radically equipped with a five-speed gearbox and discs all round, with a top speed beyond the old ton, or believed that the equally angular Fiat 125 sedan would produce an 18.2 standing quarter mile from 1608 cubic centimetres worth of twin

cam four, redlining (was it at 6250 rpm?) in top at 99-point something miles per hour and sounding a billion lire?

The Datsun 1600 rewrote the rules for cheap Japanese cars with a 19.0 quarter, peak speed of 60 miles per hour in second gear up Anderson Street hill on the eastern edge of the serene Royal Botanic Gardens in Henry Bolte's serene, largely philistine and impenetrably conservative Melbourne. (The 1600 worked well at Mount Panorama, too.)

As for Renault's 16TS, that consummate cruiser with the truncated wagon coachwork, it remained a year down our calendar, when newly denimed, long-haired hippy boy racers like me would drool over the Valiant Pacer. Abbey Road was the street running through one's dreams and an adhesive flower bloomed incongruously on the duck egg blue bootlid of my FJ Holden . . .

That was the era of Car 71's debut. From memory one test recorded a standing quarter number of 14.1 with a symmetrical 141 mph top speed, while the worst numbers I've seen are 15.1 and 131. The manufacturer claimed a maximum of 127 miles per hour.

There were four doors, a big practical boot, copious leather and lavish dark wood even on the inner door frames. Aristocratic, disdainful of demeanour, possessed of a severe and precise elegance, this sedan put all other Q-cars of its time in the shade. Had one found its way to Mount Panorama and run reliably in competent hands,

> it would have left the Monaros and Falcon GTs in its oversteering wake.

At the time I also owned a 1977 Daimler Double Six Vanden Plas, so a comparison in the magazine was irresistible.

> Strictly speaking, the XJ12 and the 6.3 were never direct rivals. But looking back it's difficult to think of any other cars of the era which come close to them in terms of performance, refinement and luxury. BMW's 3.0Si could almost equal the 6.3 on acceleration but lacked both lowdown torque and that supercar effortlessness. It was more of a full-blooded sports sedan than a luxury limousine and was never offered with an automatic transmission.

The 6.3 was not a consequence of the normal product planning process that applied at Daimler-Benz in the 1960s. It owes its existence to the inspiration of two gifted individuals, Erich Waxenberger and Rudi Uhlenhaut. Rudi was never one to hang around when it came to exploring the performance of various Mercedes. As chief engineer, he took great pleasure in driving every model to its limits. I like to imagine that it was just after a hearty lunch of wurst and sauerkraut, and maybe just the one stein of Löwenbrau, that Rudi Uhlenhaut experienced one of the greatest practical jokes ever inflicted upon an automotive chief engineer.

Many of the facts have faded into the sepia of history. So we don't know the colour of the car, but doubtless it looked to Rudi Uhlenhaut precisely like any other 300SEL. He might have had a flicker of curiosity about Erich Waxenberger's reason for asking his boss to test the car, but there he was in the fat leather seat and his right foot hard on the throttle.

Rudi's first surprise would have been the screech of tyres, accompanied by a roar unlike anything ever produced by the 2.8-litre straight six. The smell of well-smoked rubber would have been next. All this would have happened within five seconds and the car was already doing 80 kilometres per hour with the wheels having only just ceased to spin. Had there been enough road, he would have seen the speedometer indicate upwards of 220 kilometres per hour, which was a seriously high top speed in the mid-1960s. (The Jaguar E-Type only achieved 240 kilometres per hour in 1961 after special fettling.)

Erich Waxenberger's great moment of glory as a development engineer had come. His genius as a racer and his creativity as an engineer melded in the creation of this astonishing work of automotive art.

How was Uhlenhaut to know that Waxenberger's pet project was to stuff the glorious 6.3-litre V8 (created to propel dignitaries in the 600 Grosser) under the bonnet of the 600-kilogram lighter 300SEL?

How, in turn, was Waxenberger to know that Rudi would say, yes, let's build this car and that the Daimler-Benz board would agree?

The industry probably has plenty of similar stories, but many of them are never made public. The 300SEL 6.3 was the first car to upset the carefully worked out Mercedes model coding system. By rights, it should have been the 630SEL, but there was a problem in the gargantuan guise of the 600. What a great car to upset Teutonic logic! The 6.3 was sold between 1968 and 1972. In its own way, it was a kind of sedan counterpart to the Gullwing and it anticipated the fabulous AMG Mercedes of the current era.

You might imagine—as I had—that the 6.3's spiritual successor, the 450SEL 6.9, would be even faster. In terms of top speed I'm sure it was, but the 1979 car could not match its ancestor on acceleration, at least not at (Australian) legal speeds. The huge V8 was a little tamed by the presence of a torque converter and just three forward gear ratios. But it was still satisfactorily rapid, gulped less fuel than the 6.3 and was phenomenally comfortable on a long trip. If I would have loved to unleash the 6.3 on the *autobahn*, the 6.9 would have really come into its own on home territory as the speedo swept disdainfully beyond 230 km/h.

The third of my most memorable Mercedes is a 1982 380SEL, Ivory in colour with rich tan leather which had been recently re-coloured. It made me think of crème caramel, so sweet it was. That comparatively small capacity V8 revved with sheer joy and in first and second gears acceleration was strong. What a pity the 6.9-litre V8 in the previous generation W116 S-Class—my wonderful dark blue 6.9—lacked a fourth forward ratio in its gearbox! The 380SEL was an

amazingly solid-feeling car, and serene. Its fuel economy resulted from technology edging towards the modern era, which in my view really begins in 1990 with the Lexus LS400. But 'edging' is the right word because where the Lexus could sneak under 10 litres per 100 kilometres on the open road, the heavyweight S-Class typically used more like 12.5. But it had fantastic presence, helped I think by the distinctive light exterior colour. These days metallic colours are almost *de rigeur*, but this solid ivory—Alfa Romeo offered a similar shade at the time—is a reminder of how elegance can be achieved without adding flakes of silver. Ditto the bright Sebring Red of my Series III Sovereign. I can remember neighbours refusing to believe that I had bought such a lovely Mercedes for $15,000. That was in 1998. I did many thousands of kilometres and gained great satisfaction from my W126.

The fourth Mercedes is still in the family. It's a 1992 180E, white in colour with tan cloth trim. Despite having traversed more than 200,000 kilometres it still drives precisely like new and delivers new century type fuel economy in the process. Admittedly the 180E was never one to leap away from a standing start but at a cruising speed of 110 kilometres per hour the 180E has that same bank vault solidity on the road as any of its bigger and more powerful relations. The 180E brought three-pointed star motoring to many customers who had never previously been able to afford a Mercedes-Benz. It used a smaller engine than the original 1984 190E and made do without some of the luxuries—there being, for example,

no tachometer. I drove the 190E very early in 1985 and could hardly believe that this small four-cylinder car felt so much like an S-Class. What I treasure still about the humble white W201 180E is that it set a new standard way back then and it still offers more refinement than many new century models. (Andrew Miedecke, who knows the fastest way around any corner, told me recently that the 190E was one of the best handling Mercedes of all time.) As with every Mercedes-Benz it delivers an indefinable *mechanical* satisfaction, that old 'engineered like no other car' feeling.

Two years later Daimler-Benz arguably trumped its own (S-Class) ace with the W124 range. Many critics immediately hailed the six-cylinder 300E as the best car in the world, regardless of price. Through the twisty roads around Kangaroo Valley in the south coast hinterland of New South Wales, we members of the press wondered if any expensive sports car could match its agility and poise.

Since then I have tested countless wonderful new models but two that stand out for me are the 1990 500SL and its 21st century successor, the SL500. There is lineage here right back to the 1954 Gullwing. When I drove the 1990 car I pronounced it to be the finest machine I'd ever driven and its superiority over the BMW 850i was marked. As for its 21st century equivalent, this is even more beautiful, significantly faster and more fuel efficient, and even more lavishly equipped.

There has always been a special DNA in Mercedes-Benz. I recently tested a black C280 Elegance, winner of the *Wheels*

Car of the Year award. I have no doubt this is—in 2009—the best car of its compact size in the world. The C-Class, fourth generation to the 190E's first, is absolutely contemporary and yet to drive it just down to the local shop is to be reminded of the SL500 and, by association, the Gullwing.

And how could I ever forget the first time I slipped behind the white steering wheel of the neighbour's cream 220S saloon? The quality of the car was evident in the perfectly weighted controls and, although the upholstery was not leather, it still felt and looked rich. The way the steering wheel matched the exterior colour of this particular car and the expanse of bonnet out to the three-pointed star made for a memorable experience even before you had eased away from the kerb. It was a new thrill to move the column-mounted gear lever into first, then watch as the three-pointed star levitated slightly under acceleration. There was a subdued but unmistakably sporting quality to the exhaust note. At the time, our family car was a Peugeot 404 and I was well used to driving it. Compared with my old Fiat, the 404 felt quite fast. But the Mercedes gave me a new perspective on acceleration and effortless torque. It was, in 1967, the most powerful car I had driven, and by a fair margin.

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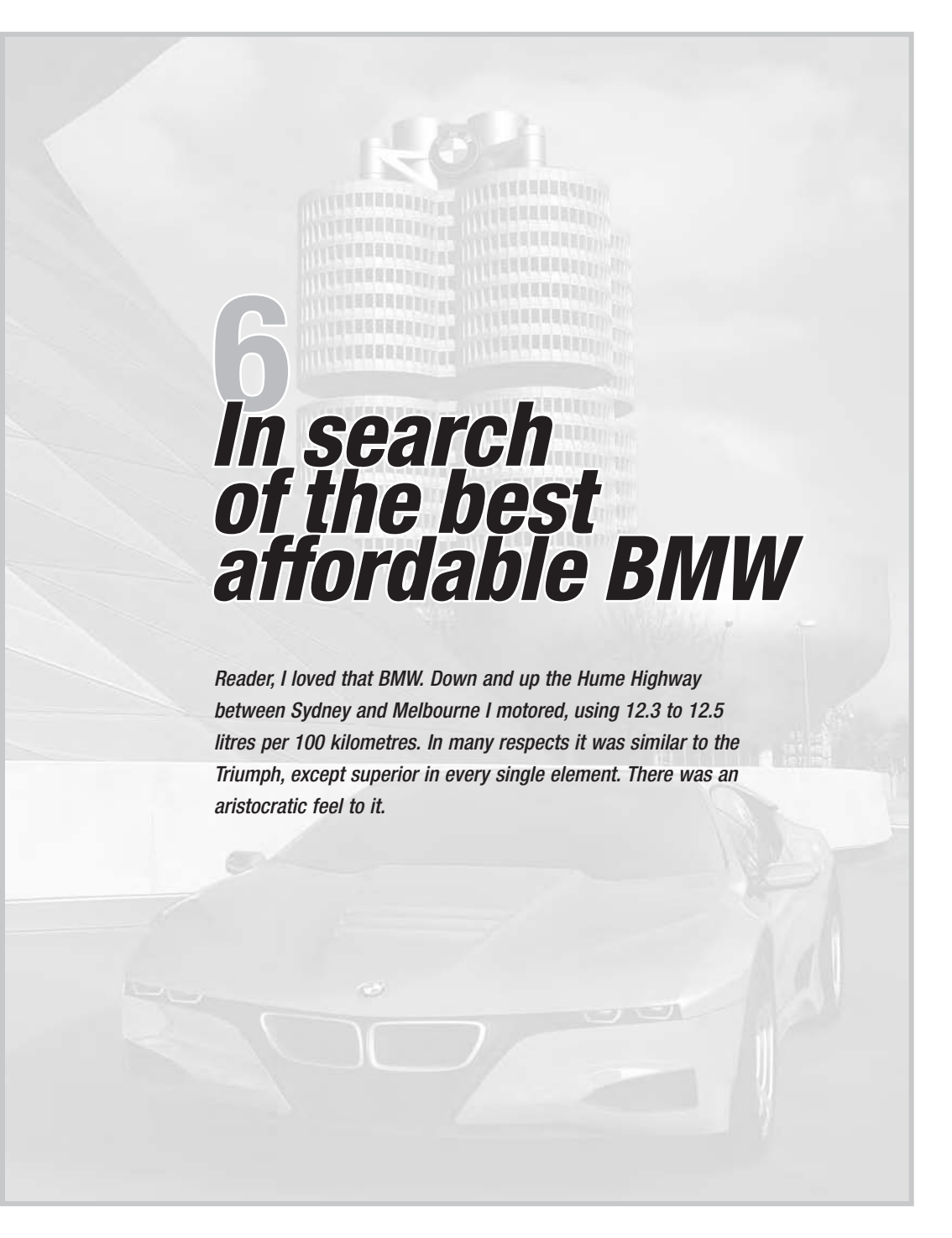


6 In search of the best affordable BMW

Reader, I loved that BMW. Down and up the Hume Highway between Sydney and Melbourne I motored, using 12.3 to 12.5 litres per 100 kilometres. In many respects it was similar to the Triumph, except superior in every single element. There was an aristocratic feel to it.

It has really only been in the past 25 years that BMW has been compared directly with Mercedes-Benz. When in 1982 I bought my first BMW, a 1975 2002 (rectangular tail light model), I certainly didn't think in terms of Mercedes versus BMW because the marques seemed utterly different in character. The 2002 was already a classic and had no direct rival.

As you'd expect, the 2002 was easily the quickest four-cylinder car I had owned up to that point, well ahead of the Volkswagen Passat TS, Fiat 125 and Renault 16TS. It would sprint from zero to 80 kilometres per hour in about 6.4 seconds compared with more than 8 seconds for any of the others. Significantly for my final judgement of the 2002 was the fact that I owned an immaculate Sun Yellow 16TS contemporaneously. I found myself preferring the Renault for long trips not only because of its supple ride but also because it steered better. At high speeds, and I admit to seeing an indicated 180, the BMW required constant minor corrections at the wheel. But the Renault's rack and pinion system, while heavy at parking speeds, gave superb feel.

I could appreciate the effortless urge of the 2002 but it always felt just a little austere. Perhaps I had expected too much of my first BMW. I was proud of the car, though, and might have kept it longer but for the fact I had overcommitted myself on the repayments.

It seems funny looking back, but the BMW brand still had great allure for me despite a less than ecstatic ownership experience with the 2002. Mostly it had to do with the E3

six-cylinder sedans. That *Wheels* comparison test between the Jaguar XJ6 and BMW 2800 I mentioned in the Jaguar chapter had quite an influence. I must have sided with Mel Nichols over Peter Robinson. The BMW was a sportier and faster car than the XJ6. In 1973 when I had acquired my first Renault 16TS, the car I set my sights on as its eventual successor was a BMW 2800 manual, preferably in red.

Some months before I traded the Fiat 1500 on the Renault, I drove it to a wedding. Alec, a rich family friend, had a Fjord Blue metallic BMW 3.0S automatic. I followed him from the church to the reception. Flat out through first and second gears in the Fiat, all I could do was keep station with the BMW. 'Uncle' Alec was not the kind of dude to have the throttle buried in the carpet. And so I got to study the chrome 3.0S badge and the BMW roundel. How wide the tyres were, how wide, too, was the stance of this beautiful car. Its straight six purred expensively, while my Fiat's four just seemed raucous by comparison. The BMW belonged to a new generation of performance sedans, one to which I greatly aspired.

I would have to wait ten more years to fulfil that aspiration, in the course of which my attraction to big six-cylinder Bavarians was undiminished. At times, I had craved an XJ6 but by the early 1980s I had heard so many terrible stories about the unreliability of the earlier cars that I wasn't prepared to take the risk. I had heard no such bad press about the Bee-Emms, except that the cylinder heads could be problematic. And so, late in 1983, I decided to buy the

best 1973–74 E3 I could afford. Because of my continuing unhappy experience with the Triumph 2.5 Pi, I was unwilling to try another fuel-injected car and, besides, a 3.0Si was probably just outside my price range.

There was a white 1973 3.0S on sale at the rather downmarket yard just a few hundred metres from my flat in Paddington in Sydney. The asking price was $4995. It boasted a cheap style of aftermarket sunroof but was otherwise your basic entry-level version with vinyl trim and no air-conditioning. On my brief test drive I could find no obvious fault, but with surprising restraint I managed not to buy it because I believed I might find something better.

Not long after this the same dealer acquired a second 3.0S, this one in Fjord Blue and, from memory, priced at an inviting $5995. But its interior had the distinct flavour of a shabby bordello. Whoever had paid all those hundreds of dollars to get the seats retrimmed obviously reckoned multi-striped velour was the cat's whiskers. I thought it was *bizarre*. And the fact that the seats had been refurbished suggested a harder life than that enjoyed by the plainer white example I had already sampled, although both cars declared about 100,000 miles. Fjord Blue suited the car magnificently, though, and power steering was a welcome inclusion. It drove really well, and I was tempted. Again, I restrained myself. The dealer struck me as dodgy. He was spare of politeness. In his eyes, I was doubtless a time-waster and know-all petrolhead.

Nevertheless, I was convincing myself that $6000 was not much to pay for such a beautiful car and that you don't really notice the upholstery when you occupy it. Did a week go by? I'm not sure. But it was only a little while after driving those two cars that I saw the third, and this time I knew the dealer. He was Roger Vagg, son of Les, a prominent Sydney Holden dealer at the time. I had already bought a car from him, a blue and white Cooper S that I rarely drove because of the model's well known tendency to run hot in traffic. Roger seemed like a good bloke who was genuinely interested in cars, which is surprisingly rare among car salespeople. When I spotted the silver BMW at the front of his yard, I had to stop.

The sign he had written for the car was amusing—something along the lines of 'What am I doing here?' Most of Roger's cars were hot Australian and US models. Apart from the occasional Cooper S or Torana XU-1, eight was probably the favoured tally of cylinders per vehicle. The 3.0S stuck out like a tuxedo in a rugby crowd. This was, after all, Parramatta Road and a fair way west along it.

Roger wanted considerably more than $6000. I forget how much exactly. But this was clearly a better car. Like the white one, it still had the original interior trim. Instead of austere vinyl, however, there was plush navy velour in very good condition. There was a manual sliding Hollandia sunroof and Roger had dialled in some street machine factor via a set of gold Cheviot alloys with Goodyear NCT 60-series

tyres. The reasonably complete service history vindicated the odometer claim of 83,500 miles.

I did not test this car exhaustively, driving it for perhaps 20 minutes. The engine idled nicely with no evidence of overheating. I jacked up the front to check for suspension wear and found no unwanted movement in either wheel. It was as tight as it had been new in 1973.

Roger happily negotiated the price back to $6500 and traded both my cars. I was a bit sorry to see the Cooper S go after such a short period of ownership, and at such a reduced price. Even the Triumph 2.5 Pi induced a measure of wistfulness, which was easily overcome by the splendour of my new machine, the finest I had ever owned.

Reader, I loved that BMW. Down and up the Hume Highway between Sydney and Melbourne I motored, using 12.3 to 12.5 litres per 100 kilometres. In many respects it was similar to the Triumph, except superior in every single element. There was an aristocratic feel to it. My friend at the time had a VC Commodore wagon as her company car. The BMW entirely outclassed it, despite having accrued ten years of age. How effortlessly this big Bavarian crested 160 kilometres per hour! How little it rolled and how strongly it gripped when hooked into tight corners.

The 3.0S quickly became the benchmark against which I evaluated my steady stream of brand new road test vehicles. Few came close, although I did fall in love with the Jaguar XJ6 Series III and it was tempting to believe the claims that reliability was much improved. But even the Jag was

only slightly better than my BMW. It was quieter but the engine note was a little less evocative. With electronic fuel injection instead of carburettors, its (modest) power delivery was smoother. In a drag race from zero to 100 km/h, I think they would have been dead equal, neither showing much eagerness off the line. But the XK engine's superior power and torque gave a significant advantage at higher road speeds. The Jaguar had the world's best ride around town, with the single notable exception of the old Citroën DS. With so much Connolly hide and walnut, the Jag's so-English interior was plusher but the BMW nevertheless exuded its own Bavarian variety of restrained elegance.

My one regret about the car was its automatic transmission. I wished I had waited for the comparatively rare four-speed manual version. Perhaps even a 2800 four-speed would have been preferable. That 3.0-litre single overhead cam six developed abundant torque and power, but not arriving until 3700 and 6000 rpm respectively. Typical of 1960s and 1970s BMW engines it was impatient for revs and thus a little peaky (though never piquey). The 3.0S tended to bog down off the start and the 400 metres took 18.4 seconds. While I never measured the rolling acceleration, I suspect it was reasonably quick from about 40 to 120 km/h. Like both the Triumph 2.5 Pi and the Jaguar XJ6, this BMW felt wonderfully responsive on the open road thanks to quite low gearing, which kept the engine revving in its favourite zone at (higher) highway speeds; you really felt as if you were driving a sports sedan. Much of this has been lost in

later model cars, unless you choose to drive in a lower gear (which, of course, you don't!).

I did have various troubles with this car, exacerbated paradoxically by my proximity to specialist BMW mechanics who were quick to highlight the smallest deficiency. In the end, convinced I was facing an expensive repair in the short term, I shuffled out of it and into what I felt sure was an equally accomplished German luxury car. Oh dear.

The silver one with the high k's drove pretty well and could get from zero to 80 just about as fast as the BMW. But this 1979 Audi 100 5E had been thrashed all its life. Having been mightily impressed by the then new aero-shape 100 and noting little change to the engine from the previous generation, I had decided a five-year-old 5E might be a logical replacement for the Bee-Emm. That down-at-heel silver car went quite fast enough to satisfy me. And so I bought the pristine one-doctor-owner blue example instead, without so much as a test drive. It had done just 60,000 kilometres and presented as new. Unfortunately the doctor had never driven his Audi 5E hard. It was palpably slower than the silver car. My sense was that it was something like 10 per cent down on performance, the difference between okay and unacceptable. Unlike the BMW, my 5E did not benefit from exposure to the highway. It just felt underpowered everywhere, even though the five-cylinder engine sounded appealing in an egg-beaterly, almost Subaru fashion.

Having bought it, I could not sell this 5E quickly enough. Back to the dealer at rather less than the predictable loss.

There would eventually be two more Audis, both of them the later generation 100 CD—but this chapter is meant to be about BMWs.

Looking back from 2009, I can say that I never owned another BMW that delighted me as much as the 3.0S. It had something to do with the time I owned it—late 1983 to early 1985, at which time mainstream cars mostly felt distinctly inferior to my middle-aged luxury sports sedan.

My third foray into the blue and white roundel did not occur until December 1992. It was at least as much of a case of love at first sight as had been the previous experience. Perhaps more so, because a black 635 CSi coupe with big gold Simmons wheels immediately dropped into a stockpile of JPS BMW memories. It also had something to do with the car I was trading, my silver Alfa GTV6, in which I had competed in the first Targa Tasmania earlier that year. This BMW was a coupe, too. It had an extra litre of engine and a Getrag racing gearbox. Where Group A versions of the GTV6 had been class cars in among the Starions, the 635 CSi was an outright contender mixing with V8 Commodores and XJS Jaguars.

This was heavy metal within financial reach. Never mind that it lacked a service history and was four years older, as well as being an escapee from some other automotive market. The BMW glittered. Its Recaros promised a tight grip through Targa Tasmania 1993. And, I must declare it, there was that aforementioned roundel. It is not always easy to be

fully conscious of such impressions, but I guess BMW still slightly outranked Alfa Romeo in my private status race.

I would come to change my mind, not in everyday driving or on interstate trips, but when I came to race the BMW in Tasmania. Indeed, I experienced exactly that change of class mentioned above. The GTV6 competed with Holden Calibras and Mazda RX-7s. But the 635 CSi was in company with the BMW M5 and the Honda NSX. I still got my Targa plate but one or two stages were completed with less than a handful of seconds to spare. And I was nowhere near the class placing I secured in the other three years I had competed. The real anticlimax came when I went to jack up the car at the end of the event. The jack went straight through the rusty body sill. The moral: always buy an Australian-delivered car!

In 1996 I bought a 528i—the second generation E28 model (restyled in every panel to look almost indistinguishable from the original E12)—three-speed automatic. Then when I got the opportunity to trade it on favourable terms for a same-year (1984) Bahama Beige four-speed automatic, I jumped for it. These were nice cars, but already rather old-fashioned in the mid-1990s. I never fell in love with them, although the Bahama Beige car gave good service for several months, despite infuriating wind noise around the driver's door. It eluded all attempts at repair, and I soon realised that this was not a must-keep car.

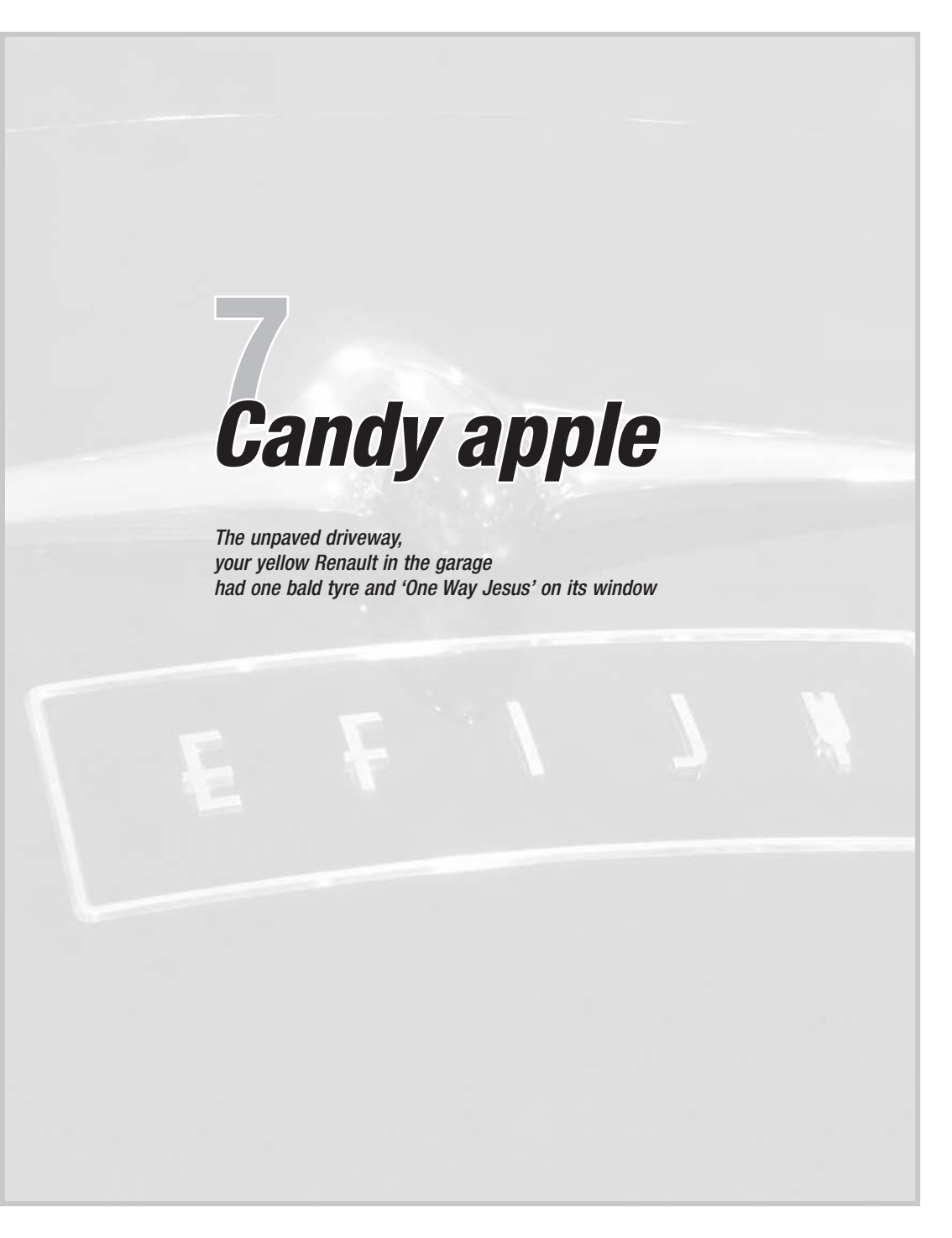
Of these five BMWs I owned between 1982 and 1996, only one rose well beyond the competent in terms of its blend of qualities. That was the 3.0S. I agree with Mel Nichols that

he was probably wrong in 1971 to rate its 2800 predecessor above the original XJ6 but I can certainly understand why he did at the time. It was a much sharper, more involving drive. Not until the Series III—and a late one at that—do I believe that Jaguar eclipsed the understated and underrated brilliance of the E3 'New Six' BMWs. So, what about the Seven, I hear you asking? In many respects it was not a true successor to the E3, being significantly larger. The early 733i was clearly underpowered for Australian driving conditions, unless fitted with a manual gearbox. But the 735i Executive I drove in mid-1985 was, at that time, the finest car I had ever driven. Hindsight reveals how the lush buffalo hide that encroached throughout the interior (even to the handbrake grip) suffered under local conditions. But the superb wood highlights, the inclusion in the rear folding armrest of a separate set of controls for the wonderful Becker sound system (a detail I only discovered when I returned the test car) and the responsiveness of its straight six when teamed with a four-speed automatic impressed me mightily. This most upmarket expression of the first generation (E23) Seven cost $65,500 in 1985. Jaguar's Vanden Plas was $67,400. At the time, had I been Mel Nichols or even John Wright, I would have given BMW the nod over Jaguar. So why have I never quite owned one? I guess it's habit. And there is a strong aesthetic element. While the E3 cars were handsome almost to the point of being beautiful, the E23 looked awkward even in 1977. By contrast, the Jaguar Series III is timelessly beautiful. If I want a more involving drive, I can jump into

my VK Brock or the Subaru. Given the choice of one car only between the BMW and the Jaguar, I would waver. In fact, back in 2000 when I was occupying a Jaguar-free zone, I rode in the back seat of a lovely E23 Executive just like the one I have described. I asked the owner to get in touch with me if ever he wanted to sell his car. Of course, I never heard from him.

7 Candy apple

The unpaved driveway,
your yellow Renault in the garage
had one bald tyre and 'One Way Jesus' on its window



That poor little Fiat 1100. In Gordon H's hands it was usually in top by the time it had reached 30 miles per hour and he showed considerable reluctance to engage lower gears. I know this because I later sat beside him some mornings when he gave me a lift into Melbourne. There we were in Williams Road, South Yarra, and Mr H would choose the right-hand lane for the whole journey, so as to be ready to make the necessary turn several miles on. He was as prepared for that turn as any boy scout could be. The 125's magnificent twin cam engine never had a chance even to begin to stretch its legs, but instead lugged along at 20 miles per hour in top. I could see why my 1100 had run its bearings by 50,000 miles.

When I got the Fiat 1100 it was on the understanding that it did indeed require rings and bearings, which was going to cost another couple of hundred dollars on top of the $500 purchase price. There were strict instructions about running-in procedure and the car had to go back to Willys Motors after it had covered (was it?) only 200 miles. Whatever the distance was, I did it too easily in short bursts near home over the first weekend, showing off to friends. I had a race with Hugh G from his parental home around a long block we had designed. Our thought was that, with the Fiat being limited to 50 miles per hour, the fawn Austin A30 might prove quicker. Memory does not deliver this result, so perhaps Hugh won, although I doubt it.

As has been the case with almost every other car I have owned since, the 1100 never had quite enough power and I

didn't have quite enough money to do much about it. The answer, of course, is that wealth and automotive (like human) power are both relative. ('Are you the more,' I once asked Christ in a poem, 'that I forever wanting more am wanting?') My enthusiasm ran way in advance of my knowledge and I see, looking back, that I had yet to grasp the critical concept of torque as opposed to power. I learnt that one the hard way when friends who were taught to drive on Holdens and Morris Majors tried to drive the Fiat up moderate hills from 25 miles per hour in top gear. If enthusiasm was ahead of knowledge, so, fortunately, was my driving instinct, because I wrung the very best out of that little car.

I have to laugh at some of my pathetic ministrations. One weekend I painted the grey air cleaner housing Candy Apple Red. I scrubbed the black paint off the radiator so it was gleaming brass. How satisfied these minor tinkerings made me. Inside my car-mad brain, the Fiat was already faster, as well as Frankly Finer (per the ads of the time). The next stop was Norm Beechey's speed shop in Sydney Road for a sports muffler and a chromed rocker cover. I thought twinned yellow racing stripes would look good against the two-tone grey. No, truly, no-one could *invent* this. But what on earth was I dreaming? Bathurst? Do you imagine people laughed at me and this car? You're right, they did. It was a simple case of a little car being full of sound and fury but signifying nothing whatsoever except its owner's adolescent obsessiveness, which does not necessarily retreat in later life . . .

I can admit now that I challenged a mate with a new (Vauxhall Viva, Coke-bottle hip variety) Torana to a race around Albert Park Lake one lunchtime. The Fiat was clearly the underdog. Robert M (smiling his supercilious smile beneath his thin moustache, quite the grown-up 21-year-old dandy in his three-piece pinstripe suit and a perpetual Dunhill at the ready) gave me a start of 200 metres and overtook me just before the end. Both cars were jammed full of young men, while mine had a boy at the wheel. I remember seeing 70 miles per hour as the highest speed, while he claimed 80. The police were nowhere in evidence, and what could we have said to them anyway? As far as the race was concerned, from Robert's point of view it was like taking candy apple from a baby.

The Fiat was closely matched to a (40 brake horsepower) 1962 Beetle but could easily beat a (36 brake horsepower) 1961 model. It could stay level with an EK Holden to the end of second gear but once you were into third any semblance of what might be called acceleration quickly vanished. Many years later, my great friend Roy Carey was describing an Audi 100 5E he had owned. 'Performance,' he mused, 'yes, I guess you could say it had performance, in the sense that it went forwards. And it went backwards.'

The *coup de grâce* was the $80 dual-throat Weber (replacing a single-throat Solex) carburettor I finally had fitted to the car. That was at Jimmy Guilfoyle's in Box Hill. Jimmy, who ran short of patience with tyre-kickers, usually had a brace of late-model Fiats for sale and a race motor

or two around the place. I doubt the Weber made any measurable difference to the performance with everything else still standard, although I liked the way the throttle stiffened at the point where the second throat was ready to open. It fuelled my dreams of Bathurst, of truly fast cars, and was an early lesson in power: you can never have enough of it. Even too much is not quite enough. So there was a measure of psychological value, maybe even $80 worth of 1968 currency. The dual-choke carby certainly didn't help the Fiat to attain my magic number from childhood—80 miles per hour. On the Maltby Bypass near Werribee, heading north, the appealing horizontal band of red would make it all the way to 76 on its impressively accurate speedometer after a build up of 2 miles. I knew this was a pretty good result for a 1960 1.1-litre sedan, but it wasn't the 'more' I wanted. When a friend got an EH 149 sedan, I matched its green (but not the white roof) with envy. That felt like a fast car to me in 1968. It also consolidated my desire to own an EH Premier manual one day, which never happened, although I did eventually get an EH Special.

That was also the year I began to glimpse motorsport up close. Well, closer than I had previously. Robert M and I were trainee auditors in a chartered accounting firm in Collins Street. Another of my co-workers, a serious young man about 23 I suppose, was a champion rally driver in the University of Melbourne car club. (I knew so little in comparison!) His car was a Volkswagen 1600 Fastback, complete with myriad extra lights across the front. I even

tackled a couple of rallies myself. In the first one, my mate Simon D and I were doing quite well until we (well, I) bogged the car up to its axles and had to camp out for the night. Before that happened, it had seemed that there were at least three Hillman Imp GTs, each with a phalanx of lights across its pseudo grille (the Imp being rear-engined), looming fast in our mirrors, but I'm pleased to record it was just the one, in constant search of the quick way to the finish. (It doesn't matter how fast you drive if you're heading in the wrong direction!) Our event ended, aptly enough, near Launching Place.

The Fiat finally gave me a chance to experience at first hand the wisdom of my father's advice to treat every other driver as a 'bloody idiot trying to kill you'. A friend sat beside me and I was probably trying to impress him. Peter M (who later became a QC) insouciantly neglected to wear his seatbelt. When we punched into the green HR Special turning across our path, one of his knees dented the metal dashboard. The Fiat was a write-off. Pete got a sore knee. I was without a car. The elderly driver of the Holden had simply underestimated our speed, which, at about 45 miles per hour, was too fast. He made his turn across our bow at what looked like point blank range. He was unhurt and unrepentant. My father was not amused. I had been too short of money to pay the comprehensive insurance premium. He had paid it for me, a fact he felt necessary to reacquaint me with, and I just felt stupid. Doubtless, he also felt that I had not adequately absorbed his philosophy that every

other driver is a bloody idiot. But I am probably glad that I did have that crash because I learnt from it. The hard way. As both my parents liked to say: 'You always learn the *hard* way.'

My next cars were a Mosman Blue FJ Holden followed by the lamented Jaguar Mark V. There was a sad and sorry Beetle (moral: never buy a car from a wrecking business). An assignation awaited me at the end of a drive to Geelong the first weekend I had the Beetle. I started out with gusto. By the time I had gone a few miles, the car would not go in fourth. Then it began to lose speed in third. By the time I had reached the Geelong Road, I was doing 15 in second and having to change back to first. I went back towards Melbourne, slowly. A mechanic—supermarkets may not yet have become ubiquitous but in 1970 you'd still find servos with a mechanic-proprietor working on a Sunday morning—extracted some dirt from between the needle and seat of the Volkswagen's tiny carburettor. And I proceeded, finally arriving closer to 3 p.m. than 1 p.m.

The Beetle was sold because I was set to lose my driver's licence for three months, having been sprung testing its maximum speed on the Nepean Highway in Chelsea. Although he was polite enough, the policeman showed little interest in my genuine reason (to me) for exceeding the speed limit by some 40 miles per hour. The cylinder head had just been re-conditioned because engine compression was down. This work, I was sure, should have yielded two or three additional miles per hour. But, as I was to rediscover

many times in later years, so many promised improvements are not fulfilled in any way that can be measured.

By the time the case came to court, a number of months down the calendar and onto the next page (1971), I had automatically graduated from my probationary licence to a full one. I paid the fine and bought an Austin A40 Farina, whose chief merit was a purchase price of $120. It was a bit tired mechanically and I recall a top speed of about 67 miles per hour. But the Austin gave me the measure of the difference between having a car and not having one. The A40, I'm now thinking, was really a Morris Minor 1000 by another name and clothed with different bodywork. You'd have the Minor, wouldn't you?

When, I can hear my patient reader musing, is he going to get a real car? Maybe on this page. Until I wrote just now about the A40, I had never pondered its connection with the car I bought the following year with money kindly provided by the Commonwealth Bank, University of Melbourne branch. For some reason, I got it into my head that I'd like to buy an Austin 1800 Mark II. I answered an advertisement for a 1970 model, manual, Camino Gold in colour and 37,000 miles on the odometer. With all the maturity of a final-year uni student, I invited the eager salesman to drive the car from the dealership to my house for inspection. In those days, that was fairly standard procedure and probably resulted in a greater chance of a sale than when prospective customers made their way to the dealership. I think I haggled the price all the way down from $1495 to $1450. (Selling

it only a few months later to a dealer, I haggled the offer up from $950 to $1000.)

You could not imagine the difference between driving a 1960 Austin A40 Farina and a 1970 Austin 1800 Mark II. Even now, I think this is one of the most underrated mass production cars, a victim perhaps of a less than perfect reliability record and absolutely dud styling. But from the driver's seat it was a joy. You quickly adjust to the bus-like angle of the plastic wheel and the notchy gearchange. Few, if any, sedans of that era could match the 1800's road holding, allied to excellent 'floating on fluid' (Hydrolastic) ride quality. It became the first car in which I had been able to negotiate at 80 those corners near Anglesea with 45 mph advisory signs.

This was a rather rational purchase, but don't worry, I made up for the mistake with the correspondingly irrational sale after just eight months. Out it went for $1000 because I'd seen a pale blue Fiat 1500 Mark III that I liked. The 1500 was like the big brother to the 1100, although a newer design and much faster. I knew a couple of young men who owned them when I had the first Fiat. The 1500 had a recommended maximum speed of 62 miles per hour in third gear, marked by a red dot on the speedo; in those days few sedans had tachometers, outside Jaguars and Alfa Romeos. Sixty-two is a great deal more than the 1100's 47. And so I jumped at the chance to buy my own 1500, failing to realise that a 1970 Austin 1800 Mark II was demonstrably superior in almost every respect to a 1966 Fiat 1500. Despite the fact it

was four years older than the Austin, this Fiat was $1075. It did have a certain kind of flair that BMC could not achieve but measured empirically you couldn't say the Fiat was as competent. Perhaps it had a slightly higher top speed, but that was increasingly irrelevant. The interior was cramped. And although the column shift was good for one of these arrangements, it was a hopelessly outdated feature in a car with pretensions to being a sports sedan.

•

By 1972 the car market was maturing. That was the year the Honda Civic went on sale. Toyota had created the Celica, which was actually fun to drive and stylish as well. In 1973 I came close to buying three brand new cars. I thought of a Celica but found I would not be able to afford it so turned to the second shape Corolla instead. It did not inspire me as a successor to the 1500. The second possibility was the Fiat 128 Coupe, which I loved but decided I couldn't afford either. And the third was a Honda Civic. When the man said he would give me $600 trade-in, that was the end of that. At the time I had no idea how the business worked. If I had paid $1075 for the Fiat it was surely worth at least $900, I mistakenly reasoned. Incidentally, I haven't seen a Fiat 1500 in maybe ten years and the 128 Coupe is also rare. They have all just rusted quietly away, having passed beyond the Fix It Again Tony phase. Austin 1800s are rare, too, but survivors seem to be regarded as charming curiosities, especially the utes.

By the end of the year I had made up my mind to trade the pale blue Fiat on a Renault 16TS. The car I bought was a white 1970 model, KNX 256, registered shortly after my lamented Austin and priced at $2350. There were interesting similarities and differences between these two front-drivers. The 16TS was a superior touring car with more urge, taller gearing and an even more comfortable ride. The column change was forgivable in such an idiosyncratic machine. There was a particular sense of stylishness about the TS that eluded the practical Austin 1800. The dashboard was a lovely arrangement. You sat so high and looked right down over the bonnet to the road which the car seemed ready to devour. Unlike the Austin 1800 and Fiat 1500, it had a tachometer. It could, in theory, do 100 miles per hour, but I think it was Chris De Fraga (motoring editor of *The Age* at the time) who described the 16TS as a 'high nineties' car. The Renault certainly had the potential to cruise at 90. Now I can hardly even remember when I last saw one, but I was to own three more before 1982.

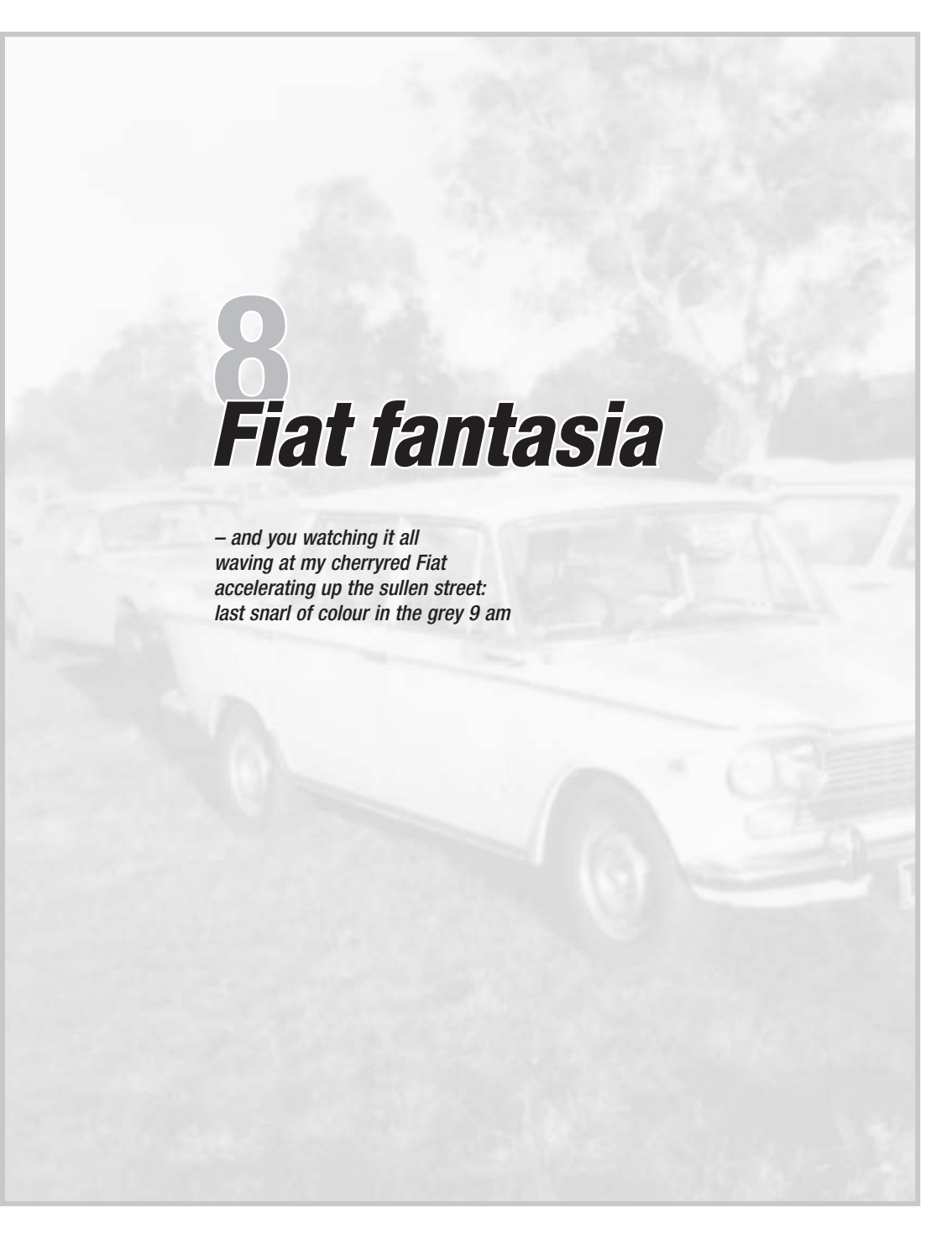
There was something about the Renault 16TS that inspired me to park it in poems—perhaps its undeniable gawkiness was at the heart of this.

Forget any comparison with the Renault 12 because I owned one of those briefly, too. The 12 felt like a much cheaper, less sophisticated car. And it was in my haste to get out of the dark blue Renault that I leapt from frying pan into fire. Ah, the Harbour Blue Volkswagen Passat TS! Sometime during my ownership the hire purchase repayments sent me

back to driving a taxi every Thursday night. But this two-door 1975 model felt to me like the first unadulterated sports sedan I'd ever owned. The only problems were a temperature gauge that frightened me by perching its needle right on the edge of the red (but the radiator never actually boiled) and an unlovable penchant for popping from top gear into neutral on the open road. I still remember racing Richard McC, who was in his Citroën DS21, between Licola and Heyfield. The Passat had the flat cornering of the Austin 1800 with less understeer and a deal more squirt. In the mirror, the big *Diesse* claimed fantastic roll angles and, surprisingly to me, had a little bit more power on the straights. I have never owned one; I have always wanted one.

8 Fiat fantasia

– and you watching it all
waving at my cherryred Fiat
accelerating up the sullen street:
last snarl of colour in the grey 9 am



Looking back from the safety of a new century, I can see my Fiat obsession more clearly. In something like the way the black Armstrong Siddeley Whitley fed into Jaguars, the Fiat fixation later spread to Alfa Romeo (but fortunately never all the way to Ferrari, although I did own one Maserati). Of course it was that Millecento and its crucial role in driving me from eighteen to nineteen years of age which deserves the credit.

By the time I was 25 and several months I had owned six Fiats—three 1100s, a 500, a 1500 and a 125. 'You can't repeat the past,' Nick Carraway, narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, tells the eponymous hero. What I was trying to do was to live the past as present, just several years later. Best I explain. When I had HHE 661, I coveted friends' 1500s, which I couldn't afford. But five years later I could. When I used to take the 1100 to Willys Motors to get it serviced I fell in love with the 125, especially a striking blue demonstrator model they had whose number plate I still remember: it was JXW 622. I had to wait until 1975 to get a 125.

In those years, it was Fiats I loved most of the marques I could aspire to buy. The two telling exceptions were the Renault 16TS and the Monaro GTS 186S. Oh, and yes, the Jaguar. I guess I was partly in love with my own adolescence, condemned to attempting to repeat the past. And I was planting the seed of my subsequent obsession with Italy, the location of my first overseas trip in 1984. Back in 1973 I could drive my pale blue Fiat to La Trobe University, where I was a tutor in the English department, and fantasise that

I was driving to the start of the Mille Miglia. That chrome cursive Millecinquecento across the glovebox and the Veglia Borletti gauges served as props. (The Austin 1800 issued no such Latin magic.)

The Fiat phase also meant a fairly high level of mechanical rectification. In the 1950s most healthy Australians thought Fiats were weakling foreign cars unsuited to local conditions. (Perhaps they were right? 'Four cylinders, mate?' 'Made in Italy, cobber?' 'No good here, pal.') Even into the 1970s I heard these views expressed by many of my favourite mechanics with some of whom I was on quite close terms of the 30-day statement variety. 'Could you Fix It Again, Tony, please?'

Who could tell which organ was playing up, or why, without much panel-kicking and inventive oaths about Italian engineering? Did this stuff happen to Enzo Ferrari back in the 1930s, I wondered. Did Tazio Nuvolari have to pull into the pits with an electrical problem? Probably.

Oh yes, I remember countless riflings through elegant little gloveboxes—thoughtfully lit for the purpose—in search of extra cash. But when the Fiats were *going*, it was barely relevant whether they had four hundred and something air-cooled cc or 1608 cc beneath twin camshafts, whether the engine pulled or pushed, whether the car understeered, oversteered, or could divide its time between these two conditions. Mostly I found my Fiats sublime; they found some connection in my automotive soul.

When I got my first Fiat 1100, I revelled in the sound it made as an absolutely standard car. Then I got a sports

muffler, and later the Weber dual-throat carburettor. Speed became almost an aural quality as opposed to a measure of distance over time. The 1100 could cover the benchmark zero to 50 miles per hour split in 15.8 seconds. It had similar acceleration to a 1961 (40 brake horsepower) Beetle. This meant level-pegging with most grey-engined Holdens from a standing start to the end of the Fiat's second gear (the speedometer's dot occurred at 31 but 37 was achievable), when the six-cylinder car would surge ahead. But you couldn't measure the quality of the sound that Fiat made. I remember one surprised observer saying, 'I thought I heard a Ferrari but then I saw your silly little Fiat with its yellow stripes.'

It was the heyday of speed shops. Brian's. Norm Beechey's. Blokes fitted Speco-Thomas floorshifts with great curving chromed levers to their early model Holdens. Extractors were plumbed into Simca Arondes ('Some car, this Simca') and I could buy a can of Candy Apple red to paint more speed under the bonnet of my 'silly' Fiat. They were simple days of simple dreams.

I owned two other Fiat 1100s between 1968 and 1972, the first being an unregistered 1953 model that never left the backyard. It was dark green and I even went to the trouble of fitting near-matching green leather bucket seats from a deceased 2.5-litre Riley parked near the South Yarra Boulevard. (At least, I hoped it was deceased.) The second was a comparatively rare 1961 Special in dark red with a black roof and normal-opening front doors rather than

the suicide variety used on earlier models. There was even a reclining split front bench and a dual-throat carburettor which meant gearchange dots placed further around the speedometer. Brand new, the 1100 Special would have threatened a genuine 80 miles per hour.

But this was the wrong car. I had thought I was buying the one I'd seen at a Fiat Car Club meeting three years earlier, a Special that had never felt the pitter-patter of tiny raindrops on its pristine paintwork. Years later, having stumbled upon yet another Fiat mechanic, this one operating from his home in an Elsternwick street, I found that particular magnificent car under a tarpaulin in the garage, still the love of its Latin owner's internal combustion heart, despite his brand new and much less lovable Fiat 132 GLS. It was at about that time that I saw my own sad Special again, by now languishing in a wrecker's yard, astonishingly also in Elsternwick.

The 1100 Special—misguided though the purchase of that particular specimen had been—was really a step towards the craved-for 1500. I never forgot the black one with red trim that took pride of place on the Fiat stand at the 1962 Melbourne Motor Show.

When I finally bought my own, a tired powder blue Mark III, it seemed like the fulfilment of a long-held dream. To many it was just another boxy Italian sedan but to me it was just about the most beautiful car I had ever seen—lithe, agile, spare of excess, possessed of a perpetual nose-down eagerness. I removed the hubcaps so it would look faster.

The clutch was flabby, the pistons slapped lightly and there was a blue tint of smokiness around the exhaust. My friend Andrew's 1963 model could beat it to the end of second gear by two car lengths, but I barely cared. This Fiat was built for driving rather than motoring. It drove deep into trout fishing country in remote parts of the Otways, companion to my escapist habit. After one fishless trip to some dam in western Victoria, it drove through such a blizzard of locusts that the black and white front number plate turned pure insect-black and the whole car smelt of them. If the pistons were always more likely to pack it in earlier than those of a stolid Hillman Minx, who could blame them? The 1500 was your archetypal *carpe diem* car. It was light on its feet in the best kind of way. You always felt engaged with it, looking down that short, sloping bonnet to the road. The 1500 always felt and sounded faster than it actually was, which is perhaps no bad thing in a car.

My next Fiat features at greater length in Chapter 16, the one about worst cars. Suffice to say for now it was a 1959 500 Convertible, the roof being of the type that rolls back in something of the style of a tin of anchovies until it comes to rest just above the engine, where you secure it with a canvas bow. There were lots of romantic gestures like that, including a rheostat on the trafficator warning light, enabling adjustment through a whole subtle and entirely irrelevant range of pinks from puce through pearl to pale. But there were few wanton extras, like synchromesh on the gears. You pulled a little lever on the floor to start the

engine and sometimes the cable broke. Laugh? How could you help it? Especially when you thought of the person who would later try to steal this novelty-on-wheels, only to have the benighted little thing break down within a few hundred metres and face abandonment minus some of its bits.

Later came the lemon 1970 125 which sometimes tried to match character with colour. But that Fiat would rev its racy little heart out. The top speed was 99 miles per hour if you adhered to the tachometer's redline. At 80 it was doing 5000 rpm (where a typical 1.6-litre car of this current era would be spinning at more like 3700 rpm). Small wonder, then, that fuel consumption on a trip from Melbourne to Noosa and back brought an average of 23 miles per gallon, rather than the 28 I had hoped for. The 125 never seemed to me as triumphantly idiosyncratic as the 1500 and the trend to internationalism was beginning by 1967 when this model made its debut. I owned mine in 1975–76 and it was still more than a match for most new cars of that era, an HJ Holden for one example. But Fiat had hit a deadly patch and the 132 which superseded the 125 had almost nothing to commend it. The engineers had been outflanked by the bean counters.

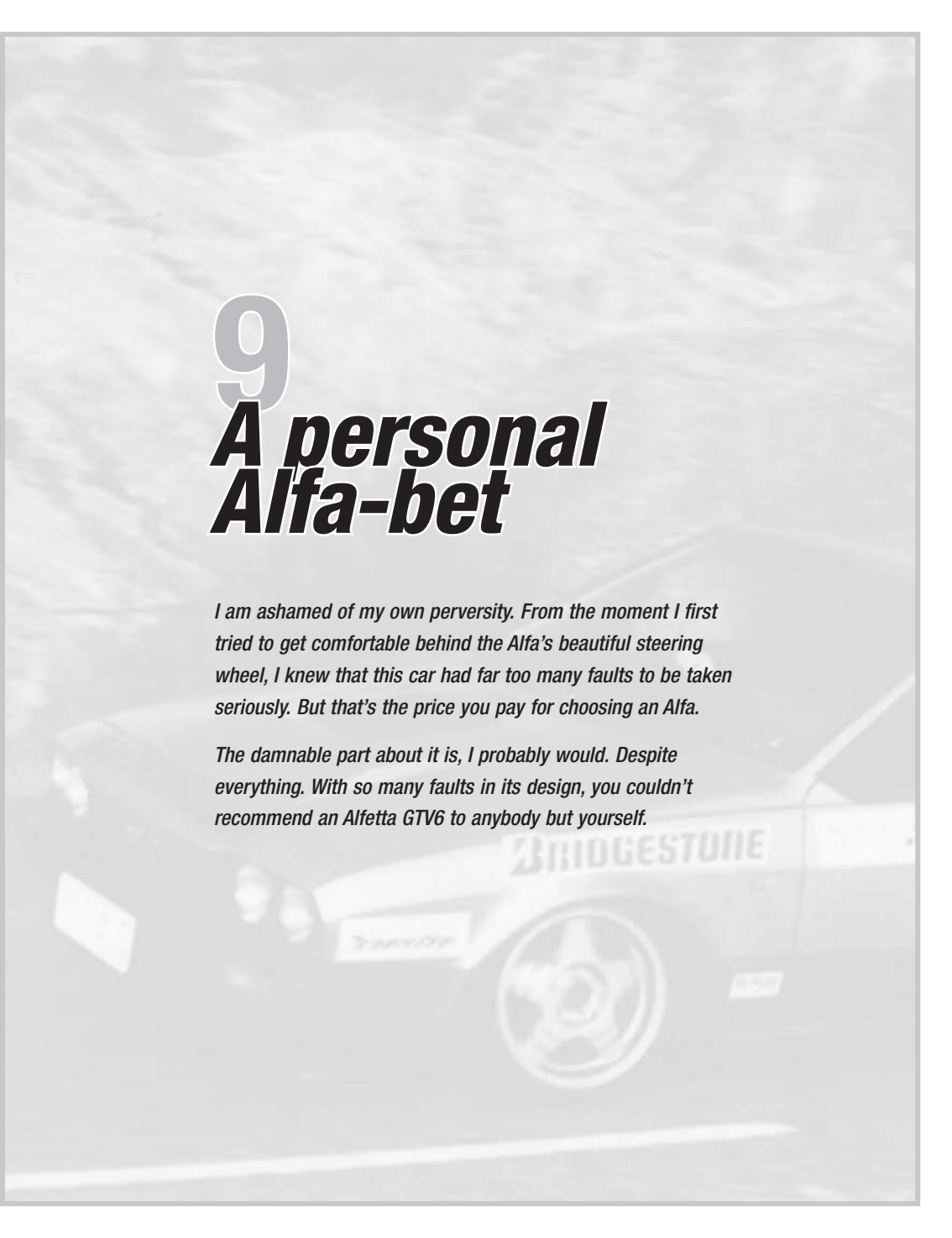
My last (probably ever) Fiat came many years later in the guise of a drop dead gorgeous silver 130 Coupe. That brought back the best memories of the 125. Indeed, that's what it felt like to drive—a bigger, cruisier, more relaxed 125. It remains one of the world's most neglected classics, a Pininfarina work of art. But when did Fiat ever succeed

with a big car? If you're interested, I would rate the 130's general performance about lineball with a Series III XJ Jaguar. In many respects, the concept was similar. Both were luxury grand touring cars with a late 1960s/early 1970s feel to them. I bought this car from my friend Greg McBean, having long admired it. Greg had paid a small fortune for a bare metal respray. But the rust kept sneaking back. He found it upsetting to the point where he finally agreed to sell this glorious machine to me. There wasn't actually that much rust so I ignored it!

9 A personal Alfa-bet

I am ashamed of my own perversity. From the moment I first tried to get comfortable behind the Alfa's beautiful steering wheel, I knew that this car had far too many faults to be taken seriously. But that's the price you pay for choosing an Alfa.

The damnable part about it is, I probably would. Despite everything. With so many faults in its design, you couldn't recommend an Alfetta GTV6 to anybody but yourself.



Alfa Romeos did not exactly supersede Fiats in my automotive lexicon because by the time I fell in love with them, it had been about twelve years since I'd owned a Fiat, the 125. But by 1991, I could not imagine myself as an Alfa-free zone. I still remember now that particular mild-mannered late-autumn Sydney day, turning my 1981 Sportiva into South Dowling Street on the way to my mate Lambros's muffler shop in Darlinghurst, having this precise thought: whatever other cars I own, I will always have an Alfa. It turned out not to be the case, but I was fervently convinced at the time.

The first Alfa Romeo I ever drove was an Alfetta Gold Clover Leaf in 1984. Its woodrim steering wheel made a great first impression, followed quickly by the exhaust note. But the quirkiness of power window switches mounted in the roof and working counter-intuitively, the unassisted steering which loaded up through tight corners, the alarmist Alfa Check system blinking red false alarms and the stylistic excess of the instrument panel all deterred me; the Alfetta lacked *restraint*. At that time I owned my insouciantly elegant silver BMW 3.0S. Ten years old, the Bee-Emm seemed understated and efficient compared with this extroverted Latin-mobile. But perhaps I was merely trying to quieten my own insistent romanticism. After all those Fiats, what would become of me if I also fell for Alfa Romeos?

Of course, I had no hope of escape. It was just a matter of driving the wrong (right!) car. The Alfa serpent took its time

to bite. I remember the disappointment of a 33 Ti after the promise of its green stripes, lovely alloy wheels and exhaust music. It was, sadly, full of sound and fury signifying precious little. The build quality was execrable.

It must have been in June or July 1984 when I got that sinking feeling, the one that told me I was set to fall in love with another car, indeed another marque. I was one of a team of drivers on a *Wheels* comparison test. The idea of the exercise was to assess the new Nissan 300ZX against its peers—Mazda RX-7, Mitsubishi Starion, Toyota Supra (the Celica-style one) and, er, the Alfa Romeo GTV6 in heartbreak red. Even in the few words I was permitted to write as a counterpoint when the report appeared in the September 1984 edition, I was trying not to love the GTV6:

> I am ashamed of my own perversity. From the moment I first tried to get comfortable behind the Alfa's beautiful steering wheel, I knew that this car had far too many faults to be taken seriously. But that's the price you pay for choosing an Alfa.
>
> The damnable part about it is, I probably would. Despite everything.
>
> With so many faults in its design, you couldn't recommend an Alfetta GTV6 to anybody but yourself.
>
> Let logic prevail, then. The Mitsubishi Starion will drive around the Alfa, assuming its driver has mastered the power steering. You would choose this car for the perfection of its compromises.

> Compromises? Well it's not a sports car like the RX-7. Neither is it too big and sedan-like in the manner of the Supra and the 300ZX.
>
> So there's my entirely subjective summary. When your heart says Milano but your head says Mitsubishi.

There was insufficient space to define the magic of the driving experience. The evocative mechanical clatter of the V6 as it spun to the red line once, twice, thrice. The power bulge on the hood, under which sang Madama Butterfly. That feeling of utter connectedness to the car in which you actually sat uncomfortably, knees splayed out, wheel too far away, head in the rooflining. The GTV6 was alive in my hands and from then on, I wanted one. In time, I would come to own three of them, one twice. But to own a GTV6 so early in my attachment to the marque would have seemed too much like starting at the top. Besides, there was another Alfa on the way that I would learn about a few months later when I took my maiden overseas trip to the Turin Salon.

Before that, though, there was an opportunity to drive the 1984 Sydney Motor Show Alfa showpiece, the Andalusia GTV6. Alfa-naticism threatened to engulf me. A friend, photographer Greg McBean, was already a dedicated Alfa-phile when he accompanied me in the Andalusia. I would use one of Greg's wonderful photographs on the cover of the inaugural issue of a new magazine I had conceived (under the auspices of Federal Publishing), the now improbably titled *Go Car*. It was all so very 1980s. And so was the

Andalusia. Who remembers it now, I wonder. White like the Spanish dancing horse from which it took its name, it featured a Momo Pininfarina grey and white leather wheel, Compomotive telephone dial-style alloys, Recaro front seats (in grey leather plus retrimming of the rear seat to match), spoiler and wheel arch flares from Alfa Romeo USA, a steel sliding sunroof and various other goodies.

I was grateful for the sunroof, which reduced headroom and reminded me that, really, this car was too uncomfortable for me ever to consider. Even at the time me thought the lady did protest too much!

Italy came up soon after the Andalusia affair. In November 1984 two Australian journalists, Mike Kable of *The Australian* and I, representing *Wheels*, boarded an Alitalia jet for Rome as guests of Fiat. My charming (now, sadly, late) companion liked to call Italy his second home. That's probably why he hardly seemed to notice that the Citroën CX2400 taxi in which we travelled from Rome to Turin was cruising at 160 kilometres per hour. I was astonished, trying to imagine an XF Falcon doing the same thing on the Tullamarine Freeway. As for the landscape, it just delighted me. Already half in love with Alfa Romeo, and with Fiat shaping so many of my automotive memories, I knew that Italy would always be special in my soul. And so it has proved.

One of the stars of the Turin Salon was the Alfa 90, essentially a luxury V6 variant on the Alfetta sedan. The Ferrari Testarossa was a bold, modern supercar, its side strakes quite audacious. And somewhere in there, drawing

attention, was the tiny but unbelievably accelerative Ford RS200. In awe of just about everything, I wandered around the stands. Mike, playing on his home ground, seemed to know all the stars. He introduced me to Gianni Zagato, head of one of Italy's grandest *carrozzeria*. The Turin Salon was a daze of glamour, the like of which I had never experienced. And there at the heart of it was the Alfa Romeo stand, a brace of identical gold 90s forming its centrepiece. Of course, I craved one, and knowing it was powered by the same engine as the GTV6, this latest sedan displaced the GTV6 from my immediate Alfa fantasies.

Not that I could afford an Alfa 90 when they arrived in Australia the following year. But I could no longer resist the bite of that serpent, and rushed into ownership of a curiously dark grape-coloured (Beech) Alfetta 1.8 sedan. At the time I also owned a 1978 Holden Commodore SL/E 5.0-litre and a marvellous horny old VC Valiant V8. At $2700 the Alfetta seemed to me like a staggeringly good motor car. There were gestures of rust, the crashpad was cracked and the top of the rear seat was torn, but the wood was real and the engine sounded just fabulous. I found myself comparing it with the beloved BMW 3.0S, which by that time had been swapped for the Commodore.

And that Commodore in its turn made way for my first Alfa 90 and higher repayments than I had ever faced. So I had two Alfas and the Valiant. Then came the upsetting discovery that not only did the 90 offer hardly any more real world urge (due to extra weight, and moonshot gearing in

the interests of economy) than the old Alfetta (with which I was by then so familiar), but that it did not handle as well. Alfa Romeo was seeking the executive car buyer and had given the 90 soft suspension. Plus there was all that extra weight of the V6 engine over its front wheels. It was not what it could have been, a GTV6 sedan. And wouldn't there have been some demand for such an Alfa? That, indeed, was what I tried to turn several Alfa 90s into. Between March 1986 and March 1997 I owned a world record number of 'em—six. Three were modified and took to the racetrack with reasonable results.

For a while, too, during the late 1980s, I owned a lovely white 105 series Giulia Super 1600. It was Italian elegance on a stick, but it never moved me the way the transaxle, Alfetta-based models did. But you can see how hugely superior the 105 sedan was to anything GMH could do in the pre-Monaro era of the mid-1960s.

It was in 1995, near the end of my daisy chain of 90s (there would be one more, briefly, in early 1997) that my tales of Alfa Romeo ownership meet up with the previous chapter on BMWs. The last Bavarian machine I reported on was a Bahama Beige 528i with excessive wind noise. Out it went, traded on an early Alfa 164, red and with cloth trim instead of the leather I have always preferred in any car. The 164, like the 90 before it, was an Alfa Romeo I had met when new, while attending the national media launch in 1989. There could be no question that this new generation, larger Alfa Romeo prestige sedan was more elegant and more tastefully

trimmed than the Alfetta-based 90. The enlarged 3.0-litre V6 was displayed beneath the bonnet as a showpiece. So the 164 appealed more strongly to the artistic sense. And it was better built.

All these virtues tended to obscure the weaknesses. Of course, I had always known that the 164 was imperfect, merely human. But having my name on the registration certificate and repayments booklet concentrated the mind on these weaknesses. The acceleration, blunted by avoirdupois and a torque converter, was not what I would have expected of a prestige car launched in 1989, although to be fair there were plenty of peers that took longer than about 9.5 seconds to reach 100 kilometres per hour from rest. And, really, what did the people at Alfa Romeo understand about automatic transmissions? Not much. The markings 'P, R, D' etc., did not correspond exactly with the position of the lever when any of these positions was selected. Near enough must have been judged good enough. And the selector could be moved freely between 'D' and 'N'. My memory may be wrong on this point but I seem to recall having to press a button to move from 'D' to '3'. These were minor issues. But the insistence of the torque steer even on moderate throttle openings was not. This was a wearying car to drive at anything but steady cruising speeds.

What an interesting change of the guard it was, then, to switch from a 1984 rear-drive BMW to a 1989 front-drive Alfa. It proved—certainly at that stage of the evolution of front-wheel drive technology—that the opinion of most

enthusiasts was correct. There were exceptions, but the Alfa 164 was far from being among them. It promoted torque steer (from being a mere disappointment) to a vice.

Let me now contrast the 164 with the GTV6, my favourite Alfa and, I note, one that I have still not offered much analysis of in this chapter. If the 90 sedan was poised uncomfortably between the traditional kind of Alfa Romeo and a more modern, internationally focused variety, then the GTV6 belonged firmly in the first camp. It did not have power steering, allegedly because the engineers thought that assistance subtracted too much road feel. The sole negative was that the steering was heavy at ultra-low speeds. This, in turn, reminds me of an exchange between Phil Scott, then motoring editor of the Sydney *Sun-Herald*, and the charismatic managing director of Alfa Romeo Australia, Ruggero Rotondo. Scott was complaining about the crunch that often accompanied the selection of first gear in the GTV6. 'How often you use-a first gear, Phil?' was the thickly accented question from Rotondo (followed almost immediately by an invitation to the launch of the new gearbox: 'You come to the launch of our new gearbox, Phil, next-a week?'). In the dreams informing the creation of the GTV6, the correct answer to the first question is: not often.

The gearchange is actually not as bad as critics such as Phil Scott suggested. To the delicate hand it is precise. Besides, the GTV6 is the kind of car that invites heel-and-toe downchanges, which are almost *de rigeur* on the track (especially with rear-wheel drive cars, which can otherwise

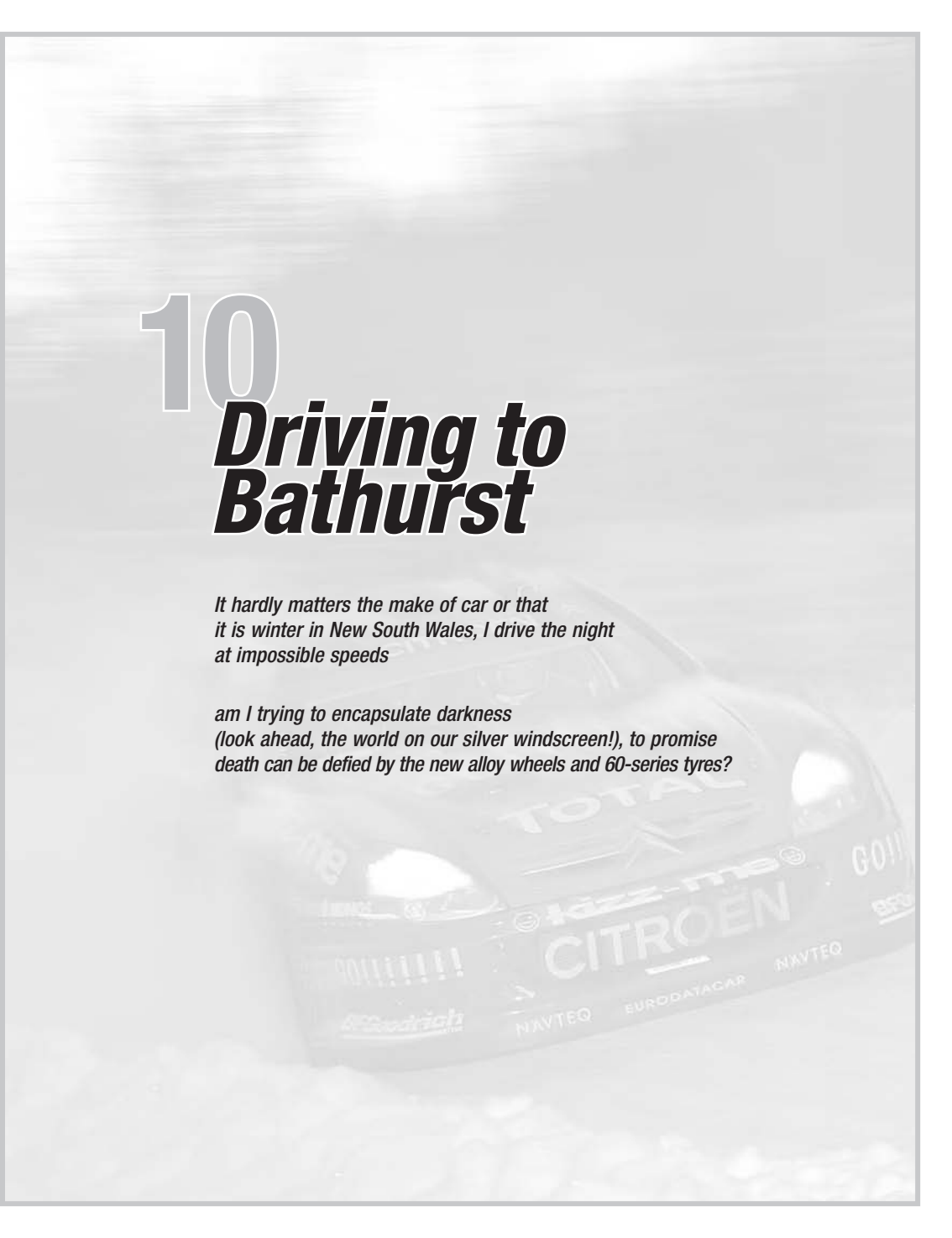
step offline). By 21st century standards, this is no high-performance car. Zero to 100 kilometres per hour took a sneeze less than 10 seconds and the 400 metres about 16.7. Remember, this is before the Impreza WRX essentially redefined affordable performance. The VL 'Walkinshaw' Group A Commodore was a fast car in 1988 but it couldn't reach 100 kilometres per hour in less than 7 seconds or break 15 flat for the standing 400 metres. Even in 1990, when I first owned an Alfa GTV6, the sensation of real speed was confined to the acceleration in first and second. Oh, and the fabulous sound. After the 1992 Targa, one of the camera operators for the video said that ours was the sweetest sounding car in the entire event.

So sound and not all that much accompanying fury are part of its character, as are the gorgeous lines. But the real key is the extraordinary level of steering feel which combines with that *Madama Butterfly* aural quality to give the GTV6 its unique character. And if I have to choose an Alfa Romeo from my own experience to rank second, it is the old Alfetta 1.8 sedan. It, too, steered superbly and sounded great. And the only other street sedan/production car I have raced that felt as secure on the ragged limit was the Citroën BX 16-Valve. In the final analysis, the racetrack is the place so many of my motoring fantasies and memories call home. One word? Bathurst.

10 Driving to Bathurst

It hardly matters the make of car or that it is winter in New South Wales, I drive the night at impossible speeds

am I trying to encapsulate darkness (look ahead, the world on our silver windscreen!), to promise death can be defied by the new alloy wheels and 60-series tyres?



From my perspective the road to Mount Panorama began at 3 Cochran Avenue, Camberwell when I sat, aged ten, in front of the 21-inch black-and-white Kreisler television set watching the inaugural Armstrong 500-mile race for production cars. Doubtless, I had briefly pondered the coincidence between the name of the race sponsor Armstrong York and our own black Armstrong Siddeley car, just as I had tried to imagine that poor old thing competing in the race with no hope against even such slowcoaches as a Humber Super Snipe. In 1960 I was falling in love with the idea of motor racing, even if this notion was embodied in the strange shape of a Vauxhall Cresta, the car which won that inaugural Phillip Island endurance event. Of course, John Youl would have won easily in his Mercedes 220SE if he hadn't rolled. He made up for the mistake in 1961. I met Youl an unbelievable number of years later when he competed in Targa Tasmania. He was still very fast and finished quite a number of spots ahead of me, driving his Mazda RX-7 Turbo.

By the time the 1962 race was screened, I had picked up a little more knowledge and I really fancied Geoff Russell's Ford Zephyr against an assortment of cars including a Molybond-sponsored EJ Holden with its basically 1948 engine, for God's sake!

I'm sure the interest in racing was the same for many other baby boomers who were mad on cars before they could talk. But for others it was probably only after the race moved from blustery Phillip Island to terrifying Mount Panorama in 1963 that interest was aroused, while for some it would

not be until the end of the 1960s that mere interest would be transformed into passion as previously unimaginable Chevy-powered Holden coupes competed with the Ford Falcon GT for racetrack glory and buyer allegiance in those formative years of Ford versus Holden tribalism. In 1973 the race changed from 500 miles to 1000 kilometres in recognition of Australia's belated switch to metrics.

The history of Australia's greatest motor race has been well told by Bill Tuckey in his book, appropriately titled *Australia's Greatest Motor Race*. It now seems remarkable that we had to wait until 1981 to read such a narrative but at least when it came it was a beauty. Tuckey's name was familiar to me from my adolescent years when he was the editor of *Wheels* magazine—'Fat Boy' he liked to call himself—but as I sat one entire day on the couch devouring his book, I had no idea that I would shortly become a motoring journalist myself or that I would meet Bill Tuckey. (He was embarrassed when I called him a poet!)

And if both the meeting and my new career seemed more than improbable at the time, there was at least one hope that would have struck me, new to Sydney and aged 31 (eking out my living as a night-time taxi driver and sending poems, short stories and book reviews to the literary magazines who rewarded some of these efforts with publication and a small cheque) as beyond dreaming. Eleven years later I would race at Mount Panorama, not in the Bathurst 1000 but in the James Hardie 12-Hour. In virtually showroom-standard cars from Commodores and Falcons to

Mazda RX-7s, the Subaru Liberty RS Turbo and the Mitsubishi Galant VR4, and the tiny Suzuki Swift GTi. In fact, this was very close to the original formula that made its debut at Phillip Island in 1960 before relocating to Bathurst in 1963: production cars.

For the 1973 event, the rules changed with much more extensive modifications to the cars permitted. From then, they continued to get more specialised to the point where all a current Ford or Holden V8 Supercar has in common with a production model is the name and the body shape. I for one believe it is a real shame that it was allowed to become (and remain) a simple Ford versus Holden event. May the time come soon, when Bathurst is once again open to a range of cars from around the world as it always was before V8 Supercars.

In those early gladiatorial days—a Volkswagen and a Mini racing a car length or two apart through most of the inaugural Bathurst 500 in 1963—one chose one's car as one might choose a weapon. I fantasised about our family vehicles in this scenario, although few criteria could have been further from my father's priorities. I had long believed that in buying the Armstrong Siddeley my father had selected an outdated implement. Two of our three family cars actually competed in production car racing. In November 1961 Dad bought his Morris 850. Apparently some dill at BMC Australia thought 'Mini-Minor' sounded diminutive. But I never heard anyone referring to a Morris 850 as anything other than a Mini! Finally, they got the point and out came the Morris Mini

De Luxe, complete with more power and wind-up windows and all of them seemed to be beige.

By 1967 we had a bottle-green Peugeot 404, but the race had moved on considerably. Bob Holden had entered a 404 in 1963 for the inaugural Bathurst 500-miler but had no hope of getting near the leaders, finishing eleven laps down on Harry Firth and Bob Jane in their Cortina GT. As I came to the age of owning cars myself, I started to do a little retrospective thinking. How would my Fiat 1100 have fared in 1960 in the right hands? I wondered in 1968. And if there had been such a race in 1950 would the Armstrong Siddeley have been disgraced?

While 1967 lives in my memory as the year we got the 404 and I was doing Year 12, it now seems more of a landmark for the Australian automotive industry. That was the year the Ford Falcon GT made its debut. How could I not be impressed when the young unmarried executive down the street traded his Jaguar E-Type roadster on one of these bronze sedans? And then there was the bloke who cruised into the local Church of England, where some sort of youth fellowship function was finishing; within minutes all thoughts of the Almighty vanished from the heads of the assembled teenagers as they flocked around this golden car, its green instruments winking the promise of unbridled secular V8 power into the suburban evening. Six o'clock rock indeed.

That year saw the Falcon GT win at Bathurst, where, amazingly it now seems, the local machinery was regarded as underdog to the pure-bred Alfa Romeos. (Strangely, my

enduring images from that race are of the Alfa drivers—chiefly I remember Paul Hawkins and Kevin Bartlett—hurling their white Alfas around corners in a desperate attempt to stay anywhere near the roaring Fordies.) The limited-edition Cortina GT 500 with its dual fuel tanks and even the Mini Cooper S were already folded into the history books. Lap times tumbled accordingly and the 3-minute mark looked within reach.

Looking back, it's difficult to say which caused more of a stir, the limited-edition Falcon GT sedan or the first Holden coupe, announced in August 1968. From my point of view it was the latter, but only because I had never imagined the General producing such a slinky, sexy, hot machine. Improbably, they did publicity photos at my old bluestone school, which made a bizarre setting for the Warwick Yellow GTS 327. The Monaro was more at home at Mount Panorama than at school and, in the wise hands of Bruce McPhee, it taught the Falcon drivers a lesson. By this time Ford's 1968 Falcon had been introduced and the GT was a regular model, still available in GT Gold but in a number of other colours as well, including Candy Apple Red, Zircon Green and Springtime Yellow. Never have any doubt that Ford Australia's plan with the first GT was to produce it as a limited edition. For starters, there was no handbook for the model because none was prepared. Secondly, the wheel brace was your normal Falcon unit, which simply wasn't suitable for tightening those trick new high-crowned wheel studs properly. Imagine how you would have felt if it was *your* brand new

GT that got a puncture on the wet winter's peak-hour night you collected it proudly from the dealership.

By 1973 I had owned a few more well-used cars and answered an advertisement for a purple 1970 Monaro GTS. The fact that this was a six-cylinder 186S version with the two-speed Powerglide automatic transmission barely dented my enthusiasm. But driving it did. What possible relationship could this already weary vehicle bear to the Holdens that lapped Bathurst accompanied by the well modulated television commentary of Evan Green? How could just a few years of neglect have turned it into such a sad sack? But even though I walked away from that particular dodgy example, somehow the dream of a two-door Holden persisted—but not a clapped-out specimen in aftermarket purple and fitted with a slushbox transmission. I bought my lovely blue 1969 six-cylinder GTS four-speed the following year.

In 1977 I did meet a real live motoring journalist but it wasn't Bill Tuckey. Chris De Fraga was the motoring editor of *The Age*. At the time I was working for the Victorian Council of Adult Education and I wanted to hold a seminar for women keen to learn more about motoring—you can imagine the kind of stuff I had in mind: how to change a tyre, how to check the oil and other exciting subjects. Over lunch in Papa Gino's restaurant in Lygon Street, rather than ask for suggestions for the seminar I had to ask poor Chris about four of the cars I had owned over the years and which one would have fared best at Mount Panorama. (How little

I knew at that time about the real requirements of a race car!) These were: the Monaro, Renault 16TS, Fiat 125 and the Volkswagen Passat TS. I mentioned them in the order I had owned them and at the time I still had the Passat, which I rather fancied. Chris De Fraga might have paused for a few seconds before choosing the Fiat. It was, of course, the only one of the quartet with disc brakes all round. Mind you, that Fiat was its own special variety of automotive weapon in 1968 and even when I owned one seven years later it was still considered a pretty hot car. Its secret was a twin overhead camshaft engine in the Alfa Romeo style, allied to what would today be thought of as absurdly low gearing. The engine was redlined at 6250 rpm and gave something like 15.9 miles per hour per 1000 rpm, so to reach 100 miles per hour, you had to enter the red zone. But I reckon they would have been doing at least 6500 rpm down Conrod trying to beat the Datto 1600s. As for the Renault, it was a great cruiser but with all that body roll hardly a track car. I had yet to understand that the nought to 100 km/h time plus top speed don't give a total idea of performance.

Ten years on I was still learning the hard way, and I don't know if there is any other. By then I had a motoring spot on Sydney radio station 2GB. Charlie Cox was the program director and quickly became a mate. He, too, was passionate about the notion of going car racing. Indeed, he was closer to it than I was, although I already had my Confederation of Australian Motor Sport (CAMS) National Competition licence. Charlie, who seemed to me astonishingly young at

27 to be an executive, told me that he was going to race a Mazda RX-3 in a category called New South Wales Street Sedans. I decided to join him. I liked Charlie from day one and subsequent fame has not changed him.

My car was a 1974 Alfetta with 105,000 miles on the odometer. But, I reasoned, it would brake and corner better than an RX-3. I knew there was a shortfall in grunt but I thought this was a reasonable device for the track and, fortunately, I was right. About the only other non-Mazda in the category was a Triumph Dolomite Sprint, which was better driven and a little quicker than the Alfa.

Motoring journalist and publisher Geoff Paradise, who was already a mate of Charlie's, was very keen on my motor racing endeavours. I was working for him then as an editor. We conceived the idea of doing a magazine called *Fast Fours*. I convinced Geoff to add *& Rotaries* to complete the title. At the time a used Mazda RX-3 or RX-4 was about the cheapest way to buy high performance. Because I was racing against these Mazda rotaries on a regular basis, I was particularly conscious of their urge. The rotary engine came in three sizes: 10A, 12A and 13B. Even a 10A (in the same sub 2.0-litre class as the Alfetta) could outdrag me once I changed out of second gear into third.

Geoff enthused when I told him—I was, even at 37, staggeringly naïve about some aspects of what is usually called the real world—that I was going to buy custom plates for the burgundy Alfetta. Somehow I had come up with RACER. 'Mmm,' he said 'That's pretty good, but I think you

should have BOOF.' Geoff was most amused by his idea, an abbreviation of BOOFHEAD, a light-heartedly derogatory term we used quite regularly but always to describe other people (some of them readers of our hot car magazines). That afternoon, I posted off my application and cheque for my RACER plates. (My naivete consisted in thinking the noun would be applied to the car and not the driver!) Some weeks later I got a letter from the New South Wales Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) telling me my number plates were ready for collection. There was only one problem, the plates in question read BOOF. I laughed. How generous of Geoff, I thought, to shout me a set of plates, and I waited for the RACER plates to come through. Finally, it dawned on me. My bastard mate had seen my letter to the RTA on the desk, picked it up, opened it, changed RACER to BOOF, put it back in the envelope, taped it up and sent it off. So I had to pay a second fee for my preferred plates and I doubt whether anyone ever asked for BOOF plates again.

Charlie Cox and I began our racing careers on the same day, a few months before the BOOF episode. In our first race, from memory, he finished fifth and I was sixth. Charlie displayed great verve from the beginning and was soon a front runner. Years later, as an expatriate in Britain, he raced in the British Touring Car Championship. My apogee was a much lesser one. Unlike him, I never graduated to touring cars, but I had a great time in a number of production cars, the highlight being my two-hour stint at Mount Panorama in the 1992 James Hardie 12-Hour.

However improbable it might now sound, I drove a Citroën BX 16-Valve, one of a three-car, nine-driver team owned and run by previous Bathurst 1000 winner (in 1987 with Peter Brock and David Parsons) and Wollongong Citroën dealer Peter McLeod. One of my first impressions on arriving at the circuit, which is a public road that is closed for race meetings, was this remarkable invitation, not so much a poem as a ditty:

> Relax for a spell
> enjoy the view . . .
> stop at McPhillamy Park
> at the top of
> Mt Panorama

This neatly lettered sign has doubtless charmed numerous quietly touring families in their Holden wagons with the rug, picnic set and grandma in the back. It is a charming welcome to the mountain that towers over the town of Bathurst. Any irony perceived by me in this advice was entirely unintended by the writer. How was he or she to know that McPhillamy Park, that heart-in-mouth fast, blind corner at the crest of the mountain would become one of the last places you would care to stop in a race? The hardest thing during my two-hour stint of the twelve was trying *not* to slow down at McPhillamy Park!

Mount Panorama has always been a land of the brave. A month before the race, I spent half a Saturday afternoon

driving around and around the circuit. Through the Dipper, using only the left-hand side, even the legal 60 kilometres per hour feels quick. I was trying to follow Peter McLeod's advice about mentally translating this quiet rural road into a racetrack, where in places I'd be flat in fourth, and down the straight all out in fifth, with the tachometer needle just about to touch 7000 rpm.

You don't lift off the throttle at all for the right-hander before the Chase; just keep it flat. That was what they said. But it was probably not until the last practice session that I swallowed enough brave pills to do it. And the next time around I couldn't repeat the experience. But by race day, it was just routine. You use the extra portion of road to the left (which came up so quickly at 205 kilometres per hour in the Citroën) then kiss the ripple strip on the right of the track rather than actually traversing it. It's difficult to imagine what that must be like in a V8 Supercar at 290 kilometres per hour or more!

Most tracks have their daunting sections. I think of turn one off the straight at Phillip Island, going over the top of the hill at the old Amaroo Park, or even the double-apex sweeper at Winton where the road can disappear on you very quickly. But no racetrack I have competed on combines such a mixture of challenges as Mount Panorama. Get it anywhere near right though and it is surely the most satisfying circuit in Australia.

That was how I felt during my two hours of the 1992 James Hardie 12 Hour, which was the most exciting race I

have ever been in. Before then, every race car I had driven had been my own—two Alfetta sedans (a 1.8 and a 2.0), two rotary Mazdas (one 10A-powered RX-3 sedan, one RX-4 13B coupe), a Suzuki Swift GTi and a Corolla SX. Even looking back, though, Citroën remains the name that seems the most unlikely of these to be associated with any racetrack. I remember teammate Glen McIntyre, a quietly spoken New Zealand champion, saying that when the invitation came to join the McLeod Valvoline Citroën team he couldn't picture what kind of Citroën he would be racing.

So how did I come to be there in Peter McLeod's nine-man driving team? Nineteen ninety-two just happened to be the year that Peugeot Concessionaires Australia decided to run a three-car team of 405 Mi16s with Peter Brock as the lead driver. Brock was joined by his (young) old mate Neal Crompton, journalists Peter McKay, Paul Gover and Bob Jennings and a couple of hotshot young steerers whose names now elude me. This was a big budget effort.

I had known McLeod for a couple of years, having frequently discussed Citroëns with him and, indeed, having sold him a CX. So I asked him about the chance of a drive on the promise of more publicity for the marque than the other three journos in the Pug team could collectively provide for that brand. He liked the idea but, not unreasonably, insisted on a test session at Oran Park, where my times would have to be close to the other drivers, which fortunately they were. From memory, we were running mid-54s without all the development work having been done on the car. (By

contrast, my Alfetta running on skinny 78-series tyres per the street sedan class regulations managed a best of 57.7, which was fast enough to put me fifth on a grid of perhaps a dozen cars in 1987.)

There was a positive vibe in that team. McLeod had done his homework. While the 405 Mi16 and the BX 16-Valve used the same 108 kW 1.9-litre engine and five-speed gearbox, the Citroën was significantly lighter and because it ran 14-inch rather 15-inch rims, was usefully lower geared. Lap times were slightly quicker, probably about two seconds when averaged across all the drivers. The most obvious advantage was climbing the mountain, where the Peugeot kept company with the Corollas while the Citroëns could gradually pull clear of them.

Glen McIntyre put one of the three cars on the class pole with a time of 2:54.60 but sadly clutch failure sidelined Citroën 19 early in the race. But with one down, the other two were running first and second in class, from quite early on after Peter Brock pitted. He had been driving his Peugeot to the limit with a fastest lap of 2:54.67 before the brakes packed it in.

One of the drivers teamed with McLeod himself was a certain Captain Peter Janson. I had never met him until the Friday night before the race. Imagine every good thing you've ever heard about this professional 'gentleman'—his charm, his wit, his labyrinthine tales and trademark cigars, his life among the rich and famous—then multiply it several times. Janson is larger than life, yet smaller than life; somehow I

had expected him to be a big man. Does he fit the legend? Well, I can't imagine him in jeans but he *is* the legend. With the Captain you don't care whether there's an apocraphyl postscript to the story, the man and the times justified his presence in any race team, even without the jokes. This legend just strapped himself into the unfamiliar Citroën and drove bloody fast.

When 9 a.m. arrived and it was my turn, I felt ready to race but extraordinarily nervous. I remember in the opening laps being spoken to on the two-way radio and asked what to me seemed silly questions. How does the car feel? Are the brakes okay? That sort of thing. As my concentration became divided between racing and responding, two or three cars went past. 'Everything is just fine,' I replied. 'Don't call me, please. I'll call you if there's a problem,' and tried to settle into a routine.

It looks so easy on the television screen. One thing the late Peter Brock used to say was that he liked to get 'into a groove'. That day, facing the daunting Mount Panorama, I knew precisely what he meant. One car that passed me probably on the first lap was a black EA Falcon, clearly being driven by the slowest of its team. I found myself being baulked but was not sure how to get around what suddenly looked like a huge vehicle. For two or three laps this went on, until finally I took the Falcon at the end of Conrod when its driver braked and I didn't. The remarkable thing was how quickly it then shrank in my mirrors. I think I lapped it three times during the two-hour spell.

Equally surprising was the way the very fast cars gained on me up Mountain Straight. Those Mazda RX-7s were familiar in the mirrors, but the turbocharged Saab 9000 was another rapid closer. But across the top of the mountain, having got past, it could not get away from the Citroën until we were through Forrest Elbow and onto the straight. One highlight was passing Bob Jennings in one of the Peugeots on Mountain Straight. He subsequently told me that he had just exited the pits, but that 405 also shrank quickly in the mirrors to become invisible within two laps. I knew I was going okay. And so was the car. I have forgotten now whether the number 16 Citroën lapped me during my stint, but I reckon it did. The only Pug I saw was the Jennings car. Those Swift GTi's and Corollas were great across the top of the mountain but it was a blast to slip past them down Conrod. Conversely, the difference in speed between the Citroën and the lone BMW M5 or the Mazdas was a revelation.

The lap times were coming down gradually—3:04, 3:03, 3:02, 3:01, then 3 minutes, and finally in the last half dozen laps or so I was circulating in 2:59s. Hardly brilliant, when the McLeod car was doing 2:56s and the occasional 2:54, but I'd kept it on the track and in good condition. I realised later that I was out there at the same time as Brock but never saw him, which meant I had driven two hours without the great driver having been able to make—at the very most!—three minutes on me. My lap times, then, were at least 97.5 per cent as quick as his. When I came into the pits, Citroën 14

was still placed second in its class behind number 16, the McLeod/Dane/Janson car.

The two remaining BXs continued to circulate in first and second place in their class. By about 2.30 p.m. I was seated in the Mazda hospitality suite but refusing offers of alcohol in the vain hope that I might be required to drive again. A computer gave a live readout of the placings. A little after three, I decided to wander down to the pit because I wasn't sure whether they would have constant intelligence of the placings. 'My' car was still second in class and an impressive fifteenth outright. McLeod didn't look up from the television monitor despite the fact I had brought him good news. 'The car's in the wall,' he said. You can guess which car he meant.

The tyre let go just as the hapless driver, young Graham Gulson, was heading (too fast as it turned out) around a final time before coming into the pits. When the tyre let go, so did the Citroën. The wall was too hard. Car 14 was out.

At least number 16 was still circulating, still way ahead of all class rivals. I remembered how Brock had talked about the possibility of a top ten finish. With half an hour to go the BX was running eleventh or twelfth. At the end of that single lap of the clock—so short when your life is suspended and you're racing, so long when you're watching, coaxing, cheering—Peter McLeod drove it home eighth outright. I had almost forgotten the easy class win.

It might have seemed absurdly optimistic to field a team of three 1.9-litre four-cylinder hatchbacks, floating on fluid,

as the old BMC advertisements used to say, to keep racing company with Mazda RX-7s, a BMW M5, numerous V8s and other high-powered offerings at the most merciless and poetic circuit in Australia. In this case, you'd have to say, one out of three wasn't bad.

11 The Shire of Monaro

. . . we are huddled
behind this V8 and think how the night is fled
across cold paddocks: where in the world are we headed?

I remember the road, the look of the paddocks, the temperature of the late-spring afternoon, when I first looked beyond the speedo's hysterical 100 miles per hour, beyond the bonnet's immaculate metallic blue, and knew my Monaro for what it was, and for what it wasn't.

This was 1974 and mine was a basic HK GTS, with the 186S (3.0-litre) engine and the almost impossible Opel four-speed box, in its prime at five-plus years and 55,000 miles. Ever since I had set my adolescent eyes on those first Warwick Yellow 327s, I had wanted one for its looks alone. In 1974, I still thought them beautiful. And even now I retain a soft spot for Holden's first generation Monaro. How could anyone who tuned the television to Bathurst on the first Sunday of every October not be in love with Holdens and/or Fords? At least to some extent. In those days my own inclination was more to Holdens than Fords. Now, for reasons I don't altogether understand, it's the reverse. But I absolutely refuse to allow myself to be described as 'a Ford man'.

The name Monaro sounded unusual for a Holden back in 1968. As it happened, 'Monaro' arrived late in the day, long after the car itself had been designed. But there was no way the General's men were looking for a name that conjured up glory at Mount Panorama; all they wanted was a catchy moniker to apply to their new coupe. Names can be difficult. An employee of the design staff was on holiday near Cooma when he happened to notice a building with a big sign that read 'Monaro Shire Council'. The shire took its

John Wright as viewed by famous automotive cartoonist John Stoneham.

John with advanced driving guru Ian Luff and Corolla, Oran Park, 1990.

A most unlikely race car: one of John's Alfa 90s.

The car tragic can love many varieties. PHOTO BY JENNIE HAWKES WRIGHT.

Jennie with 1957 Chevy, 2008.

John with Mercedes-Benz Conrod Trophy and his MY00 WRX. PHOTO BY JENNIE HAWKES WRIGHT.

The combination of that particular blue and those initials means plenty.

name from an Aboriginal word for mountain or high place, so you really couldn't dream up a more appropriate one. But, amazingingly, GMH advertising never deconstructed the word's origins for us. If anything, that surely would have helped sales. For the Monaro may as well have been called the Holden Mount Panorama.

If ever there was a real Australian mountain car, it was the Monaro GTS 327. Back in 1965, when the gawky new HD Holden could be optioned up with a 140 brake horsepower motor dubbed X2, one advertisement read: 'Head for the hills.' That catchcry was not written with Mount Panorama in mind but rather something like a drive to the Dandenong Ranges. I met a man in 1969 who had owned a manual HD Premier X2 since new. He said it would do a genuine 100 miles per hour in its heyday but by 1969 could only manage 97. That suggests just how fast expectations were moving after 1975 and how the horsepower race driven by the Big Three was causing buyers to want more, more, more!

The first I knew of Monaro was when I opened a *Wheels* magazine. My mother was driving the old family car—yes, still that same 1950 Armstrong Siddeley for what it was worth, which was precious little in those days—along Burke Road, Camberwell in the vicinity of the junction with Toorak Road. I could hardly believe my eyes. As the ancient Armstrong Siddeley criss-crossed the tram tracks, trying to avoid the worst potholes and rounding up slower traffic (practically all traffic was slower than my mother in her black car in those days), I devoured the figures. A Holden that could do

almost 125 miles per hour? A bloody Holden? And 100 in third gear. Hell, we'd only just become used to the idea of a four-on-the-floor gearshift in Australia's Own and now we had a Holden that could run almost as fast in second gear as the early Holdens had in top.

The main problem of the early Monaros was a low IQ. It knew what it could do well, but hated even trying anything different. Wet roads, bumps—particularly of the mid-corner variety, never welcomed by a semi-elliptic rear end—camber changes, speeds over 120 kilometres per hour and stop-start traffic gave the Monaro an identity crisis: am I a rough-riding two-door taxi, it would ask, or a grand touring coupe? Speeds over 120 kilometres per hour? So insistent was the wind roar that it made more sense just to open the windows and be done with it. When the GMH stylists shaped the HK body they didn't go anywhere near a wind tunnel (although surely in a sense the Lang Lang Proving Ground is a kind of permanent wind tunnel). Every HK-HT-HG Holden was afflicted by wind roar around the A-pillars. On the highway, you could almost hear 'em before you could see 'em!

At an indicated 80 miles per hour, my car caught St Vitus' Dance—proof, I thought, that its previous owner (a Renault/Peugeot mechanic, that being a time when Renault Australia assembled both marques in West Heidelberg, Melbourne and the cars were sold out of the same showrooms) had never driven it fast. The problem was an easily remedied out-of-balance tailshaft. Even cured of St V's, however, 80

in the Monaro felt more like 100 in any good European machine.

I didn't care, although I now suspect that I carried some guilt for having forsaken a supple and sophisticated Renault 16TS to buy the Holden. With its drumming exhaust, likably larrikin character and that blissful pillarlessness (wind roar or no!), it was the nearest thing I had known to an Australian sports car. Crossing the Queensland border with all systems go, all windows wound down, and the car so heavily laden it almost thumped the bitumen, it felt to me as though it were worth thousands, not the paltry $1850 I had paid, in cash.

There were optional 6-inch rims shod with Bridgestone low-profile (for the era, being 70-series) steel radials, fat chrome pipes to suggest twin exhausts, and sheepskins warming pale blue vinyl seats. To me, the Monaro was *nothing* like a two-door taxi, though the parts cost about the same, except for the dreaded gearbox. Most surprising was the fuel consumption—doubtless aided by better breathing, a twin-throat carburettor and the lower roofline, it returned 26 miles per gallon at a steady 65 miles per hour. By comparison a 186S automatic sedan would have been lucky to get 23 mpg. Beautiful, (relatively) economical, rorty and flat-handling it was. A grand tourer it was not.

That idiosyncratic tacho, mounted just inches above the floor on the centre console, almost became airborne at highway cruising speeds—too fast, it cried, too fast! My mechanic reproached me for occasionally using 4000 rpm

through the gears, warning me the Opel box would blow up. So it was easy through first, second and third and no more than 70 down the highway—well, mostly no more than 70. I had to dream into that Monaro the true grunt I wanted it to have.

A car for freeways and boulevards, it was not afflicted by any hint of sophistication. The dreaded mid-corner bumps inspired almost FJ-like behaviour from the live rear axle with its stiff semi-elliptic springs, so that the heavy coupe felt ready for imminent departure from sanity and tarmac. Sometimes it could embarrass four-cylinder sporty sedans like the Peugeot 504 1.8, but only when there were uphill twisty bends of nice smooth bitumen.

Through the Grampians one September afternoon, the Monaro was pulling 55 in second (the loudest noise, my memory of the mechanic's warning) out of tight bends, while my mate's Pug gasped at 47 or so, leaning like a dancer on its fine suspension. We never repeated this experiment over dirt, or downhill, where the General's early boot polish tin-sized discs might have proved unequal to the task of stopping such an overweight phallic symbol.

Even in the city it had limitations. The fragile Opel box plus primitive driveline made for snatch, unless you treated this Monaro as if it were a Fiat—delicate and demanding great smoothness. Rear vision was poor. There was inadequate interior room, though the boot was big. At such times, I would turn up the radio—favourite songs of the time were 'You make me feel brand new' and 'I'm not in

love'—and hunt the GTS around Kew Boulevard. At such times, it might have been called 'Corvette', as far as I was concerned, this being the perspective of a car tragic.

I loved the Monaro GTS nearly all the five months and 20,000 kilometres I owned it. But on any rational analysis it was no match for the cool cream Renault 16 TS it had irrationally replaced in my hands. The Renault, like the Fiat 125 I owned later, would turn a low-18s quarter compared with the Monaro's 19 and risking the Opel box, and would cruise insouciantly at about 135 kilometres per hour. The Renault and Fiat were among the class four-cylinder performance sedans of the late 1960s. Then there was the amazing Datsun 1600.

For the Monaro, 100 miles per hour might just as well have been the sound barrier. That Renault had gas-filled rear shock absorbers, standard XAS Michelins, Jaeger instrumentation and untiring seats. A cool, cool customer, but somehow not as sexy as the Monaro. When my wife learnt about the change of cars, she said I'd lost my mind.

Perhaps she was right. But for those five months and 20,000 kilometres I had the experience of owning and driving what was not just a fair-enough motor car, but a significant piece of Australian motoring history. And you won't see even the world's best Renault 16TS advertised for $50,000-plus, which is about what a GTS 186S is worth as I write.

Didn't it take a long while, though, for such Aussie classics to be properly recognised by the market? In the early

1980s I saw a GTS 327 for sale. It was the same slightly garish metallic blue as my old 186S. From memory, this tidy but not pristine Monaro was priced at considerably less than $6000—too much for me, but hardly expensive when a new base model Commodore was not far off $10,000.

12 On not owning Falcon GTs

For once, I probably shouldn't have kept my money in my pocket or, more accurately, have allowed the bank to lend the necessary funds to another customer. At least I can claim some prescience. The last paragraph of my 'Fordword' for The History of the Falcon GT *reads:*

> If you are already fortunate enough to own a GT, then you won't need us to tell you to hang onto it. If you don't have one, begin your search as soon as you have read this magazine.

I have never owned a Ford Falcon GT. But somewhere in my heart, ever since I first heard of such a car and even before it changed the face of Australian motoring forever, I have always wanted one.

I should also acknowledge that the car has played a central part in my career as a motoring journalist. In 1983 I compiled the first ever commercial Australian magazine devoted to the history of a particular car. This was *Roarin' Fordies*, commissioned at my suggestion by Federal Publishing. It was the history of the Ford Falcon in Australia with special emphasis on the Falcon GT. (Many followed, including magazines on Charger, Monaro, Torana and Commodore, as well as books, among which was one published by Marque Publishing on the Mazda rotaries.) Without those glory days, there would probably have been no call to produce such a one-shot magazine and it is absolutely significant that the Falcon was my first suggestion for the history format.

Later came a magazine, conceived by Geoff Paradise and me, and published by the company he had founded, Performance Street Car Publishing (PSC). This was *Super Ford*. The inaugural issue centred around a huge feature detailing for the first time the whole story of the Phase IV GTHO. It accounted for the first 39 pages of the 100-page magazine. Later came a one-shot magazine, also produced by PSC, *The History of Falcon GT*. As I write, that magazine, with additional material, is being published in book form.

So, although I have never come close to owning a GT, my vicarious experience of this iconic model—*brand*, we should probably call it now—has been exhaustive and sometimes exhausting.

Funnily enough, perhaps, my favourite of the original series was always the XT. I would have had—would have—mine in Candy Apple Red, by choice. It was so astonishingly 1968! Of course, when all this interest was really beginning to gather in the early 1980s, I could have bought a nice XT GT any old time for six grand. But didn't.

For once, I probably shouldn't have kept my money in my pocket or, more accurately, have allowed the bank to lend the necessary funds to another customer. At least I can claim some prescience. The last paragraph of my 'Fordword' for *The History of Falcon GT* reads:

> If you are already fortunate enough to own a GT, then you won't need us to tell you to hang onto it. If you don't have one, begin your search as soon as you have read this magazine.

In truth, I hankered more for Monaros, at least until 1992 when a new car drove into view that rearranged my motoring priorities. There was I, in the heart of my Alfa Romeo phase with added Citroën race car flavour, when Ford Australia reintroduced the Falcon GT. I had no idea at the time that most of the 250 EB 25th Anniversary GT Falcons to be produced would be significantly down on the claimed power

output. Not to put too fine a point on my response, I fell immediately in love with the Cobalt Blue test car.

In my test in *The Best Car & Sports Driver* magazine, I noted the differences between 1967 and 1992:

> Button-down collars were fashionable in 1967 and they are again today. But the new shirts have much more in common with the old ones than does the Anniversary Falcon GT with its ancestor.
>
> In 1967 Germaine Greer's views hadn't entered the broader culture. Martin Luther King's eloquence hadn't succeeded in giving American blacks equal rights. The Australian Aboriginals were not entitled to vote. John Lennon and Paul McCartney were churning out new songs with delightful regularity, while Bob Dylan's electric guitar was still causing distress to folk music purists and The Seekers tunefully saluted Georgie Girl. In 1967 an HR 186 was considered a reasonably fast family sedan and the Valiant V8 was a rocketship.
>
> When the Falcon GT drove into this scene, plenty of us noticed!

I see now, though, that 'test' is too grand a term to describe the rave I delivered for the 25th Anniversary GT. I allowed myself to be seduced by the bonnet scoops . . . and the memories. But want this car I did. It was probably fortunate that I could not afford it. Hindsight reports that the appellation GT was hung too lightly upon that car. Ford

Australia traded too brazenly on the glory days. But hey, I was a sucker for it:

> Nineteen sixty-seven, you've just turned 17, a couple of times a week you get to put the L-plates on the back of Dad's Peugeot. Next year maybe you'll get to buy an old four-cylinder car and you'll go out to the Geelong Road and try to crack 80 mph. But what you really want, what you wish you could persuade your Dad to buy is the new Falcon GT. Picture yourself taking your girlfriend to the Toorak drive-in aboard a Ford Falcon GT. How could she say anything else but yes to your suggestion of retiring to the back seat just about the time James Bond or Our Man Flint gets down to serious action? How could there be a more exciting car than this gold and black sedan with the charcoal trim and the green-lit Stewart–Warner instruments and an exhaust note loud enough to wake your neighbours early Sunday mornings when you should be getting ready for church?
>
> In 1967 you could only dream haplessly about getting to sit in a Falcon GT. You'd never own one. In the '70s you could afford faster cars than the Peugeot 403, Fiat 1100 and Mosman Blue FJ Holden in which you spent those first years of driving. But you cannot afford a Phase III GTHO. Then the dream was over. No more GT Falcons.
>
> You watched through the '80s as those old GTs became collectors' items, their prices escalating way past

the original numbers. And, perhaps strangely, you are not really tempted to cash in your nostalgia chips. You are heading towards 40, you've got a bit softer in your tastes and you don't quite fancy the idea of weak brakes, heavy manual steering and vinyl trim. You wished Ford would somehow magically re-create the Falcon GT, but in a modern style with power steering, fast glass, central locking, air conditioning and maybe even leather trim. You wished Ford would build a sophisticated Falcon V8 that could take the battle right back to the Europeans again. You wished!

Can you picture yourself in October 1992 just moseying down Parramatta Road in a Cobalt Blue Anniversary Falcon GT? Can you see yourself feeling almost as proud of being Australian as you had been ashamed just a week or so beforehand when the Bathurst yobbos hurled abuse (and some of them just plain hurled) and cans at Skaife and Richards (for daring to beat the Australian cars in their Nissan GT-R)? You look across the top of a Momo wheel housing Ford's cruise control, past a miniature mountain range of bonnet ducts, down the tunnel of traffic and in your heart you are somewhere along Conrod doing 226 rather than 58, right? And wouldn't you be remembering vignettes of that black and white footage of Firth and Jane and Geoghegan and Gibson in XR GTs? Can you imagine yourself doing mental arithmetic at the traffic lights, calculating repayments, wondering whether to take an even larger mortgage on your house? Can you

> feel yourself going bloody crazy with desire for another motor car, for this sublimely muscular yet sophisticated, poised, tasteful and yet almost outlandishly singular machine? You can? Then, you, too, are me.

'Sublimely muscular'? That part was in my sweaty imagination. A better car followed when the GT turned 30 in 1997. This one I actually drove long and hard. Mine was the sole dissenting voice as the Porsche Boxster was voted *MOTOR* magazine's 1997 Performance Car of the Year. My choice was the EL Falcon GT. Again, I couldn't possibly have justified the purchase, even if I could have borrowed sufficient money. By this stage I felt some kind of stake in hot Falcons because my own car was also an EL Falcon, an XR8 in Navy Blue bought new and extensively modified. You can read about that car in the next chapter.

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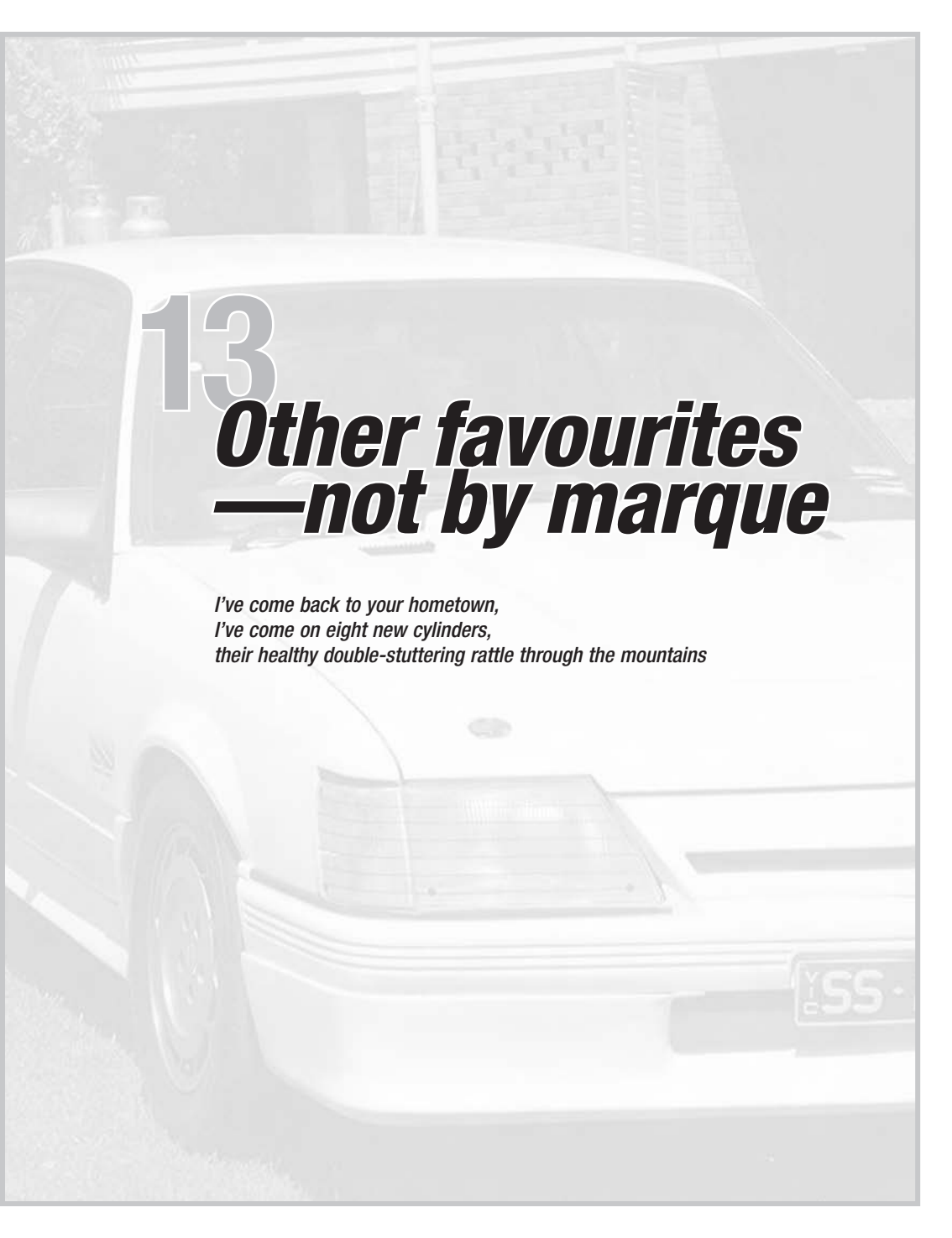

13 Other favourites —not by marque

I've come back to your hometown,
I've come on eight new cylinders,
their healthy double-stuttering rattle through the mountains

Even by the time I was 25 I had already owned so many cars that often the easiest way to date a particular event was to remember which car I was driving at the time. The machines themselves are embedded in the very quality and texture of memory. For example, a trip to Noosa in 1974 in the Monaro cannot be remembered apart from the presence of that car, photographed in the camping ground. With all windows open and radio blaring, heading north at 70 miles per hour (before we all learnt to think in kilometres per hour) felt like a profoundly optimistic and at the same time naïve adventure. And wasn't that also the Monaro? It never felt quite grown up.

Some cars were around for much longer and in different contexts. I bought two of my parents' cars. The Peugeot 404 (JOE 358) had come into our family life in 1967, when Dad bought it secondhand with something like 7000 miles on the odometer. It was an occasion of great excitement for me. I learnt a great deal in that car, although fortunately it did not put me off my older Fiat, which had its own verve (and yellow speed stripes). When, seven years later, the opportunity came to buy the 404 from him, I did not resist. I could drive adolescent memories forward into my mid-20s. The 404 had been resprayed but it was still mechanically youthful.

In 1980, by which time I had accrued a measure of financial insecurity, I settled for my mother's Holden HD Premier (JLF 896) for $600. One day I packed it with most of my belongings and drove to Sydney to live. How could I

ever forget that drive for freedom? I had a car, $400 in the bank, some debts, no job and nowhere to live.

Mum had bought her HD towards the end of my first year of full-time university in 1969. It offered a marked contrast to the same-age Peugeot. We all knew the 404 was superior but there was plenty to like about the effortless torque of that 179 motor, and the quality of the interior and size of the boot were positives. Once it had got me to Sydney and I had begun to work my way into a better economic position, I was happy to put the immaculate Premier in my past, along with memories of adolescence.

This may seem like a strange way to enter a chapter on other favourite cars, but there is something about those two that still helps me to decide which qualities I value lastingly in a machine. Although the HD Premier proved to be my freedom machine, I could never shrug off the mediocrity of its two-speed Powerglide transmission and dismal fuel economy. There was stuff to like about it, but evidently the car had not been engineered by people who enjoyed driving fast. (Many years later I finally owned an EH Special 179 sedan, which really was a far superior car to the nose-heavy HD, although, frankly, not a patch on a 404.) The Peugeot could only manage the same true top speed of 80 miles per hour, although it had been quicker than that in its early years. But it steered so sharply, rode so well, and cut so sweetly through the air, that it always felt more like a slower Mercedes-Benz than an alternative to a Holden or Falcon. It was a blast to change that weird column lever down into

third for an overtaking manoeuvre, then slowly towards you and upwards into top again at 65 miles per hour. The acceleration itself was modest but the 404 always delivered a great sense of involvement and control in the driving process: it was a *driver's* car.

Perhaps if things had gone differently with the 403 I owned for just weeks and which was my official 'first' car, I might have become a Peugeot addict, in that way of so many enthusiasts. Members of Peugeot clubs seem to be even more obsessively one-eyed than their counterparts in most other one-marque associations. Had my first year of car ownership, that drive from eighteen years of age to nineteen, been spent behind the imposing wheel of the 1957 403 rather than the simpler two-spoke item of the Fiat 1100, I may have made the transition from 403 to 404 to 504, and so on. But I somehow doubt it. To me, Peugeot lost the plot in the 1980s, in much the same way that Fiat had lost it a dozen years earlier. I mean, how could someone reared on the effortless poise of a 504 fall for a rear-wheel drive 405, let alone the heavy-handed stylistic awkwardness of the 407? And so this book contains no dedicated Peugeot chapter.

Indeed, my favourite cars which have not yet been covered represent a diverse lot. Fiats and Alfas, Mercedes, BMWs and Jaguars cover great chunks of my motoring memories, but they are nowhere near the whole story. Some other marques have also exerted special magic, Maserati for one. If only the car had been just a bit more reliable . . .

In all my life I have never met such a wonderful salesman as Tony Graziani, now my long-time friend and dealer principal of Italia Motori. One Thursday winter afternoon in 1995 I was in Crown Street, Darlinghurst, waiting for a group of running companions to turn up so we could practise the City to Surf route. Why not, while waiting, wander into the House of Maserati and have a cup of coffee with Tony, I thought. And did. I may as well have stepped into Italy. Within maybe 15 minutes I had decided to buy a six-year-old Biturbo 425i sedan. Tony only had to be his charming self; I wanted a part of that world. What I was really buying was the romance of *Italia*, not in the guise of a mere Fiat or Alfa Romeo but a marvellously plush and fast Maserati. Something special with orange leather hide and briar wood, that trademark analogue Maserati clock which kept beautiful time. Pity about the rest of the electrics, then. And the car I sold to buy this flawed pseudo-masterpiece—not traded, note, but sold, because Tony expressed no interest in the car beyond saying it did not suit me—was an almost new HSV Statesman.

Of course, the Statesman had been a mistake in the first place. It was fast but in no way special—another impulse buy. The only other Holden I have bought since then is the VK SS (strictly, an HDT as the Statesman was an HSV!), which I have now owned for about seven years. It features most Group Three options, a red-hot engine and Supra gearbox. Purists might scorn the modifications, but I could never be interested in a bog standard VK SS with that clumsy four-speed M20 gearbox. One day someone will rock

up and pay me lots of money for this bewilderingly fast old hotrod, but it is a special vehicle in the important sense and one I'm happy to own. HDT and HSV have, between them and in very different ways, produced some unforgettable machines, but some are insufficiently differentiated from the mainstream products. The Statesman 185i came into this category.

You might wonder, then, when I confess to buying a brand new EL Falcon XR8 within eighteen months or so of selling the HSV. This time, I was a sucker for the price. Because this was a 1996-plated car on sale in February 1997, I was able to save some four or five thousand dollars on the recommended retail price. The fact that it was that great Navy Blue colour and came with body kit and 16-inch wheels made the impulsive decision easier.

That XR8 stands out in my memory for plenty of reasons. The first is that it is perhaps the only new car I had modified within 10 kilometres of buying it. That nasty plastic gearknob. About the most cost-effective modification you can make to any older style manual car is to ditch the original knob in favour of something that rewards two of the five senses equally. On my way to the Central Coast from Ryde, I detoured to Rhodes—I have often noted that all roads lead to Rhodes (where Roman Autotek is located)—to get a Momo Competizione alloy gearknob.

That was to prove only the start of a long journey of modification to the XR8. Heasman Steering of Sydenham, Bilstein importer for New South Wales, fitted lowered Lovells

coils and Bilsteins all round. The 3.27 final drive was swapped for a 3.45. Genie extractors, a high-flow air filter box, and the EL GT's 60 mm throttle body (in lieu of the standard 45 mm unit) all contributed to a lift in performance. Cross-drilled Sixth Gear brake rotors improved the stopping.

There were plenty of other minor changes during my two years of ownership and my work was rewarded with news that the dealer who traded the car (on a brand new AU Fairmont Ghia V8) sold it almost immediately.

The EL was the last of what might be called the half-hearted XR8s. Before the introduction of the AU, Tickford revisited the EL, making some of the changes I had made. But in truth the AU was a much better and quicker car in standard form than any of its predecessors, and the 5.4-litre versions are better again. Here, then, is the main reason why I have never pursued an EB or EL GT. Successive XR8s are generally better than earlier model GTs and an EL GT, despite all the careful engineering that went into it, could hardly be compared with a brand new XR8. What the longer term issues of this are for the collectability of Australian muscle cars are, I'm not sure.

After the EL GT, I owned quite a string of Falcons, most of them V8s. A Narooma Blue AU II XR8 ute was fun for a while. Most memorable, though, is the 1979 FC LTD Cartier 351 I ran from mid-1999 to late 2007. It was your veritable grandfather's axe of a car. I'm sure some components were replaced twice. With a bit of help from my old mate Mick Webb of SVO, an operation he runs out of Ringwood in

Melbourne's east, I got this one into a pretty advanced state of tune. It had extractors, a special Mick Webb cam, and a great big Holley carburettor (which increased consumption by almost 20 per cent!). Despite the FMX three-speed automatic it would race from zero to 100 kilometres per hour in 8.7 seconds, which I always thought was pretty good. Among the cars I owned during those eight years that the Ford could out-accelerate were a 2.7-litre Honda Legend coupe, the 380SEL Mercedes, a Peugeot 206 GTi, a Magna Sports and my Lexus LS400—all were younger, some by twenty years. But the Ford was always a very long way behind the VK SS, which can reach 100 kilometres per hour in 6 seconds flat or quicker if you are prepared to use road testers' tactics of dialling in highish revs, then dropping the clutch (which I am not).

In my fantasy, this LTD had plenty of Falcon GT in its specification. The Cleveland 351 and the Holley 780 cfm carburettor were closely related to the items found in a Phase III GTHO. And it certainly made a similar sound. But there was a small difference in value, even though I kept thinking someone who already owned any 351-engined GT wouldn't mind buying this LTD for its engine alone. Anyway, it was the closest I have come to owning a GT.

Thanks to lowered suspension, a fat front sway bar, wide 12-slotters and Bilsteins, the LTD handled astonishingly well—emphatically better than any pre-EB GT in standard guise. This old and formerly grand dame seemed to surprise and impress everyone who rode in her, especially those few

who took the wheel. I was sad to see her go, but rust was taking over panel by panel. And with fuel prices at the time of the sale looking set to keep climbing forever, it was an expensive treat to go for a 100-kilometre drive. I needed 23 litres of 98-RON fuel to do the job even at a steady 110 kilometres per hour. The LTD drove out of my life at about the time people were beginning to ask $1 million for the best Phase IIIs. I was grateful for $2000.

At the time of sale, the LTD held the record for ownership tenure at more than eight years. But as I write, two other cars are well placed to challenge that. Both are among my favourites: a 1982 four-door Range Rover four-speed and the aforementioned Brockmobile. I like to joke about a Rangey that it will take you to places other vehicles won't, but will not necessarily bring you back. But mine's been good and is still nice to drive. I could probably write about a third of a book on how Jaguar-Rover Australia used to fete the automotive press in the early 1980s. We did some fabulous drives in Land Rovers and Range Rovers. In fact my first ever press launch was in the last quarter of 1981. From Melbourne Airport we flew by light plane to Mansfield and then by helicopter into Wonnangatta Station, that extraordinary magnet for bushwalkers and four-wheel drivers.

Seen from the air, the Victorian Alps are mainly blue-green peaks, brown rocky outcrops, lean windy ridges with only the Wonnangatta Valley offering a substantial sliver of fertile green. There, for the delectation of maybe twenty motoring writers, an array of four-wheel drives glittered.

Among the Isuzu diesel-engined Land Rovers, the driving of which was the chief purpose of this expedition, were two Range Rovers. It was the first time I ever drove one of these then unbelievable machines, the ride quality of which in this terribly rough country set them apart from anything ever made before or since, at least until well into the 1990s.

My 1982 model has wind-up windows, dilapidated cloth trim, steel wheels and was sold new without a radio. But the standard equipment list of the current Rangey occupies several lines of small print in Glass's esteemed guide. I'll let the reader decide how much of this list constitutes desirable progress.

If the old Range Rover has a kind of animal ability to negotiate topography, the Brock's character also seems to be more animate than mechanical. The engine is nothing short of ferocious. Down the main straight at Phillip Island at a Jaguar club super sprint, it gobbled up WRXs, race-tuned Jags, hot MGBs and the vast majority of other cars there on the day. It reached a true 210 kilometres per hour before this anxious driver went for the middle pedal. For the record, I've seen 204 on the speedo of an EB XR6 (probably 197 actual) and 208 on my WRX (before it was modified and probably a whisker below 200). And I can't imagine that on its ordinary rubber the Brock made an especially fast entry onto the straight.

Similar in concept but absurdly slower was a lovely VC V8 Valiant I owned in the mid-1980s. This one scored a

complete suspension upgrade including Bilsteins all round and was actually a pleasure to drive. It dispensed plenty of pure V8 character and, to me, exemplified that bumper sticker which reads 'Classic not plastic'. Valiants were always underrated, except during the first few minutes they were on sale here.

I have already spoken briefly of my Cooper S. You can't help but love one of these but even in 1983 I couldn't say it felt quick, just lively. There has still never been anything else remotely like a Cooper S, unless you count the BMW version, which is nowhere near as fast (in the context of today) as the original was when it took glory at the 1965 Bathurst 500.

In the BMW chapter I briefly mentioned my 1979 Audi 5E 100 CD, elegant in Azores Blue but lacking in real world performance. Among the best cars I have ever owned was its successor, of which I have had two. The first was a Topaz Green 1984 model, which I owned shortly after my first Series III, a 280ZX (which I traded from Roger on the Jaguar) intervening briefly. I note this strange trio because all delivered about the same performance from zero to 100 kilometres per hour. Call it, by 1989 standards, respectable (about 12 seconds). I remember paying $18,000 for this Audi, which seemed awfully cheap compared with the 1982 Jag for $30,000 earlier that same year. The Audi was pristine. I had never experienced a car which so effortlessly consumed long trips. And since that time I have owned just one other that was (perhaps) better.

The second 100 was a 1987 model, which was plated 1988 and delivered in 1989—tells you something about how slowly these cars sold. It was that hero colour Titian, an orangey kind of metallic red, rather striking. This car offered me a way out of the red Alfa 164 I had so quickly grown to dislike. I returned to my friend Brian Foley, that long-time Alfista, and sold him back the 164 and took the Audi off his hands. He was pleased to see it go.

I then had to reconsider that whole rear-drive versus front-drive argument yet again. The Audi showed how poorly the Alfa engineers had done, although admittedly that car did have much more grunt than the 100. There was no torque steer and outstandingly good steering feel to the Audi. It was an absolute standout car. I have no doubt that if the overpriced 200T had come with leather trim, I would have snapped up one or more of those along my huge drive.

The car that challenges the Audi 100 CD as a long-distance cruiser is the 1997 24-valve Citroën XM I owned some years ago. Nothing in the world rides better than an XM, and with the 140 kW engine (as opposed to the boat-anchor single camshaft 12-valver used in the troublesome earlier models) performance was okay, although hardly exceptional in what was a deeply expensive car when new. Steering feel was about on par with the Audi. On smooth roads, the XM might have had an edge but as conditions deteriorated, its margin would increase. But where the Audi pleased more was in the complete integrity of its design. That five-cylinder engine felt and sounded great.

The instrumentation was elegant and clear. There was a kind of creative austerity to the Audi. But the XM was always let down by its strange interior. My 1997 car had appallingly unconvincing faux wood trim. This may seem hugely irrelevant to cruising ability and in one sense it is. But when you are virtually living in a car, you do notice the details. (I'm sure I wouldn't enjoy my Wrex quite as much if it didn't have a bonnet scoop!) One of the lovely things about cruising in a Jaguar XJ Series III Sovereign is one's consciousness of its sublime interior; your sense of the road comes back down that long, curvaceous bonnet to the Momo woodrim wheel and the expanses of walnut dash and you are conscious of being cocooned in your private tunnel, surrounded by impeccable taste. Nevertheless, I have to give the Citroën XM my vote as the best car in which I have ever speared between the Mornington Peninsula and the Sunshine Coast hinterland.

Oh, the Maserati—Stormy Sky in colour and by nature—suffered one electrial problem too many and I sold it back to the gracious Signor Graziani. He gave me a generous price and our friendship was never at risk. The City to Surf also deserves another mention. I broke 65 minutes for the first time that year (on my way to a best time of 59:20 in 1997).

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14 Luxury export to the US

Interestingly, both Edsel and Lexus used the opening letter as a badge. For Lexus, the capital would be enclosed within an 'imperfect' ellipse. So imperfect was this ellipse that it required six months of work and a precise mathematical formula to get it right. (With Edsel everything *was imperfect.)*

Lexus is a catchy enough sounding brand name but few people realise it is also an acronym for Luxury Export to the US. Was this the origin of the name? I don't believe so, but it is a great story. The Lexus marque was Toyota's signal to the world that Daimler-Benz, BMW and Jaguar were no longer going to dominate the international automotive status game. In a sense it is the marque that dares not speak its name because no-one ever *told* us Lexus could be seen as an acronym, let alone that the same car was sold in Japan as a Toyota Celsior.

The Australian Lexus media launch was carefully stage-managed. We journalists were bombarded with information. Backing the speeches were scads of written material on high-quality parchment-style paper with expensive black covers embossed with that impressive 'L' logo. I'll come back both to the naming of the marque and the design of its emblem a little later.

For the drive program, no expense was spared. This was one of those special events where partners were invited, too. As for the venue, it was Belltrees cattle property in the Hunter Valley, seat of the White family since 1831. The family's most famous member, Nobel Prize-winning novelist Patrick, was not present. Despite the usual feuds that work through families, Belltrees seems to have been a very special place for White because it appears in various (dis)guises in some of his major works, including *Voss*: the expedition led by Johann Ulrich Voss departs from a grand property in the Hunter Valley. I don't know how many of

the Toyota Australia executives who were doing so much to make everyone welcome had read *Voss*, but I believe it was their absolute intention to embed the Lexus marque into Australian culture. Perhaps they even hoped that what the Land Cruiser was to serious offroad work and government contracts, the Lexus might become in the luxury market, *the* car in which to arrive at the golf club.

At the conference preceding the Belltrees junket, held at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, I recall one of the more experienced journalists saying that if he went out with $120,000 to spend on a car and came back without a Mercedes, his wife would kill him. This was not the way the executives at the southern Sydney suburb of Taren Point (where the head office of Toyota Australia, *nee* Thiess Toyota, is located) wanted us to consider the LS400. Naturally, they never used any other name but Lexus to identify the new LS400: the 'T' word was avoided wherever possible. There were some tough questions that day, but towards the end the conference was becoming mired in trivia. I just managed to attract the attention of Bob Miller, Master of Ceremonies and Toyota Australia's Director of Sales and Marketing, for a final question. I directed it to the Chief Engineer of the Lexus, Ichiro Suzuki. Was the Lexus LS400 the very best car that it was possible for Toyota to produce in 1990? Yes.

An obvious answer, perhaps. But look at it this way: if the LS400 was judged to fall short of the standards set by, say, the V12-powered BMW 750i, then the reasonable inference would be that BMW is a superior creator of cars than Toyota.

Suzuki-*san* offered no qualifications to his affirmative, no suggestion of inevitable compromises to keep the price down. And, indeed, there was little evidence in the car itself of any skimping. If the California walnut was used more sparingly than its equivalent in a Jaguar, the reason was not cost—you only had to check out a contemporaneous Mercedes-Benz S-Class with its residual austerity to see why Lexus went easy on the timber.

If anti-lock brakes, leather trim, a brilliant CD sound system, and a V8 engine were all to be expected in a new $100,000-plus luxury car for the 1990s, few could have been prepared for the technology lurking beneath the Lexus's bonnet. Its 4.0-litre 32-valve V8 produced an effortless 190 kW. It soon became the darling of hotrodders, who reworked this low-stressed unit to make prodigious outputs. The theory at Toyota seems to have been that the engine would run a million kilometres without a rebuild.

Profound research drove the entire program. Initially, the code name was F1—not for Formula One but for Flagship One. Toyota engineers dug deep into the culture of wealthy Americans. They also found out all the things these prospective customers did and did not like about Mercedes, BMW, Audi, Jaguar and the other European luxury marques. One of the most important findings was that many customers wanted improved service; they wanted the people who sold them their luxury cars to pamper the owners too.

The 'LS' stands for Luxury Saloon, the '400' for the 4.0-litre engine. And the 'L' stands alone as a highly recognisable

emblem. While many old automotive brands have disappeared since World War II, few have been successfully created. It seems to have been easier for Toyota to arrive at 'Lexus' as the name of its upmarket marque than it was for Ford to conjure 'Edsel'. Both emerged from a selection process involving hundreds of names, then a short list, and then a final choice. The five finalists in the search for Lexus were: Alexis, Calibre, Chaparel, Vectre and Verone. Alexis was favoured but the *Dynasty* connection inspired the rework to Lexus. (And I can just hear someone saying, 'Hey, it's also short for luxury export to the US!') Interestingly, both Edsel and Lexus used the opening letter as the badge. For Lexus, the capital would be enclosed within an 'imperfect' ellipse. So imperfect was this ellipse that it required six months of work and a precise mathematical formula to get it right. (With Edsel *everything* was imperfect.) Molly Sanders of Molly Designs etched a very distinctive, stylised 'L', initially on titanium. Then he cut, filed, polished and surrounded it. But there can be many a slip between ellipse and cup: Molly's work went into competition with five other designs. The previous favourite had been an 'L' designed to look like a seagull's wings and *sans* ellipse. 'That was too whimsical,' said Molly. 'I felt it needed to look like jewellery.' And it does.

The Powerhouse Museum function to inaugurate the Lexus brand in Australia was big on facts, figures and theories. But how would the Lexus fare when driven hard on local roads, where so many Japanese cars—and not a

few Europeans—had fallen short of the promises made for them?

We were flown by light plane to the Hunter Valley and chauffeured by LS400 to Belltrees. I was immediately impressed by the silence of the car and by the elegant, understated gestures of highly polished woodwork contrasting with the leather upholstery. But the shape was a mixture of Mercedes, BMW, Jaguar and existing Toyota. The latter was the most dominant theme. 'It's a big Cressida,' I observed unkindly. Not the response anyone from Toyota wanted to hear. It was, however, actually a compliment. In 1990 the Cressida was a far superior car to a Commodore or Falcon—superbly refined, powered by a quad camshaft six-cylinder engine, incipiently elegant of line and astonishing value for money. In some respects the latest Toyota Cressida bore favourable comparison with a BMW Five Series.

Naturally, executives charged with boosting the sales of Mercedes-Benz, BMW and Jaguar, along with those less imposing marques such as Audi, Volvo, Saab and Alfa Romeo, were not exposed to the new luxury car from Japan in the way the press was. Few of them would have been handed the keys to an LS400 and invited to drive it for several hundred kilometres over a selection of roads. On performance, standard inclusions, silence and build quality the Lexus surpassed all but the very flagship BMWs and Mercedes. It left the XJ40 for dead. This view was about as close to unanimous as you will ever get in a roomful of motoring journalists.

Thus it was, that well before the end of the elegant sojourn in the Hunter Valley, the Australian motoring press had a pretty strong notion of how the Lexus might revolutionise the luxury market. But when such views were proffered at, say, a Jaguar function, the response was polite bemusement. Simply, the luxury car establishment underestimated the threat posed by Toyota with the Lexus marque. Almost two decades on, Jaguar has all but disappeared from the Australian market.

When the Lexus turned its well-fed face towards the big end of town, the scepticism was an unhushed whisper. This Toyota by a flasher name faced the W124 Mercedes, the more expensive S-Class, the BMW Five and Seven, and Jaguar's XJ40 (successor to the Series III). But when those who could spend $118,206 plus on-road costs on a new luxury car took the wheel of a Lexus, many were immediately seduced.

If Toyota Australia was keen to woo the scribblers, they went to even greater lengths with customers. Access to special performances at the Sydney Opera House was a big element here. The plan was not just to transform the buying and servicing experience for the luxury car owner, but to make him or her feel as if the purchase of a Lexus brought unique privileges, membership of an elite club. Toyota set the pace; others followed. In the 1970s Jaguar had Mastercare to keep its customers' cars on the road most of the time. But at Lexus they knew how to provide a special ownership experience that went way beyond removing the broken-down vehicle on a truck and repairing it for nothing.

I happily declare a deep interest in both the Lexus LS400 and the last of the grand old-style Jaguars, the XJ Series III. I have one of each. But which is the better car? Does the question even make sense? And is there a point to asking it?

By contrast, my Lexus has probably never been on a truck. It has now covered more than 340,000 kilometres. I bought it with 311,000 on the odometer and had the timing belt changed as a precautionary measure. Three years ago it was immaculate, but about eighteen months ago the lovely metallic grey-blue of the roof and bonnet began to destroy itself.

The virtues are still apparent. Cruising at the legal limit between Victoria and Queensland, the Lexus drinks little more than 10 litres per 100 kilometres. The engine is barely audible, except when you kick down a gear or two for overtaking heavy vehicles. It still runs 0–100 km/h in 9 seconds and could, at least in theory, max out at 240 kilometres per hour. The climate control rarely needs to approach its coolest setting. After the first 20,000 kilometres in less than 12 months (that is, from 311,000 to 331,000) the oil level hadn't dropped. And the boot is huge (even if the rear leg room isn't).

Almost overnight, the LS400 rendered old-style luxury cars like the Jaguar Series III obsolete, at least by any empirical standard of measurement. Consider: the old 4.2-litre XK engine is said to deliver 153 kW. The automatic transmission has just three forward speeds and at a true 110 kilometres per hour is running at close to 3000 rpm (compared with less than 2500 for the Lexus). Around town, the Series III is

a silent car, almost the equal of the Lexus, but at highway speeds engine noise intrudes, even though the ride remains uncannily quiet and almost matches that of a big Citroën.

Performance? Sort of. Zero to 100 km/h takes 12 seconds and top speed is limited by the tachometer's 5000 rpm redline to 190 or thereabouts. Fuel economy? The Jag is proud of itself when consuming just 14.5 litres per 100 kilometres. That's a lot more Ultimate or V-Power than the Lexus demands, indeed almost 50 per cent more! The air-conditioning is on sabbatical, but even when these Jags were new the system barely coped with a spring day in Melbourne, let alone a summer's afternoon on the road between Goondiwindi and Millmerran. (At least the radiator hasn't boiled yet!) The Series III was designed from new to rust around the front and rear screens. You have to budget on getting this fixed maybe every five years. I can't even *imagine* rust in a Lexus. And on it goes: paint quality, panel gaps, switchgear, etc. (Incidentally, the 1985 cars are vastly better than the cars thrown together just two or three years earlier.) The boot is absurdly shaped and shallow, a trade-off for exterior beauty.

Does the Supersize-Me Cressida have no faults, then, beside failing paintwork? Well, the digital readout for the climate control has faded to invisibility despite the system itself continuing to work with Nippondenso ease. Oh, and the seats are appalling, especially the driver's which had more or less collapsed under the weight of a (presumably) non-Japanese occupant, before I assumed custody.

Any others are a matter of perception. Yes, it's bland in the visual department, but has almost achieved Japanese classic status: the first of the new generation.

So why do I usually prefer to drive the Jaguar? Why is the Jaguar carefully wrapped in a car cover, while the Lexus weathers the seasons? Could it be something to do with the view down the bonnet, the overwhelming classic British luxury of the Jag's interior, including the excellent front seats? Or the constant knowledge of its graceful style? I confess that I don't mind hearing the XK engine spinning at 3000 rpm (and maybe somewhere in the back of the brain is an image of D-Type Jaguars triumphing at Le Mans). This is a very old-fashioned car, which to me is part of its appeal.

The Lexus by contrast is the best *appliance* I've ever owned. I have yet to discern any automotive personality beyond the silently competent. The steering and handling are fine but there is little sense of involvement for the driver. The ride is good, although ultimately a little too soft, but without the suppleness of the Jaguar's. Finally, there is a slightly anaesthetised quality to the driving experience. Perversely, the old Jag, which could not match the Lexus in acceleration, cornering speed or braking, feels the sportier carriage. It is highly strung, a temperamental thoroughbred. As a car tragic, faced with the choice, I would wave farewell to the effortless Lexus without a qualm.

15 Visions of Rianna

And this is the chase. This is the real Targa stuff. Bryan opens the gap on the straights, I close it marginally through the winding sections and fortunately there are plenty of tight corners. At something like 30 kilometres, we have finally closed right in on the elegant bumperless rear of this silver Ferrari and the driver waves us through because we have legimately caught him; it's the rule. This is the feeling to savour, among the greatest feelings of satisfaction I've ever had in motor racing.

It is mid-afternoon and typically cool on the final day of the 1994 Targa Tasmania. My navigator and I are harnessed into our Alfa like astronauts in a space shuttle. The cars are flagged off at 30-second intervals. It feels like a long time when you're watching the one ahead accelerating into the distance, especially the Mini Cooper S, which takes its time to reach top gear. The Mount Lyell Highway combines long straights, a steady climb and a challenging mix of corners. The bitumen will be damp in places, ready to catch the light tail of our little car and give it a flick. I have heard some, like racer Kevin Bartlett, say they prefer oversteer, but I don't. Our Alfa is a 1974 GTV2000 with a modified engine and suspension set for the racetrack. It has reasonable urge but I don't trust its handling as much as the 1985 GTV6 I ran in the inaugural (1992) Targa or even, *in extremis*, that of the BMW 635 CSi I drove in 1993 which telegraphed its intentions in a way the stubby and too-firm old Alfa does not.

Mount Arrowsmith this stage is called. I am urged on by my experience in the first event. We are lined up and the car immediately behind us in the queue is a Walkinshaw Commodore. The navigator approaches my window. 'Would you mind if we started in front of you?' he asks. 'I don't mind,' I say, 'but you'll have to ask that official.' Which he proceeds to do. The man's answer is no. 'Make sure you watch your mirrors,' says the HSV man. 'We'll be right on top of you.' I watch. No sign of the Walkinshaw. (From memory we finished the stage some 50 seconds ahead of them, meaning that we

completed it 20 seconds quicker than they did. I wish I had found the grace not to mention this to the crew. They must have spent most of this longest of all Targa stages thinking we had run off the road somewhere.)

We have covered about half, or some 25 kilometres, of this stage when we catch sight of the dark blue Mini of Harrison and Sedgwick ahead of us on the road. Harrison is a great driver with plenty of Bathurst on his CV but the steep climb doesn't favour a small-engined car. At first sight it's half a kilometre ahead of us, glimpsed briefly. 'It's the Mini,' shouts my navigator. 'Go on, catch him!' On a fast straight, the gap shrinks to about 300 metres, which isn't so many seconds when you're doing 150 or more.

And catch him we do, and it's as if we have been trying to do just this for five days. Ten more kilometres on this winding, marvellous highway and we have reeled in the Harrison/Sedgwick Cooper S.

Such are the joys of the wonderful race over roads that are seemingly purpose-built for the Targa Tasmania. Let me share some more memories. It's the same year, 1994, and we're about to drive Rianna, the last (and to my mind the best—no, all right, equal best with Cethana) of the day four stages, 38 kilometres. You start with a short straight, then comes a doggedly dogleg left, then a mountainous climb, then great soaring straights with blind crests and a regular invitation to get airborne. Without pace notes we cannot know which of these crests is quickly succeeded by a corner, so we treat each one thus. I am surprised after 8.5 kilometres

to see the silver snout of a Ferrari 330GTC looming in the mirrors. So soon? But then I remember that this was just about the world's fastest car when it was new. On those long straights its speed might have been 40 kilometres per hour or more higher than ours. It is at this moment that my navigator makes her sole mistake in six days of navigating. 'Right!' she bellows at the top of her voice, unaided by any fancy in-car chat system and her voice further muffled by a conspiracy of full-face helmets. I move to the extreme left verge, ready to hook hard right. And then she cries, 'No, left, left, sorry!' I slow some more, drop back to first for the now very tight turn as the Ferrari driver, Bryan Mendelsohn, seizes the opportunity to slip past, taking the correct outside line and going hard in what is probably second gear; he makes the first 100 metres really quickly! But the road is tightening, the climbs are becoming fewer and shorter, there are even some descents and I realise with a shock of joy that he's not getting away.

And this is the chase. This is the real Targa stuff. Bryan opens the gap on the straights, I close it marginally through the winding sections and fortunately there are plenty of tight corners. At something like 30 kilometres, we have finally closed right in on the elegant bumperless rear of this silver Ferrari and the driver waves us through because we have legitimately caught him; it's the rule. This is the feeling to savour, among the greatest feelings of satisfaction I've ever had in motor racing.

Then, about two minutes later, with the Mendelsohn Ferrari no more than 50 metres behind us, the Ross Holder/Sam Davis Alfa Romeo GTV6 appears in the mirrors, maybe 50 metres adrift of the Ferrari. So here are the two cars which started 30 seconds and 60 seconds behind us respectively and obviously set to pose quicker times for the stage. Around the Ferrari goes the red GTV6 and slowly, oh so slowly, it is making—clawing—ground on us. Finally, I wave Ross Holder through some half a kilometre from the end of the stage, just about the best one of the whole Targa, and he dances his beautifully prepared Alfa through right on its limit. And the feeling of exhilaration, the whole experience of this legal road racing is almost beyond description.

Over dinner that night in Burnie, Ross, Sam, my navigator and I relive the experience. Ross, it happens, develops and tests Nissan GT-R race cars, while Sam is a senior engineer at HSV. Being overtaken by them in a car that, at least in theory, should not be faster, is no disgrace. And Ross had prepared the GTV6 himself, tuning it to perfection. And, as I saw, driving it accordingly. Their average speed through Rianna was 2 seconds per kilometre quicker than ours.

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The next year, 1995, the memory of Rianna inspires me to new levels of daring. Picture my Citroën BX 16-Valve (the very car that won its class in the 1992 James Hardie 12-Hour at Bathurst) with the right rear wheel cocked some 15 centimetres clear of the tarmac through a tightening

right-hander deep into Rianna. My navigator had to vomit into a bag during the stage but begged me not to slow down on her account. I have already mentioned oversteer versus understeer and this is a good example. On its very soft rubber, the BX displays little tendency to 'push', but that's what it will ultimately do and even a sharp lift off the throttle produces only brief, easily managed oversteer: you just bury it into corners, then get on the power really early. The front tyres feel as if they are trying to suck the surface off the macadam. On the road, you rarely miss a limited slip differential, which any front-drive car needs on almost any racetrack—except, as we found in 1992, Mount Panorama.

That was probably the best I have ever done on a Targa stage and at the end of day four I had eased comfortably clear—all the advantage seized on Rianna—of my deadly rival and potential blood brother, Barry Padgett.

Barry came to the event in 1995 as reigning class champion. His Peugeot 405 Mi16 is closely matched to the Citroën on paper, and so it proved on bitumen. It was like the 1992 James Hardie 12-Hour at Bathurst revisited! Barry Padgett had plenty of local knowledge backed by pace notes, but this was my fourth time and lots of sections were familiar. For some stages Barry's time and mine were a second apart, or even identical. Heading into stage five, I was confident of the class victory, thanks to Rianna. But I didn't worry about my tyres, the front pair now being rather low on tread.

On day five it's raining. Unfortunately, Barry and I never see each other on the road but we get together to compare notes during the day. He has clearly gone quicker on the wet sections. In the end, I am delighted to finish second, and to take home my third class-placing and fourth Targa plate. (A plate is awarded to you if you complete every competitive Targa section within the time set for the class.)

The Targa is at once a great race and a week-long party. I remember one magic scene in 1993, where the event served as an unforgettable backdrop to life itself. We had finished Rianna and were heading for the overnight stop at Burnie—car-crazed Burnie—where later that evening seemingly half the city's population swarmed over the rally machines. Adrenaline cooled in my veins as the BMW glided through the soft autumnal twilight (Tasmania!). Suddenly, a bride and groom cheered us. An entire glittering wedding party lined the main street of this tiny town, to greet each of more than 200 cars individually. That's better than a car per guest. For a moment, perhaps, one well-charged guest thought that I, in my look-alike car, was Gentleman Jim Richards in his black JPS BMW coupe. 'At least you're related to him,' he said. 'I can tell by your hairstyle.'

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16 A Chiko Roll in the Kimberley

Has ever a car been more inaptly named than this Triumph? Of course, there was its predecessor the Vanguard, which led from the back of the field. And the Cedric. Designed to appeal to English sensibilities as perceived by 1950s Japanese executives, it caused the Poms – and perhaps even more so we colonials – almost to die laughing instead.

Okay, I'll admit it immediately, this was just a good chapter heading. I have never owned an Austin X6 Kimberley, although there was a time I thought it might have been a good idea. I have, however, owned some terrible excuses for motor cars, which is the main theme of the chapter.

Sometime towards the end of 1995 the then editor of *Wheels* magazine, Angus MacKenzie, invited me to bare my motoring soul. No, he wasn't interested in hearing the good stuff, the fabulous motoring memories; he wanted to hear about the disasters. 'There must have been some barkers,' he said, 'some real dogs. Tell us about your ten worst cars.' Did I detect a note of voyeurism? I did.

By the end of 1995—and the story Angus invited me to write appeared in the January 1996 edition, which has Peter Robinson on the cover in an orange BMW Z3 ('Licensed to thrill, but James Bond's BMW misses the target')—I had been a motoring writer for fourteen years and had already had close to 100 cars to call my own, even if in most cases a finance company might have urged a prior claim to ownership. 'There have been the automotive equivalents of love affairs, one-night stands and marriages of convenience,' I wrote. 'This is about the marriages of inconvenience. Until now I've mostly wanted to write about the good times. I am a romantic, you see.' Angus wasn't and probably still isn't. 'Go on,' he urged. 'There must have been some truly horrendous cars.'

Dear reader, that was in 1995, when I was already a candidate for T.S. Eliot's rhetorical question: 'After such knowledge, what forgiveness?' And that was before I had

revisited my past in the form of an Armstrong Siddeley, or explored the ultimate mechanical and electronic vagaries of the early series Citroën XM. It was also several months before I was appointed motoring correspondent for a short-lived magazine with the improbable title of *Sporting Doctor*. What forgiveness? I can hardly believe what I did. The magazine offered to subsidise my purchase of a car in which to tackle the 1996 Variety Club Bash and report on the experience in its glossy pages. My first thought was to build up a Peugeot 404 and then I bought—wait for this oxymoron—an (allegedly) rally-ready Triumph 2000.

In the *Wheels* story published just months earlier I had nominated my Triumph 2.5 Pi prominently among the barkers, describing it as a comfortable place to wait for the NRMA. 'Its beautiful wooden dashboard inspired reflection on one's motives for having bought such a shitfight in the first place.' Looking back loftily, I observed that I was a younger man at the time, one who really wanted a Jaguar and chose the Triumph as a cut-price substitute. What bullshit! I had simply been driving down a street in Sydney's eastern suburbs when I saw it for sale at a price I could almost afford. Why did I not remember what a salesman had once said to me about the Austin X6 Kimberley that I was contemplating buying from a neighbouring used car yard? 'Some cars,' said this wise man, probably pausing to draw on a Benson & Hedges, 'are not worth anything at all.' Absolutely—that 2.5 Pi was not worth the grand I somehow raked together for it.

Funnily enough, it was only the other week that I remembered why I had been drawn to the $1000 Pi. I happened upon it parked in a street. (Was it Randwick?) This was only a year or so into my life as a motoring journalist. *Wheels*, to which I contributed, was my favourite magazine. Evan Green, whom I had yet to meet, had just published a spellbinding four-part series in which he told the story of his assault on the 1970 World Cup Rally in a works Triumph 2.5 Pi. Undoubtedly the finest Australian motoring journalist ever, Green brought that car to life: it was almost human. But I had always loved them anyway. And in a curious way, my experience with that white Triumph almost mimicked his, but at much lower speeds, like tragedy played out as farce. It still numbers among the worst cars I have ever owned when measured against that critical criterion of continuing to proceed.

But I thought this heavily fettled Triumph 2000 was a different proposition and, besides, the Variety Club Bash was a specialist event and it would be better to buy a car someone else had already expended hard work on preparing. Further, I reasoned that a 2000 equipped with a 2.5-litre engine and twin carburettors would avoid the most devilish of my earlier car's mechanical features, the Lucas fuel-injection system. Joseph Lucas had been a pioneer in fuel injection, initially for racing cars—so said the man who pocketed my cheques and was reputed to be the only mechanic in Sydney at the time who could fix this arrangement. 'I see, racing,' I have subsequently said to him in my imagination. 'What

variety of racing? How long were the pit stops?' Lucas is sometimes unkindly referred to as the Prince of Darkness—as in when your headlights fail or the entire electrical system goes on strike.

Has ever a car been more inaptly named than this Triumph? Of course, there was its predecessor the Vanguard, which led from the back of the field. And the Cedric. Designed to appeal to English sensibilities as perceived by 1950s Japanese executives, it caused the Poms—and perhaps even more so we colonials—almost to die laughing instead. The Datsun Stanza was arguably the world's least poetic car and, while the Hillman Husky may have been a dog of a little van, it couldn't have pulled a sled on level ground. The early Hyundai Sonatas were anything but musical. The fragile little Triumph Herald was a double-barrelled misnomer. It was no triumph whatsoever (despite a 24-foot turning circle) and all it heralded was one's own demise when the cardboard dashboard fell into your lap.

I am delighted to report that I have never owned any of the above cars except the pair of six-cylinder Triumphs, and the worrying thing is that, looking back some 25 years, I can almost feel another Pi coming on (almost), another Failure 2.5 Petrol Rejection. But another Triumph purchase would make me a repeat-repeat offender, and not for the first time. I must also confess to a pair of Citroën CXs, a trio of XMs and a veritable orchestra of Alfa 90s.

When it ran sweetly the Triumph 2.5 Pi was a delight in its English low-geared style. Mine was an automatic that

ran out of breath at about 157 kilometres per hour, which from memory was around 5000 rpm, with the in-line six sounding wonderful. The Bash car was slower. Before I got it home to the New South Wales Central Coast, it was slower again because it had dropped a valve. So there I was with the only almost-free car I had ever owned in my life, on the first day of custody. And already a huge bill loomed.

The Variety Club car came with plenty of variegated spares including axles, a gearbox and a worn engine. I still remember carrying the gearbox up my steep bush block and putting it to rest in the cubby house . . .

A nice man called Trevor (not Daryl or Craig, note) arrived to remove the Triumph's engine. He would take it away and perform a comprehensive rebuild, with performance almost an equal priority to reliability. A few thousand borrowed dollars later, I had a passably swift Bash car. On the Stuart Highway it would pull a genuine 180 kilometres per hour in overdrive top and did not miss a beat. But it would be unsaleable afterwards, for who would want a roughish, high-riding white Triumph 2000 with a hot motor? No-one, except the man who had campaigned it the years before it came to me. He blessedly rang out of the blue asking if he could buy back his car. Yes, please! Thank you indeed, Paul. And do you still have the car all these years on?

All this happened in 1996. I sold the house two years later and still drive down that street from time to time. And I'm betting nobody has moved the spare gearbox from its resting place.

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Neither of those Triumphs was so completely an unmitigated disaster as one European I owned in only too recent memory. I dare not identify this vehicle because it is sufficiently rare that the father of its present owner would be likely to sue me were he to recognise himself in the following account.

I had already advertised the car for sale and, indeed, found a buyer, when the thermostat, which had been replaced only eighteen months or so earlier by the previous hapless owner, gave up the ghost. This, I thought, was a job I could do myself. Wrong. On a Holden or old Fiat it was a very straightforward job, but not on this car. Some genius engineer had decreed that to change this particular thermostat would entail disconnecting the engine from one of its mounts. So my regular mechanic, grumbling about the design of the car and the nationality of its engineers, did the work. Oh yes, and the first thermostat I sourced was a dud.

Then I asked him to issue a roadworthy certificate so I could complete the promised sale. But this very conscientious mechanic found an oil leak and said that would have to be repaired first, which would mean engine and gearbox out and several thousand dollars of expense.

At this point I should tell you about my buyer. He had rung me three times before I began to worry about his business sense. The third time he said: just keep the car for me. Don't sell it to anyone else. Well, I said, normally such a request is accompanied by a cash deposit. And then the

proverbial penny dropped: how old are you, I asked? He was sixteen. This knowledge just made me feel guilty in advance but he had apparently nurtured a desire for one of these particular shitboxes since the age of five. He was a car tragic, whom I will call Ben. 'My father is going to buy it for me,' he said.

So I found another mechanic who had known the car in an earlier life and was happy to certify it without fixing the oil leak. Problem was, his location was some 300 kilometres from mine. Never mind. Off I went. The oil leak posed no problem either for the trip or the inspection. I came home with the certificate as a treasured new possession, my passport to a shitbox-free life.

Ben's father had a sensible desire to check out the car before buying it. Would I mind driving the 120 kilometres to their place? No worries. After the recent 600-kilometre round trip, a further 240 would almost be a pleasure.

Unfortunately, although everyone loved the car, Ben's dad didn't yet have any money. He had just moved in with a new girlfriend, who he said would save up the several thousand dollars over the next couple of months. Throughout the test drive (conducted entirely by me) Ben's dad simply sat in the back and talked about himself. It turned out that this somewhat strange individual had once before promised to buy Ben a car and then reneged. I was anxious about the whole arrangement but I didn't want to upset Ben, who had fallen in love with this sleekly European technological nightmare. While his father raved, Ben just sat next to me

grinning. So I closed the deal with no cash changing hands. I had now driven more than 800 kilometres towards the sale without receiving a dollar. Fuel alone added up to some $150 of expense.

Several weeks passed and eventually about a third of the car's purchase price arrived in the form of a postal order. Several more weeks passed and Ben's father did not return my calls. Meanwhile, another prospective buyer was ringing to ask if the car was still available. Guiltily, I decided to sell it to this man who wanted to fill my pockets with cash and would buy the car without any questions because he'd had one before and wanted another one, registered and roadworthy or not. I would return Ben's father's (or his girlfriend's) money.

So I rang Ben with the bad news. 'Hang on,' he said. 'Now my stepfather wants to buy the car for me.' The dimensions of this family situation were becoming clear. (It was already all too clear that Ben's dad was a complete loser.) So I spoke to stepfather Graham, who entirely reasonably wanted to drive the car (oh no!) and suggested that, if the deal went ahead, I should refund all of Ben's dad's girlfriend's money because he, Graham, did not want Ben's dad to have any part of the deal.

Ben and Graham and Ben's mother and brother and sister were going to drive nearly 200 kilometres to inspect the terrible vehicle. On a public holiday. About 1 o'clock in the afternoon they rang to say they were stuck in traffic and would not be able to make it before Ben's mother had to get

back to the city for her evening job. That's okay, I said, stay where you are and I'll meet you there in an hour. I jumped into the shitbox and started my journey.

Fifteen minutes down the road, the water temperature began to climb. I had no tools and no mobile telephone reception. I stopped, opened the bonnet and saw that the top radiator hose was coming adrift. Using the ignition key as a screwdriver (as you do) I was able to make a hasty repair and proceed. I was about 20 minutes late and everyone was getting anxious, I most of all, I think. But the test drive went okay and the deal was struck. They requested I deliver the car the following Saturday and a bank cheque would be waiting for me.

When I got it home, however, I soon discovered that where I had reconnected the top hose to the radiator, that plastic item itself was crumbling. Nothing short of a replacement would suffice and how would I get one and have it fitted into the shitfight in time for Saturday's delivery? Somehow I managed. The bills had mounted, but at least the sale would proceed.

The next part of this story defies belief. The car's in-built immobiliser began to play up—on the day before the delivery—and I could not start the car. Eventually, after frantically consulting a factory expert, I got it going.

The next morning the bloody car started perfectly but some inner voice told me not to switch off the engine. The long drive was perfect but I still felt nervous about turning it off. 'Where would you like me to park the car?' I asked

on arrival (thinking it might be there for a while!). 'Oh, right there in the drive is fine,' said Graham, a likeable man made even more so by the prospect of his paying me for the car. Money changed hands, and I left rather promptly.

Then came the phone call. They couldn't start it. I said I would contribute to whatever the costs of repair might be but did not say that I already knew there could be big problems. Monday seemed a long way into the future. When 9 o'clock came I was on the phone to the importer. Can't be fixed, the man told me. No parts available here or in Europe. And this for a car just seventeen years old!

Then came another phone call. It was Graham. They had started the car and had worked out how to disconnect the immobiliser.

So that was the worst car I have ever owned as well as the most stressful selling experience. I've left out more details about Ben's real dad, too, that made the situation even more stressful. The thing is, Ben wanted that car, warts and all. Even when it couldn't be started on the Saturday afternoon, he said he was thrilled just to have it. The worst news I have for Ben is that being a car tragic is a lifelong disease.

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So what constitues the worst car? Ask anyone who is standing next to a broken-down vehicle, or hitching a lift, and the answer is easy: the worst car is the one that is not going. The worst car is the car that has failed most often to go. Thus we can leave the related question of best cars to include only

those which manage to run most of the time. Only then can questions about quality of design and driving pleasure enter the discussion. I need to make this point carefully because in terms of theoretical design and the joys of taking the wheel, the car discussed in the last few paragraphs *should* have been one of the best I've ever owned, not the outright worst. Wright's Overriding Theorem Number One: to be considered a 'car', the bloody thing has to run, keep running most of the time, and not cost an effing fortune to keep running.

You almost have to laugh when the combination of appalling design and total unreliability hides behind a rego label. I am thinking now of a 1959 Fiat 500 that gave me considerable grief in 1973. At first sight, it was a complete charmer with a convertible-style vinyl roof that could be rolled back to reveal a kind of automotive sardine can. The 500 joined my pale blue 1966 Fiat 1500 (three times the car?) to constitute what might have been called a two-Fiat family. But when I compare the joy of getting behind the wheel of the 1500 (looking down that stubby bonnet, and giving the car its head in third gear), when I think of the kind of nose-down eagerness of that car, its animal quality, then the 500 seems indeed to be a laughable thing. Let me put it another way. If cars are supposed to represent unacknowledged male sexual fantasies or to be some kind of engorged masculine member on wheels, then the Fiat 500 was the car played out as farce, which just shows you how absurd some of those simplistic pseudo-Freudian notions are!

I wanted to add some rude comments here about the new generation Fiat 500, and perhaps about so-called retro cars in general. But this new little Fiat is not too bad, even if 100 brake horsepower from the 'big' 1.4-litre four-cylinder engine feels modest when challenged by the hills of south-eastern Queensland. As I started to think about a few aspects of it that might be improved, my memory kept returning to the pathetic little 500 of the 1950s.

Of course there was no synchromesh. Of course you were forever changing gears. Top speed: 55 miles per hour and way scary. I think it had two starter motor failures. When the second one gave up its silly little ghost, I parked the 500 on a hill some way from home, perhaps unconsciously hoping it would be stolen by some lunatic. And, believe me, some lunatic tried.

Isn't it amazing how quickly a car that made you smile can make you angry when it fails to conform to Overriding Theorem Number One?

Rationality rarely intrudes during the purchasing process but may provoke a decision to sell. This was the case with my brief spell as an 'owner'. The Rolls-Royce in question was a 1974 Silver Shadow, metallic dark brown (Walnut) in colour with gorgeous tan hide. Rollers of the 1970s and 1980s, I have subsequently realised, now find ownership among those who like the idea of being rich but will no longer feel rich when the car has finished being repaired. The least you can expect is breeding and politeness from the

service personnel. And nice magazines to read while you're waiting at Just Leave Your Wallet Here Motors.

Quick quiz: what have a 1974 Silver Shadow, a 1948 Holden and a 1960 Volkwagen got in common? (And, oh yes, a 1959 Fiat 500 Sardine Roof.) The lack of a water temperature gauge. It's true. In the cases of the Beetle and the Fiat Sprat, the reason is obvious: they were air-cooled! With the Holden it was cost cutting. But presumably the Rolls-Royce product planners decided not to bother owners and chauffeurs with such peripheral data. This owner, however, took a contrary view, seeking more information not less. The nice service manager admitted that—*in extremis*—RR motors could cost up to $50,000 to overhaul. But a little early warning, I figured, could save a future financial catastrophe. I also reasoned that if an engine costs more than the car it powers, then you've got the wrong car.

I didn't spend that much on the Shadow—just $3700 of 1991 money to get a water temperature gauge and a scale model tachometer fitted into the dash, and for the removal of some slop in the front end. Oh yes, the 'slop'. Around a corner I generally took at 95 kilometres per hour in any car made after about 1960, the Rolls developed St Vitus' Dance at 75 with that crook plastic steering wheel almost shaking out of my hands.

The only other thing wrong with the car was its owner's paranoia. It seemed to me that $3700 might be the tip of a very large iceberg as time went by. I had a sheaf of previous bills from when the car was new; I added them up to get a

total much greater than my $45,000 outlay. So within two months of becoming an 'owner', I became a vendor. Would the same dealer buy the car back for $35,000? He would not. So I drove it down Parramatta Road and sold it to an honest man called Paul Margolin who would in turn sell me several cars over the coming years.

Clearly, I still had some residual fury when I penned a *Wheels* story about this model for I would not now be quite so unkind about a Silver Shadow. I wrote: 'A Silver Shadow is beautiful to look at, to sit in, to chat about, but a bloody silly joke, an anachronism, a ridiculous excuse for a car. Great at 60 km/h in Double Bay, bordering on the dangerous at 110 km/h in a crosswind on the Sydney to Newcastle freeway.'

After the story appeared in *Wheels*, a former journalist colleague wrote me a very funny letter. He congratulated me for exposing elements of the Rolls-Royce fantasy. An editor for whom he had worked had owned a succession of Rollers. Silver Somethings, said my correspondent. Silver Shitfights, he meant. Ah, my dear B.H., you are a very, very funny man.

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Having sold my Rolls-Royce to Paul Margolin, I fell immediately in love with a Diamond Blue Mercedes-Benz 300 SEL 6.3 in his yard and bought it in a separate transaction. Here was the proof that the crew from Crewe had entirely lost the plot long before 1974: the Mercedes was at least 2.5

times the car the Rolls-Royce was. My 6.3 was one of the last, a 1971 model with rear headrests. But it was not your pre-loved car with full service history like the Roller. It was cheap and devilishly fast. If I hadn't hassled this glorious howling rocketship of a limo through the 1991 Duttons Grand Prix Rally it might have been okay. But in short order the air suspension failed, the differential collapsed, the chassis grew cracks . . . and I sold it.

The Rolls experience dented my long love affair with English cars, but, regardless, Jaguars were usually there or thereabouts. My favourite sublime to ridiculous automotive story concerns a Jaguar Mark II 2.4-litre automatic, already mentioned in this narrative. This sixteen-year-old car was in lovely original condition.

What a gloriously excessive, elegant, but flawed design was the Mark II Jaguar. As a 2.4, it needed the open road to feel at all quick. Around town, the slow initial acceleration undermined its claims to being a status symbol. At the traffic lights it was easily knocked off by an EJ Premier Hydra-Matic. When the transmission lurched from first to second, passengers laughed. It dropped oil in the driveway of my mother's new townhouse. One friend said it smelt 'old', lauding the pleasures afforded by her American caricature Mazda 121 coupe as far superior. But none of this worried me. The Jaguar gave me little grief over the nine months I owned it and seemed to have a self-repairing quality, which was miraculous. Noises would come and go, but most impressive were the power brakes which disappeared quite

early on only to reappear some months later during a fast drive in the Victorian Alps. But when the fuel pump expired and there seemed no prospect of the Jag miraculously getting itself going again on Kings Way, I convinced myself to sell once it had taken its trip behind a tow truck and been repaired as quickly as possible. Christmas loomed.

The real reason was that I lusted after a manual V8 Commodore. 'You want a barker,' I rhetorically asked editor MacKenzie in my *Wheels* yarn, 'a hairy, flea-saturated, ineffectual excuse for a greyhound?' Yes, that was my Commodore, a poor, denuded version of what was supposed to be a Sports Pak manual 4.2. How stupid I was. The desk calendar marched towards the long break, so I found myself settling for the mediocre lustreless metallic Sandalwood colour complete with ingrained dirt. Those flash 15-inch 'cast alloy' wheels—not 'mags', note—were in short supply so I got some pathetic discount and 14-inch steels instead. While the journalists opened their dictionaries in search of new ways to praise Holden, I opened my own wallet!

I had never owned a V8 car. Growing up with Mount Panorama prominent on the itinerary of sacred places, that paired letter and number had special magic. In my imagination, the Commodore would take me into a new heartland.

In my reality, though, this Sandalwood Commodore proved to be the car where the warranty constitutes the durability testing: the company throws the pieces together and you test the consequences. Why couldn't this have happened to the blokes at *Wheels* magazine?

Water pump? Expired month two. 'Bring the car in, sir, we'll fix it.' Bring the bloody car in? I spent more time at John Martin Holden than I did at work. The repairs cost nothing—except time, taxi fares, work problems, battles with logistics, anguish and sheer infuriation. The service manager—a nice enough, albeit beleaguered, fellow in the style of his profession—clearly failed to understand or like cars. 'What's that noise in the engine at 4500 rpm?' I asked him. (It sounded like valve bounce.) 'You don't need to rev it so hard,' was his answer. True, but utterly beside the point, especially with the tachometer redline marked at 5000 rpm. He probably thought a nice set of mud flaps and a venetian blind would have been more sensible equipment than a tachometer.

God, that Commodore was crook. The rotten Uniroyal Steel Cats offered constant invitations to self-destruction on wet roads. There were rattles, myriad imperfections in the finish, appalling fuel consumption, the world's noisiest fan, unreliability. So it didn't break in half when tested in the Flinders Ranges as did the Opels on which the Australian Commodore was based. Theoretically tough, in practice this particular specimen didn't need to leave suburbia to break my heart. We've all heard of Monday cars, but mine must have been built late on a Sunday night. I should have kept the Jag, whose sweet little sixpack would rev happily to 5000 rpm in top and a true 97 miles per hour. The grey leather even made its way onto the centre console. The woodwork was gorgeous.

I should say a word at this point about motoring journalism. It has changed greatly since the 1980s when most blokes—and they were almost entirely blokes, with one or perhaps two women joining in as exceptions to prove the rule—who found themselves doing this work were driving enthusiasts, at the very least. A few also had racing experience.

Being a motoring journalist in Australia back then was like being at boarding school only with better food and more travelling. Drop a couple of seconds on some special stage of a rally-type exercise set up by the PR person from a car company to showcase the latest Toyota or Mitsubishi and forget your reputation. Remember the eighteenth-century poet, Alexander Pope? One of his many memorable lines is 'At every word a reputation dies'. Pope was talking about Australian motoring journalists in the 1980s. The Rat Pack had nothing on us!

Even now most motoring journalists are too clever to part with real money for real cars of their own. A perquisite of the job is a steady supply of new vehicles on a weekly loan basis. But singlehandedly I make up for all my colleagues.

And so back to the original 'VB' Commodore. I guess not too many water pumps failed over the course of the national press launch, although I guess at least one or two rear ashtrays would have parted company with their receptacle inside the too-hard rear armrest. (How many Australian kids, I used to wonder, have been smacked by an angry parent for dropping one of these ashtrays on the floor,

when in reality the fault was entirely that of the car?) It is a problem inherent in the industry, that road-test vehicles are invariably brand new or very close to it, and in many cases have been specially prepared. Way back in 1961, for example, the E-Type Jaguars that went to the press had more highly tuned engines and perhaps some other changes as well. This explains why on racing rubber, an E-Type reached a genuine 150 miles per hour in the hands of English *Motor*. But the true top speed of a production E-Type was closer to 140 than 150. How, then, can we journalists judge how cars will last in the quotidian round? I've done my best: I've owned a fair percentage of them!

Anyway, the inaugural Commodore got a full vote of confidence from the press. Not all that long afterwards, the then editor of *Wheels* (and my now friend and colleague), Peter Robinson, compared the most expensive Commodore model (the SL/E, before some marketing genius decided a dodgy French port, Calais, would yield a more evocative name!) with from memory a Mercedes-Benz 280E and maybe one or two others. Robbo thought the Commodore beat the Europeans at their own game. I didn't know him at the time, but I reckon if I'd asked him whether I should trade a 1962 2.4 Jaguar on a brand new Commodore, he would have considered that a great idea, Jaguars never having enjoyed an exactly glowing reputation for reliability. And all this transpired, I now recall, smack bang in the era of Jaguar Mastercare. And what did *that* mean? Mastercare was a warranty. It meant you took your brand new XJ Series

II back to the dealer when it inevitably broke down and they rebuilt the car for nothing. Doubtless the warranty cost Jaguar almost as much as the Jaguar cost the owner.

You might think: once bitten twice shy, but that has never applied in my case. So I did actually buy another 1978 Commodore. But this one was a handsome Malachite (very dark metallic green) SL/E in pristine condition at seven years of age. It had a 5.0-litre engine and limited slip differential. The velour trim was green and so was the dashboard. Nothing of any significance went wrong with it while I owned it, so the contrast to the brand new Commodore S was immense. And I learnt that the simple trick of inverting the air cleaner lid improved the note of the car. I still love a V8. Perhaps the SL/E doesn't belong in this chapter but isn't it astonishing how two ostensibly similar cars can behave so differently and that the better one has 100,000 kilometres beneath its steel belts, not 07 when you collect it brand new from the dealer?

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I've owned two other cars that could have got me a bulk-purchase discount with towing companies because both were regular riders on the flatbed. Each of them had the distinction of achieving two different and unrelated breakdowns at the same time. One was the aforementioned Failure Petrol Rejection, the other my Alfa 105-Series GTV2000 race car. How it got me through Targa Tasmania in 1994 with second-in-class I don't quite understand.

For 'Wright Barkers' I applied two different metaphors to the Alfa. Along with the Chiko Roll was a Pluto Pup, the absolute bottom of the food chain. (If you haven't heard of a Pluto Pup, it's like a Chiko Roll insofar that its contents beneath the golden skin are equally of the 'looks the same going in as coming out' school). And this Alfa was the Sydney Harbour Bridge of cars. Before one repair was finished, another was called for. Most of the problems were electrical; many occurred at race meetings or on practice days. Here is a short list: battery, alternator, starter motor, condenser, engine failure, starter motor again, loose wire, jammed rear brakes, broken crankshaft pulley, fuel blockage, fuel pump, broken wire, alternator again, engine failure again. My darling wife Jennie sometimes asks me, 'If you know so much about money, how come you aren't rich?' She never knew that Alfa or that Failure.

Even more fortunately, she never knew the Niki. I could never work out whether you bought the car and got a free teddy bear called Niki or the other way round. No vehicle has caused me more embarrassment. I tried to turn it into a joke by fitting a woodrim Nardi steering wheel, sports exhaust system and RACER number plates left over from my Alfetta, then transferred them to a Mazda RX-4 coupe and thence to the FSM Niki 650 (to apply its full silly name), making it look even more the caricature car—they were worth significantly more than the vehicle itself even in 1989! (Later the plates went back on the RX-4, which I sold to a mate who just

wanted RACER on the Land Cruiser which towed his own rather faster Mazda to the circuits around Sydney.)

Someone should have told me I was dreamin'! Here I was, nostalgically revisiting Fiat dreams from the 1960s and 1970s, when I had the great fortune of driving some really distinctive models such as the 1500 and 125. But surely I remembered the Fiat 500? I'm embarrassed to admit that sentimentality prevailed. It was as if the earlier car represented some kind of wonderful time gone by. What actually happens is that bad automotive memories can, in my case, lend themselves to romanticisation. So the time my Ford LTD broke down in the Victorian high country and left me with a 60-kilometre walk to the nearest town (Licola) now glows as some kind of historical marker. Thus it must have been that I thought of the Niki as a latter-day Fiat 500, which in a sense it was, and that being a car manufactured in the late 1980s it must, by definition, be fairly reliable. Besides, it was bloody well brand new!

Oh, the Niki. This minuscule Polish Fiat combined pathetic performance with appalling fuel consumption and dangerous handling. It was noisy to the point of laughter. Even a modest hill had you back to third gear and 70 kilometres per hour. The tappets needed constant adjustment. So did the drum brakes. And when I saw people laughing, I came to realise that they were laughing at me, not with me. The teddy bear, though, gave no trouble.

Somewhere in the mists of my early years in Sydney I recall a Morris 1500 with an incurable rear suspension

problem. It never drove straight. Yes, I bought this particular shitbox because it was offered at an almost giveaway price. At least the Morris didn't break down and managed the regular commute from the rented house in Annandale across to the taxi depot at Alexandria, where I would jump into (usually) an HZ Kingswood SL and drive the night shift. I can't even remember what I did with that Morrie. Nor can I remember the last time I saw one. Perhaps it was the closest I ever came in spirit to owning an Austin X6 Kimberley. Ah, poor old British Leyland. Rest in pieces.

17 Seamless seems less

And then came the Ford Mustang. Beneath its gorgeous wrappings skulked a plain old Falcon. Who cares, though, if the world's most gorgeous model, the human Cisitalia, hides cut-price underwear beneath her finery?

Car tragics usually disagree more often than they agree, so I'm going to stir up controversy with my list of the world's most beautiful cars, not bothering with anything made before World War II. Ideally, it should be a list of ten but mine has eleven, because I couldn't make it any shorter.

I exclude Porsches, Ferraris, Lamborghinis and, in general, anything priced towards the stratosphere—with one American exception (because this design, this entire concept was so *brave* at the time, but you'll have to read on). Perhaps the Boxster could have made the list, but didn't.

The first time I drove a Boxster, a lady followed me into the drive-in bottle shop to tell me she was in love with my car. It was the rear of it, she said, the sublime curve of its bum, she had never seen such a beautiful car. In silver, of course, because that was 1997. Perhaps I should have guessed then that the Boxster I was driving in the lead-up to *MOTOR* magazine's Performance Car of the Year contest would win that event (despite the fact that I was the sole dissenting judge voting for the 1997 Ford Falcon EL GT, and I was clearly wrong); beauty gives any car a hell of a head start. I still have a niggle with the little Porsche: you have to approach it from the rear to appreciate what gorgeousness it has. From the front there's less to admire, all of which serves to over-emphasise the location of its engine.

Some would insist on the Ferrari Dino 246 being included in this list, and I guess it couldn't be excluded on price grounds any more than the Boxster (when new the small Ferrari cost the same as a Fiat 130 Coupe). The 250GT Lusso might

have been close to the very top. But if you include the Lusso, then what happens to the 330GT and the Superamerica? It would have been easy to compile a list consisting of little other than the products of the *Carozzeria* from the 1950s and 1960s. The 1946 Cisitalia would have been a shoe-in for reasons I'll come to soon. But a list comprising ten or even eleven designer Italians would be too narrow, too exclusive. There are probably some one-marque enthusiasts who could happily find this sum of their favourites without reference to any other maker. (Let's see now: Austin A30, Austin A40, Austin A50, Austin A55 . . .)

I decided, then, to let the beholding eye wander to the extent where some of the choices could be called left field, although I hope none is infuriating. This is a baby boomer's wish list. While there is nothing from the pre-World War II era, equally the post-1970 car is scantily represented. And even as I write I can think of several earlier and later machines that deserve a place on someone else's list. (But this one is mine.)

Just think Mercedes-Benz, for starters. For me, the 300SL Gullwing came closest, but I know plenty would urge the credentials of the 220SE coupe or the 230SL. And if there is to be a car from the current era, it could easily be one carrying the famed star—my choice would be the SL. If Jaguar hadn't lost most of its plot it would have come up with the CLS instead of allowing DaimlerChrysler to do their own 'Jag'! As for the XF, it's pretty but less Jaguar-esque

than the Mercedes. How could you park an XF beside a Series III XJ and still call it gorgeous?

Pure beauty seems to be more difficult for stylists to achieve in an era when cars have to be packaged efficiently, smooth through the air, and score well in crash testing. Peugeot does not bother to suggest that the elongated nose of its 407 is a thing of especial charm: rather, it's altruistic, there to save hapless pedestrians. The New South Wales pedestrian lobby voted it the most beautiful car in the world. Welcome to the 21st century. (And yet, late in the twentieth, the 406 coupe was surely among the most gorgeous new cars on the market. Pity it lacked the grunt to match its grace.) Pedestrians were almost fair game in the pre-Nader era. The HD Holden with its sharp front vertical kidney slicers was styled before the 1965 book *Unsafe at Any Speed* unleashed a consumer backlash against the products of Detroit. Styling continues to be important, but is wrapped in constraints undreamt of in the 1950s when Harley Earl was laying on chromium plate by the trowelful. Even in the 1970s, by which time fuel concerns were just emerging as another factor dictating design, there was plenty of scope to move. But once Audi was able to produce a sedan that in basic form nudged 0.30 going down the aerodynamic drag scale, then the shape of cars was set to change forever. And that Audi drew many cues from the ill-fated rotary-powered NSU RO80. But, mostly, pure aerodynamic shapes are pretty dull. No wonder some of the American cars of the 1950s and 1960s now command such a following.

None of the five American cars listed here was the work of Harley Earl, although one was styled by his immediate successor, Bill Mitchell, and represented a point of departure from Detroit practice. Among the artistic elite there was disdain for postwar American cars because they failed the Bauhaus test of form following function. In a 1949 edition of *Design* journal, Harold Van Doren wrote, 'Let us skip the automobile', and in the 1951 car exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art no post-1938 Americans were included with the dubious exception of the Jeep—so in a sense the museum also skipped the automobile.

For the purists, excess was out. At the 1951 exhibition one star was the 1946 Cisitalia, the work of Battista Pininfarina. 'The Cisitalia's body is slipped over its chassis like a dust jacket over a book,' raved the curators; but the image suggested here is more like a lace negligee slipped over a gorgeous, long-legged model, surely? You can almost hear their breathlessness. As for Pininfarina himself, at the launch of the Cisitalia, he described the products of Detroit as 'Easter eggs done up in cellophane'.

There can be no doubt that for most of his time at General Motors, Earl held the fattest roll of cellophane. (You can picture his office with a set of silver trowels for chromework and cellophane in every imaginable colour.) Earl was the kind of larger-and-brighter-than-life executive you can barely imagine in the industry this century. In his huge, showy presence he must have provided Alfred P. Sloan, Jr, the true genius of General Motors and Earl's mentor, with the

perfect counterpoint. Earl's most famous initiative was the fins which graced the 1948 Cadillac and worked their way up to a height of parodic absurdity for the 1959 Cadillac, which could have made the list because of its glorious excess, except that 'beautiful' seems less appropriate than 'fantastic' or 'magnificent' or even 'awesome'. Only the excess of Virgil Exner, who introduced the Forward Look to the '57 Chrysler line-up and created higher fins than Earl's, could rival GM styling through the first fifteen years of the postwar era as American culture embraced a new prosperity.

In styling terms perhaps the opposite pole to the '59 Caddy is another Pininfarina design, the Fiat 130 coupe of 1971. This might almost be a case of too much purity and insufficient daring. Curiously, the styling reflected the driving experience; while the 3.2-litre V6 sounded sensational, it just didn't deliver sufficient oomph. The 130 coupe was just a little too elegantly understated. So it doesn't quite make the list.

Admittedly, the Studebaker Hawk GT is a risky inclusion. Many Studebaker enthusiasts would plump for the 1953 Starliner, while others will prefer Raymond Loewy's classic Avanti. But the GT with its Mercedes-style grille, absence of fins, beautifully defined edges and overall simplicity was a standout Detroit design that beat Bill Mitchell's Buick Riviera to the market by one season. It was the first of the really clean American 1960s offerings and translated the spirit of the 1950s into a more modern, cleaner aesthetic. Perhaps the themes of the Hawk GT bear some resemblance

to those of the Lincoln Continental of 1961, but that car has aged less gracefully and looks heavy. (Elegant? Yes. Beautiful? No. Tragic, too, in the literal sense, because one can't look at a Continental without remembering JFK). As for the Studebaker's Mercedes-style nosecone, that was an especially neat touch considering the two marques were sold out of the same showrooms throughout the United States. 'So you like the Mercedes-Benz grille, sir, but you'd prefer a V8 engine, with two doors and a lower sticker price? Step this way.' The GT appellation was audacious but with a 289 cubic engine mated to a four-speed stickshift, the Stude was quicker than many other pretenders, reaching 60 miles per hour in 8.4 seconds on the way to a top speed of 109 miles per hour or so.

The Riviera model name was no fluke. Rather than looking inwards to America, this beautiful Buick shone its four headlights across the Atlantic to the Cote d'Azure. Think of the contemporaneous Chrysler NewYorker as the Riviera's antithesis. Mitchell integrated expensive European taste with Detroit proportions and presence. Unlike Earl, he favoured a flowing and integrated style where chrome was used sparingly and formal elements added interest. Consider, for example, the small rear window and deep C-pillars. And the sexiness of the Coke-bottle hip (in advance of that particular fashion) contrasts superbly with the razor-edged front and rear guards. It is an alluring style and the proportioning is superb (better, I would suggest, than on the Fiat 130 coupe where the front and rear overhangs are unrelieved by added

flair in the glasshouse region). One reason the Riviera was such a standout was that it emerged as the winner of a contest between GM divisions. Think of it as Bill Mitchell's revenge on Earl after all those years as his loyal number two, much of the time objecting to what he saw as gratuitous and excessive. (Incidentally, you may believe that the 1965 Corvair coupe is more deserving than the Riviera, but the 1963 Buick really did mark a turning point in Detroit design, reaching the mainstream by 1965 with the Chevies and Fords of that year: leaner, cleaner, more elegant. Or you may think Mitchell's '63 Corvette Stingray more interesting, but in my eye there was always that impression of an E-Type on steroids, although the split-window element is to die for—of *course* they ditched it the next season!)

I cannot deny that these cars inhabited my adolescent dreams. Sure I liked the EH Holden as much as the next pimply adolescent, but how could you compare it with a summer's day of Chevrolets?

And then came the Ford Mustang. Beneath its gorgeous wrappings skulked a plain old Falcon. Who cares, though, if the world's most gorgeous model, the human Cisitalia, hides cut-price underwear beneath her finery?

Admittedly, the Mustang is not beautiful in the way of a Lusso or even the Riviera. Nor is it as pretty as the '67 Camaro. But the Mustang's sheer clarity of design and the balance of long nose (code for power) and short tail (you don't pack much for a dirty weekend) made a statement that still resonates this century. In his autobiography, Lee

Iacocca explains how important price was to the Mustang's success: 'What we found was that white-collar couples were impressed by the car's styling, while blue-collar workers saw the Mustang as a symbol of power and prestige. When we asked them to guess the price of the car, almost everybody guessed a figure that was at least [about 25 per cent] $1000 too high.' And it was too expensive for them at that higher price. Now for the sting: 'But when we told them the actual price of the car, a funny thing happened . . . "I want it!"' So the Mustang looked as if it should have belonged to a much higher class. While stunning looks will often help clinch a sale, the combination of looks and perceived extraordinary value represents the marketing daily double. The fact that beneath the hide of the Mustang beat the heart of a modest Falcon was irrelevant—and, anyway, enthusiasts could specify a stickshift V8. And so, this parts bin special became one of those rare machines that changed the way we judge cars.

And having made that statement, how could I avoid discussing the Citroën *Diesse*? This one certainly conforms to the Bauhaus principles. If its form was radical, so was the function. In 1955, the long awaited successor to the *Traction Avant* may as well have been the spaceship its appearance evoked. (Compare it, for example, with the FJ Holden!) Unlike some others in the eleven the *Diesse*'s design integrity embraced the interior with trademark single-spoke steering wheel (one design sketch shows a handlebar arrangement) and magic mushroom brake button echoing the high-mounted bullet tail lights and imperceptible radiator

grille. Flaminio Bertoni at first conceived the car in 1939 as a smoother, modernised version of his *Traction Avant* but World War II put that on hold. By the early 1950s the teardrop profile, fastback rear and smooth underbody coalesced and the design was signed off in 1954.

While the *Diesse* sedan is not universally seen as gorgeous, it is difficult to imagine anyone failing to be smitten by the *Decapotable*. A total of 1365 (excluding cars built to special commission) were produced between 1960 and 1971 at Henri Chapron's Levallois works. A few hardtop variants were also made, including the Dandy. (You may, like me, still have the Corgi 1:43 model in metallic burgundy with yellow interior.) At what point would the *Diesse* no longer be futuristic—maybe 1987 or something? As for Citroën, long since swallowed by Peugeot, it still battles to find the right successor to the *Diesse*, three model generations on. The C6, you ask? Well, it is right up there among current offerings, but it looks more to the CX than the *Diesse* and, amazingly, like the CX it gets a bit confused in the rear treatment.

The 1955 car was arguably the purest but my own preference is for the DS23, complete with its gold badging and the promise of at least a modicum of engine performance. When the last of the line was superseded by the CX, there was a collective sigh of non-relief from the cognoscenti. Had Citroën lost its unique plot forever?

If the 1955 Citroën defined a new automotive modernity, Jaguar invented the modern sports sedan by fusing sexy styling with high performance in the Mark II 3.8. The original

2.4 of 1956 was a half-hearted, skinny thing. Not that I was worried in 1956 or 1957 when Matchbox Models introduced a yellow DS19 and a dark blue Jaguar 2.4. I loved the Jag but merely admired the Citroën. My father expressed some thought of buying a DS19. My mother said it was the ugliest car in the world and that she would leave him if he did. The funny thing is that he restrained himself. And then he bought himself an Austin A30 instead of a 2CV, perhaps to avoid offending my mother's utterly middle-Australian sensibilities.

The world's greatest automotive facelift, which included adding 3½ inches to the rear track, gave the world an indelible beauty for 1959, the Jaguar Mark II. Where the DS21 and DS23 refined the themes expressed in the famous original, the Mark II represented nothing less than a transformation of the 1956 compact Jaguar. It came—packing that 3.8-litre XK150 engine if you cared to pay the extra—at the very time Harley Earl's bat-winged Chevrolet was showcasing Detroit absurdity. If you want proof of the Jaguar's aesthetic balance, park one alongside the 1964 S-Type, which is a better car but less sought after. Despite its independent rear suspension and bigger boot, the S-Type's destiny was to italicise the Mark II's absolute grace. Even the XJ Series III, hailed by *Road and Track* as one of the most beautiful cars of all time, looks a touch heavy by comparison, but still secures a place on the list.

Who could object to a little help from Pininfarina? The Series III acquired an airiness to the glasshouse and a finer

elegance than the magnificent original of 1968 and the faintly crass Series II facelift of 1973. There is one line that reveals the depth of this beauty: the upwards curving haunch of the waistline where it ascends towards the C-pillar. Drop dead gorgeous, especially in Sebring Red. Even more to the point, the XJ Series III stands as a reminder of the moment at which Jaguar lost its styling plot. Afterwards, those poor stylists did not know where else to look except backwards. In the end elements of the Series III survived into the 21st century but mostly as unintended caricature. Oh dear, the gauche and graceless 1998 S-Type!

These days, I believe Jaguar has become the new Armstrong Siddeley. In 1959 the Armstrong Siddeley Star Sapphire was one of the finest cars in the world, but the clientele was almost extinct. Half a century on, Jaguar is about as uncool as that: who wants a Jaguar when a BMW or Audi is there for the purchasing?

Then there is the unforgettable E-Type, unveiled at the 1961 Geneva Salon. This was the ultimate cat among the Italian wildlife. Could it really do 150 miles per hour? (No. Maybe 142–44 under ideal conditions. Few cared, anyway.) Was it really only one-third the price of a Ferrari? (Close. On 15 March 1961 when the E-Type shocked the world, a Ferrari 250 GT cost 75,000 francs, an Aston Martin DB4 was 72,000, a Mercedes-Benz 300 SL commanded 63,850, and the E-Type came to market at an even 30,000.) In retrospect, the 'E' (or 'XKE' as it was always known in America) was almost as shortchanged in the track department as the Jaguar

2.4 and 3.4 had been, but in 1961 we didn't care. Malcolm Sayers designed the shape and, as ever, Sir William Lyons made detail changes. It was a roadster first but the coupe version was so beautifully integrated, it could just as easily have been the original. As with the Citroën *Diesse* five years earlier, aerodynamics was the predominant theme, despite being an inexact science at that time. Twenty years ago I would have given the XK150 the nod ahead of the E-Type, but not now. And that's because I was in love with the earlier model as a child. Now it just looks old and *decade*s older than its immediate successor. If the XK120 ushered in postwar excitement, the E was a naked invitation to the freedom and sexiness of the 1960s, from which some people have never recovered.

Where the overt sexiness of the Jaguar E-Type is wrapped in speed, the Volkswagen Karmann-Ghia offered beauty as its own reward. Here was the forerunner to the Mustang, its supremely stylish bodywork concealing common or garden mechanicals. Launched in 1955 and in production until 1974, the Ghia is also the true ancestor of the current New Beetle, which is a Golf in elegant drag. Who cares that power for the Karmann-Ghia comes from an unmodified 1.2-litre boxer unit that makes none to speak of? Even the price tag was barely a worry for those who just loved the Ghia's beauty. In fact, the Beetle's mechanicals were entirely acceptable as long as you were happy with a cruising speed of 110 kilometres per hour. Few cars have ever represented such a pure statement of

style as the original Karmann-Ghia, where speed was never an issue.

In a way, much of this is also true of the 1955 Thunderbird, shown in the autumn of 1954. Remember the white example that cruises through *American Graffiti*? With the beautiful blonde female at the wheel, it is a metaphor for the American dream. (That the driver turns out to be a high-class hooker is equally germane: the dream was unravelling by the time of Vietnam, the movie suggests). The 'Bird was always more about cruising than speed. Ford's marketing gurus coined the term 'personal car'—just two doors and two seats. Inspiration came from the English roadsters of the immediate postwar era, which sold up a storm in the United States, notably the MG TC and the Jaguar XK120. The Thunderbird's mechanicals were humdrum mid-1950s American, even if the high-compression V8 was modern at the time. Brakes and handling? Forget 'em. There is some controversy about who deserves credit for the design, but the evidence seems to favour Frank Hershey, who went from General Motors to Ford not long after styling the landmark 1948 Cadillac. Freed of Harley Earl's dominance, Hershey felt free to pursue a purer line.

It would be nine years after the Thunderbird's 1954 debut that Ford would finally go all the way to the other end of the sports-luxury spectrum and build a car to challenge Ferrari at Le Mans. A secondary aim was to 'neutralize the Corvette image by substantially better performance and by surpassing it in style and feature appeal'. This was

anything but a 'personal' luxury car but from an occupant's perspective you could hardly get more *personal* than in the cockpit of the GT40, which guaranteed close company even if you drove alone. The '40' refers to the height in inches and that alone dictated a cramped interior. Roy Lunn, a 39-year-old Englishman, ran the program and had the first prototype finished just eleven months 'after putting pencil to paper'. The victories took longer, but the brave GT40 is surely the most beautiful purpose-built racing car in history.

A less expensive and more frequently raced 1960s star is Alfa Romeo's 105 coupe, which was less than one lap behind the winning 4.7-litre Falcon GT in the 1967 Bathurst 500. And that was the 1.6-litre edition! The 1750 and the 2000 variants followed, the latter less elegant in its grille treatment and interior than the luscious 1750. This is arguably one of Bertone's most successful styling exercises ever, and while some of us may have a personal preference for the edgy GTV6 (partly done by Guigaro but finished in-house and never signed off by the master), it is the older coupe that wins the beauty contest. The 105 was not especially aerodynamic and one of life's little mysteries is that its boxy Giulia sedan sibling actually boasted a lower coefficient of drag. The chunky little sedan exerts great appeal but, like the GTV6, it's somehow not *beautiful*. Elements of the 105 coupe's styling found their way into other cars. Automotive photographer, Greg McBean, an Alfa-natic, once pointed out to me the similarity between the voluptuous rear treatment of

the original Jaguar XJ6 and that of the Alfa, which preceded it. And, of course, Alfa Romeo itself continues to deliver its own tradition in new variations.

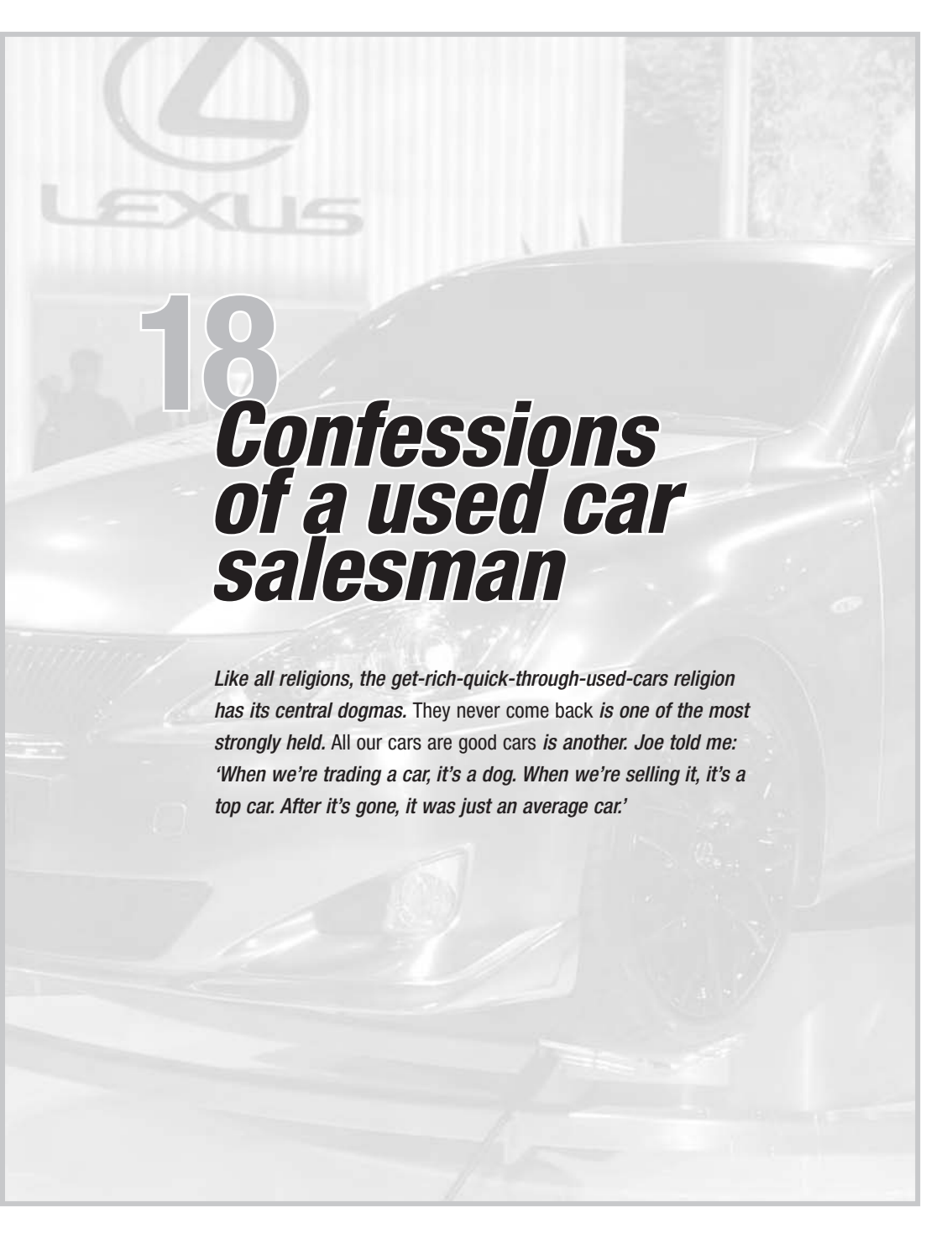
The past haunts the present—sometimes successfully, but more often not: brand is everything. I have talked about how Jaguar turned inwards to its own past with unfortunate results from the mid-1980s through to the early years of this century. For makers such as Peugeot, Volkswagen and Alfa, it is very much a matter of making an immediately recognisable logo as prominent as possible. And Audi created its full-frame grille as a blunt instrument to guarantee recognition. Grilles are tricky and Aston Martin has done well here. Indeed, the DB9 would earn a place in any list of current beauties, largely because of the seamless manner in which the 1950s are integrated with the 21st century. Porsche, having dared frame its fearful symmetry with the 1963 911, owns an enduring streamline but has to put the Cayenne SUV into its own category. Only Porsche's sports cars must have the engine in the rear. (How hard it is now to believe that Ferdinand Porsche put the engine in the rear of his Auto-Union grand prix car because that configuration permitted higher cornering speeds!)

Perhaps there has never been more rhetoric about automotive styling and less genuine distinction. But it is simply not possible for a designer to draw that simple series of curves that was the Volkswagen or the diminutive two boxes that was the Mini. The stylist has to allow for the considerations of aerodynamics, cooling, safety, access

to components, passenger space, luggage space, suspension design and travel, and so on. So it is a minor miracle that the Citroën C6—arguably the world's safest car in 2008—includes within its elegance a bonnet designed to protect wayward pedestrians. The new Nissan 370Z follows this example. As recently as the 1960s most cars didn't even have seatbelts to protect their own people, let alone outsiders! When Ford fitted deep-dished steering wheels to its 1955 models and offered seatbelts at extra cost, buyers stayed away, some evidently fearing that the cars were unsafe. For years Detroit used this experience to argue 'Safety doesn't sell'. Fast forward half a century: I have given up counting how many airbags a car now has. When I write a short article for a newspaper or magazine, I no longer bother to list all the acronyms because you can take 1000 words just to itemise safety credentials.

The point is that Harley Earl had open slather from 1927 all the way through to his retirement in 1959. But today's automotive stylist must dance to a difficult and constantly changing tune. The day before writing these paragraphs, I was invited to speak at Holden's celebration of the General Motors Centennial. Outside the magnificent atrium, at the end of a line-up of historic vehicles, was a 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air. Remember this model with its huge bat wings? 'What on earth were they thinking?' I mused aloud. And the answer is: style was everything. You look at that huge car and, as I overheard one observer say, there's not much room for passengers. Indeed. Nor a seatbelt or airbag to be

seen. As the poet Alan Wearne has written, the ’50s were naivete. And as L.P. Hartley so poignantly wrote in *The Go-Between*, the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.



18 Confessions of a used car salesman

Like all religions, the get-rich-quick-through-used-cars religion has its central dogmas. They never come back *is one of the most strongly held.* All our cars are good cars *is another. Joe told me: 'When we're trading a car, it's a dog. When we're selling it, it's a top car. After it's gone, it was just an average car.'*

Looking back, I can hardly believe one week of my working life in late 1981. I had written a few stories for *Wheels*. Was it Peter Robinson's idea or mine that I should work as a used car salesman for a week and then tell the story from an insider's perspective? That doesn't matter now, but there is no doubting that I was a sucker in desperate search of any kind of break, let alone an even one.

For humour's sake I am reproducing that story here. In many respects it provides evidence of how much things have changed in the industry. (For example, where would you find a Hillman Hunter station wagon now? Or a car dealer who would let you work for him in the knowledge that you would then write a magazine story?) But in others, depressingly, it shows that in the market there are immutable elements. The cast of vehicles might have changed, the salespeople might speak more politely and be a little more careful with the law, but my experiences on Parramatta Road in the hot Sydney summer of 1981 jump off the page at me with the strength of a recent nightmare.

As for how I persuaded the man to let me work for him, I was already one of his best customers, having bought not only a crook old Valiant V8 but the appalling Morris 1500 that was my closest approach to an Austin X6 Kimberley. He must have been sure he saw me coming . . .

In the December 1981 edition of *Wheels* with a blue, second-generation Honda Accord as the cover car, there lurked a story called 'Confessions of a Used Car Salesman' by a Special Writer. 'For a week recently,' said the introduction,

'a *Wheels* reporter sold used cars in a lot along Parramatta Road. His advice: stop your car on that mad, untamed stretch of blacktop and the chances are you'll get stitched up, dudded and drive away in a new, if unwanted, set of wheels.' The story follows.

> Big G is a car dealer on Parramatta Road. I have known him socially for a while, and I have bought two cars from him. Despite a tendency to stub out cigarette butts on the carpet he's an okay guy, one of the less exploitive car dealers I have met. He never flicks speedos. Within reason he honours warranty claims. Most of his lies are not fundamental ones. Sometimes he doesn't bother to hide faults in the cars he sells.
>
> I still think Big G is one of Parramatta Road's less exploitive dealers. And that's after working in one of his yards for a week. Selling used cars. Big G was willing for me to do this. I guess he didn't see any harm in me. But now our friendship has turned to enmity. It took just a week for this to happen. The week I worked in his yard flogging his used cars . . .
>
> According to Big G every salesman is a sucker. Certainly I found myself almost believing the lies I slipped into telling. Every now and again I felt ashamed. 'This car is in beautiful condition. Immaculate,' I said, showing off a Torana that had been hit by the Southern Aurora. As I framed the words, my eyes slipped to the holes in the handbrake's rubber boot, the place where the driver's

door window winder should be, the rips in the front seats. How did I justify the lie? Money. I knew the Torana had $200 commission in it. Desperates always make the best sales staff. Anyway, I told myself, *caveat emptor*—let the buyer beware. And there is always the warranty.

The warranty? How do dealers get around that? I found Big G surprisingly fair but if ever he wanted to sidestep a warranty claim, the simple get-out lies in the phrase *consistent with age and mileage*. So, if you'd just bought a ten-year-old Jag for $6990 and discovered the motor was smoky, you'd be out of luck if you tried to get the dealer to repair it. Best thing would be to try to make the motor blow completely—then he'd have to do the job. Unless, of course, he cared to try to prove your negligence. This is one reason for the huge gap between wholesale and retail on cars like Jaguars and Mercedes.

Big G just missed out on a late '71 XJ6 for about $3100. Apart from noisy overhead gear and badly crazed paint on the bonnet, it was a straight car. But some dealers reckoned it was only worth $2800. Had he bought it, Big G would have spent a couple of spot on paint and put it in the front row of his better yard for $6990. If he got $6500, he would be clearing $3200. Even if he had to have the motor rebuilt during the three month, 5000-kilometre warranty, he'd still have a pretty profit. Be warned: if you own a Jag, Merc or even an MGB, sell it privately.

On my last afternoon at the yard, Big G pulled a real swiftie on a hapless chap whose MGB Mark II had

broken down while he was driving it to another dealer's to sell it for cash. This B needed a new alternator—but the battery had packed up between Big G's two yards. Somehow, the boss manipulated the worried owner into accepting $4500 for his valuable machine and then had him seated in a blue '73 Volvo for a test. The idea being that if Mr MGB decided to buy the Volvo he could return the cheque for $4500 and take instead one for $380. Wholesale, the Volvo was worth $2100 and the B around $5500. Extraordinarily arrogant at the best of times, Big G couldn't contain his delight—he kept stopping sales staff and other dealers to tell them how clever he'd been. But unfortunately for him Mr MGB wasn't too pleased when the Volvo also broke down. Now with no car, and having just escaped from buying one worth thousands less (even if it was two years newer and had black leather seats), this young man saw the truth: he had been conned silly, just because he had asked to have his B's battery charged—oh, yes, that cost him an extra $5.

Fact is, that Volvo looked terrific sitting gleaming in the spotless yard. There is something ridiculous about washing The Road's self-dirtying footpaths. But it is part of the presentation. Things have to *look* clean. Every day all cars are hosed and most days they are chamoised. It is left to prospective buyers to check the trivial things: does the radiator have water in it, how is the oil level, why are three of the tyres bald when the car has a new pink slip and is being sold for $3990?

Close inspection reveals quite serious rust in some cars. I was ashamed when a buyer showed me rust in what looked a pretty straight HQ Kingswood V8 that I had already sold to one man who subsequently changed his mind and bought a more expensive HJ. When I asked Big G why he'd done nothing about the rust, he claimed he would make it a selling point: 'That just shows how *original* this car is. That's the only rust it has and I deliberately didn't patch it up, to show what a genuine car it is for its age.'

Commission on a sale can amount to more than $400. One sale more or less every week affects annual earnings enormously. During my six working days (it is normally a seven-day working week with three days off consecutively every three weeks, but I refused to work on the Sunday), I sold two cars and played a part in selling a third. There were no huge margins in any of them and I earned about $130. In the end, Big G refused to pay me because I had voiced my disapproval of his business methods. I had also advised a miserable Mr MGB not to proceed with buying the Volvo. (Another customer had a bank cheque for the car anyway.)

Big G doesn't do everything himself. He has an experienced salesman called Joe who manages sales whenever Big G feels like a lingering lunch or a trip overseas. Joe's autonomy is extremely limited. He finds that he can't always do things the way he would like. He has to battle to sell cars that, with a little extra attention,

might sell themselves. One example was a Datsun 120Y automatic on sale for $1990. Its only real fault was a stubborn gear selector that refused to engage any forward gear. It had to be fixed after the sale, obviously. But six people were turned off the car by that defect.

Suppressed aggression shows in nearly all Joe's actions. When he smiles, he seems a different and charming person. He drinks and gambles heavily and is hooked into the seven-day working week. The sales are as necessary for him as they are for Big G, since he works for commission only. To stitch up buyers, it helps to be stitched up yourself.

Further down Parramatta Road the bigger companies look for sales staff who do come into the 'desperate' category—desperate for money to cover debts, mortgages, gambling. These people (nearly all of them men) work about 10 hours a day, most of it standing in the sun. If they were out all the previous night, which is often the case, you can imagine how they respond to potential customers, to *anyone*.

One day, the story goes, a young woman selling accessories stopped at one of these establishments. Salesmen took all the accessories (like wheels) off *her* car and she was there for four hours bargaining to get them back. The salesmen were bargaining too. I don't think they got what *they* wanted, but they certainly made her feel uncomfortable. When some of these frustrated types get really frustrated, they do nasty things to customers to coerce them into buying or to punish them for not

buying. One man refused to give the salesman the keys to his car. Walking back to it later, he met its four wheels rolling down Parramatta Road. His pride and joy sat on bricks. Other people have had the keys to their own cars thrown on to the roof of the office. Some have driven cars for an hour, or a weekend, and returned to find they already owned them.

Another story Big G told me involves a man who is now a multi-millionaire. As a young and enthusiastic salesman, he once sold a Chevrolet Corvette Stingray for $15,000; the company had paid $5000 for the car and was asking $10,000. When the sales manager was told the sale price he sent Mr Operator back to the buyer with a refund of $5000. God knows what sort of excuse he found for having overcharged. Meanwhile, the sales manager hoped the Stingray's new owner would take a long time to discover his car's *real* value.

Some operators will sell a Sprite or a Midget to an infatuated customer and while he or she is signing up for it, have staff remove the tonneau, the chrome spinners from the wire wheels, and anything else that proves readily detachable. When the stunned owner mentions the missing bits, the salesman smiles and says, 'Oh, those aren't included in the price. You want a hood? You want hubcaps? I can *sell* them to you.'

You may wonder how buyers can be so stupid. But it is not so much that buyers are stupid as that sellers are clever. The really smart operators create the 'want feeling'

so effectively that customers will buy almost regardless of price. In Big G's words: 'There he sits in the Midget, wearing his racing helmet. He's just passed the Lola. He hopes to break the lap record. In his mind, the car is already his.'

I have fallen for some of these tricks myself. Once I was highballed. I could step from my two-month-old and heartily hated Renault 12GL into an immaculate year-old Passat TS for $600. I had the Volkswagen tested and it was pronounced perfect. By this time I'd driven the car 30 kilometres and had already transferred my huge assortment of things from the Renault's boot into 'my new car'. But the salesman asked me to wait outside while he went in to check something. He walked up the ramp into the showroom. Ten minutes later he reappeared. He didn't bother to come down again. 'The deal's off,' he said. 'We don't want your car. I should have checked yesterday. It's worth almost nothing.' I felt like thumping him. I felt like smashing the showroom's plate-glass or one of those pretentious chandeliers. But I *wanted* that car. Ashamed as I am to admit it, I finished up giving them the Renault and $1400. (I was so committed to that Volkswagen in every sense that I broke all records and kept it for 20 months.) The work had already been done by the salesman in allowing me to treat the car as my own.

Some dealers go much further. 'Take this one home for the weekend. If you don't like it, we'll give you your old car back.' On Monday morning the prospective buyer

returns saying he doesn't want to buy. 'Too late,' he is told. 'You already own the car. We've sold yours. Here's the paperwork.'

Sometimes the roguery comes from the buyer's side. Big G employs a genial gentleman called Eric at weekends. Eric has been a master salesman and is certainly a master raconteur, so genuinely charming and natural you'd buy a car because you liked him so much. The Saturday I worked there, a man drove up in a Hillman Hunter circa 1972. 'A low car, the Hillman Hunter. All Hillmans are low. They were always a low car,' Eric confided to me after this man finally went off in search of the Holy Grail (where dealers pay $1000 for worn Hillman Hunters). The story runs like this. Mr Hunter wanted the Mazda 929 automatic wagon. Price $4250 (bought by Big G for $3200). Eric put six spot on the Hillman. 'Run up to Joe,' he said to me. 'Tell him there's a Hunter coming up. Tell him to put about four or five on it. I think I've offered top money at six. Top money. Astronomical money.' Mr Hunter wanted $1000 and drove off when Joe wouldn't go past $600.

Hours later he was back with his family, showing them the Mazda. Eric asked Big G to look at the Hunter. 'Can't you offer him a bit more?' he asked. 'He's a genuine buyer.' Big G walked across the yard, smiling. 'I want to see the best Hillman Hunter in Australia,' he shouted. 'If it's worth a grand, it *must* be the best Hillman Hunter in Australia.' He went straight for the bonnet, something neither Eric nor Joe seemed to have done. Not only was

the motor fuming badly, but it had a cracked cylinder head. I could actually see oil in the water, water in the oil. 'It's worth two spot,' said the Big G, holding up two fingers rather forcefully. 'It's a dog exterminator,' said Eric, almost overpowered by mirth. The wife wound up her window to escape the insults. They had just been burned off. The Hunter family departed as quickly as their much-derided car could carry them, to finish running the gamut of Parramatta Road. Almost certainly Mr Hunter knew what was wrong with his car and hoped to hide it. The Mazda wagon carried a biggish mark-up, but had that deal gone through ($1000 trade-in), there would have been almost zero profit.

Eric is a master of reverse psychology. Often he will tell a buyer the faults of various cars in the yard and conclude by saying, 'Now, here *is* a good car.' Many buy on the spot. Big G uses his own variations of reverse psychology. One man wanted a cheap car to drive around Australia. He was looking at a Toyota Crown for $990. Big G kept praising a good HK Holden he had at the same price. 'This is what you want,' he said. 'Much better car. Don't buy that Crown.' He knew that with this customer reverse psychology would work. It did. The man did not like being told which car he wanted. He bought the Crown, which was the car the Big G wanted to sell. The HK was the easier of the two to shift.

Sometimes people are not really shopping for cars but for finance. They barely look at the car before they

are asking you to put their application to the finance company. Almost inevitably, the inevitable occurs: no money, no sale. But most of these luckless individuals will be able to buy further down The Road, where big dealers run their own finance companies and stand to make such huge profits they can afford some bad debts. People are being stitched into basic three-year-old Commodores for around $12,000—terms charges included.

High trade-ins still fool many buyers. Maybe Mr Hunter would have bought a similar Mazda wagon at $4990 instead of $4250, had he been offered $990 trade-in. But, judging by that look of mixed anger and sheepishness on his face as he drove away, I think he would have been capable of performing simple arithmetical feats.

The secret of making money in the car trade, and making it without the use of extreme tactics such as those described earlier, is to buy at the right price. I must admit, Big G is a talented buyer. A farmer had an HJ Kingswood wagon to sell—white, manual, Goodyear Supersteel-shod, 112,000 kilometres. He pulled up at Big G's. He wanted $3000 for it. The Big G told him he was being generous in offering $1500. After much negotiation, the farmer was talked out of the wagon he had kept beautifully since new, for $2100. Not only that, but Big G had him believing he had done well. The HJ was sold as a special that weekend for $3290.

A woman had a very clean Celica to sell. Only months previously she had paid nearly $6000 for it. Big G talked

her into a tired Rover 2000TC and a cheque for something like $2000. I don't know the exact figures, but the Rover owed him about $600 and Eric sold the Celica for an effortless $5500 or thereabouts.

Like all religions, the get-rich-quick-through-used-cars religion has its central dogmas. *They never come back* is one of the most strongly held. *All our cars are good cars* is another. Joe told me: 'When we're trading it, it's a dog. When we're selling it, it's a top car. After it's gone, it was just an average car.'

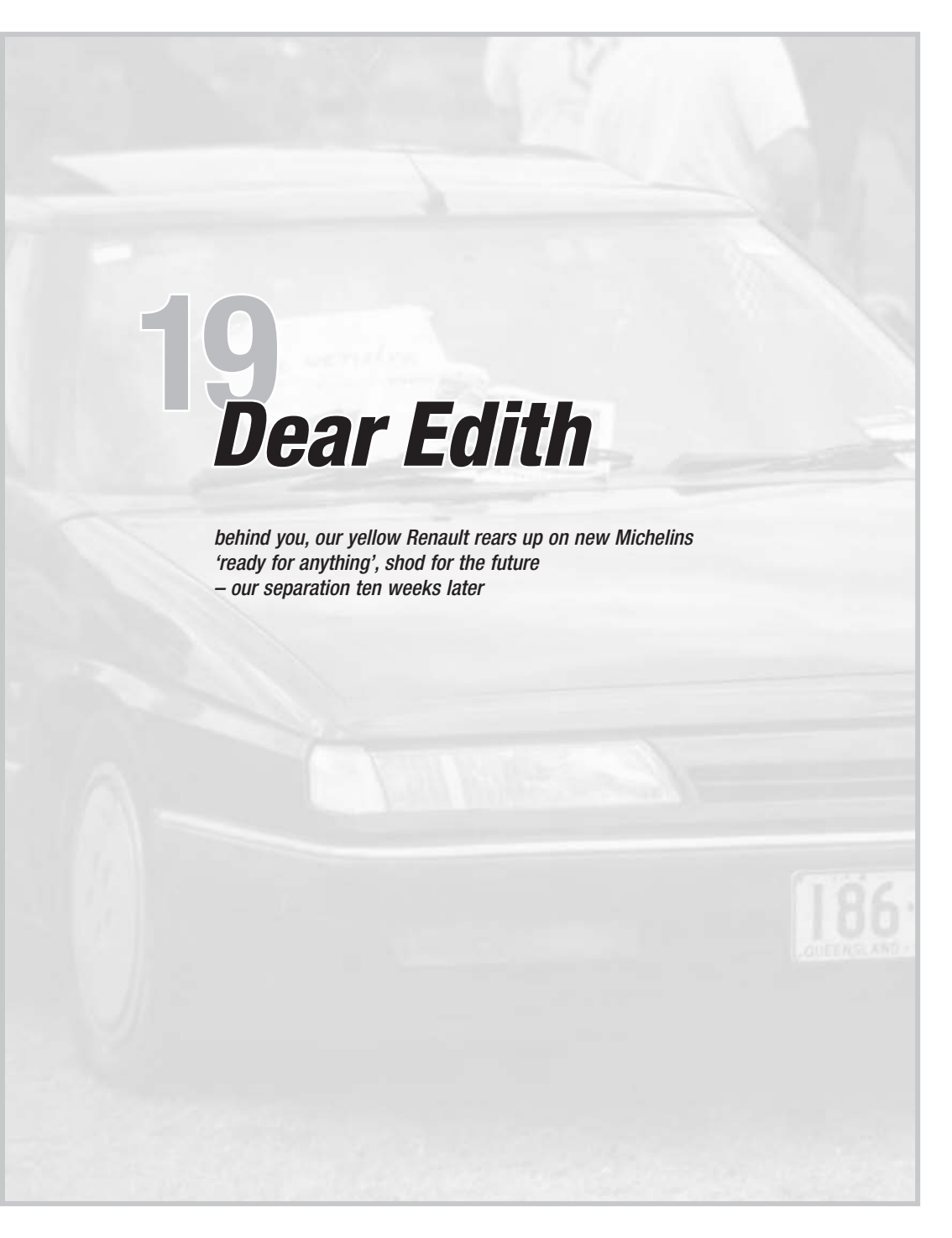
The one-chance-only nature of the used car business is illustrated by such actions as Big G's conning Mr MGB out of his car and into a Volvo. So, the Volvo fell through: someone else was waiting for it. 'They never come back,' chants Joe. 'We won't see that bastard again,' says Eric. Another part of the dogma—*someone else will stitch them up if we don't*—is at once true and a rationalisation for all manner of misleading tricks. Some big companies advertise in appropriate places like the sides of rubbish bins.

Like capitalism itself, these operators are cleverer than their critics. They scent investigation and meet it head-on. The come-on cars may exist, sometimes. But there are *always* those 'similar ones at a slightly higher price'. Ask about the $3990 Commodore and you may well find yourself driving home in one that costs $7990 ('Well, this one *is* a better car—you can't expect much in a Commodore for $3990, can you?—and there is our no-deposit finance.'). Big G doesn't practise these sorts

of tricks, but he respects others who do. I called them criminals. When he objected, I asked him what name he would give them. 'I'd call them good operators,' he said. You see, they have money. In the end, what Big G cares about is money: people and cars are just handy ways of getting more of it.

Both Big G and Joe looked open-mouthed at me when I expressed enthusiasm for cars. They *hate* cars. I think Big G hates people too. I had always imagined it would be easier to sell goods one liked than goods towards which one felt indifferent. Now, I don't think so. To Big G, a car is like a cheque: whether you keep it pressed neatly or crease it a little, it will still be worth the same. I guess about half the cars in his yard were low on oil or hadn't had an oil change for six months or more. Some had flat tyres. One was minus its air cleaner and one had lost its dipstick. Perhaps these defects could be remedied after sale, but why couldn't he be bothered to fix the cars first? Simply, he doesn't believe it will bring him extra money.

I wrote that Big G's single important end is money. In fact, that's only half the truth. His face is that of an excited little boy every time he clinches a good deal or 'steals' a car from someone. It is this *process* of making money that lights him up like a Christmas tree, and when he's made his countless millions and bought his world-cruising yacht, I wonder what will spark him then.



19 *Dear Edith*

behind you, our yellow Renault rears up on new Michelins
'ready for anything', shod for the future
– our separation ten weeks later

Regrets, I've had only a very few. You will have noticed that Ferraris, Porsches, Aston Martins and the like are notable by their absence. I don't remember deciding any such thing consciously but I reckon somewhere back in my twenties I knew I would never be rich and set my sights on cars that might one day be achievable. Yes, I well remember my Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow but for the most part BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Jaguar and Audi—the cars invariably several if not many years old—have represented a kind of automotive aspirational glass ceiling. So no regrets on that score, and it is not out of the question that an old 928 or even a 911 might one day join my collection. Hey, if I could buy a nice Porsche from the sale proceeds of the Brock, it might be worth considering.

While I have been troubled by numerous purchasing decisions I did make, there have been some I didn't make that I look back on as the cars that got away. How about a tidy Citroën Light 15 for $120 in 1971 or 1972? Then there was the Monaro GTS 327 for something like half or two-thirds the price of a new base model Commodore in 1982.

In 1974 I almost bought a Peugeot 504 in its early 1.8-litre guise. It was absolutely the best car I had ever driven at the time. But I let that beauty go because of tardy acceleration. Had I bought it, I reckon there might have been a Peugeot chapter in this book because, as I have said, that marque does breed a strong attachment. A friend of mine, Andy McCutcheon, owned an unfortunately Avocado-

coloured 2.0-litre 504. I shared the driving with him on a trip to Noosa. It was a fantastic car.

When I bought my first Jaguar XJ6, I drove a manual version also on sale at the time and rejected it. Looking back, I'm not sure why. I guess it focused my concerns about where manuals stop and automatics begin. The obvious example is a Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow where a manual gearbox would be inconceivable, as much so as a torque converter transmission in an FSM Niki 650. I'd love a manual XJ now, to join my sweet red automatic. I do remember that it was mechanically harsher and that there was nowhere to put your left foot, except kind of tucked up in front of the clutch. And I also remember that the main performance gain over the automatic was in the 0–100 km/h range, not on the open road. But that lineage from the fabled Mark II 3.8 manual with overdrive (and wire wheels) was clearer with the XJ6 five-speed. (If you have one for sale, please let me know.)

Perhaps it is strange to report this but there are very few other cars I remember having come close to buying that I subsequently wished I had. But there are many cars that, had the right opportunity arisen, I might well have bought. In no particular order, I think of the Alfa 164Q with its manual gearbox and the dramatic reduction in torque steer compared with the standard car. At the time I tested the EB Falcon GT, I had a 164Q to hand and it was livelier than the Ford.

After finishing some distance behind Michael Catchpole's Alfa Romeo Montreal in the 1992 Targa, I came to desire one

of those special and beautiful V8 cars. But I have no doubt that purchase would have come to prove a pricey mistake. So call that one half a regret.

Afterword: Insider trading

If you think car salespeople have a bad reputation, you should hear what they have to say about the general public. 'They're lying, cheating bastards,' is a standard phrase in the industry, and the view is commonly held that even the mildest-mannered, church-going citizen adopts a different persona when car buying. It's got a lot to do with previous buying experiences and the poor reputation of car salespersons. Many customers walk into a dealership as if into a war zone. You can see it in their body language at 50 metres: suspicion, nervousness.

After selling new cars in a metropolitan dealership for a year (late 2001 to late 2002), I can now see both sides of the story. And after that experience, although having bought maybe 120 cars in the past 34 years, I would approach any purchase differently now.

Mostly I have bought from people I thought of as friends, dealers with whom I had built up a relationship. I now understand how much money this approach has cost me because the sad fact is that friends unknowingly give salespeople the best opportunity of maximising profits.

So I now probably wouldn't buy a car from a dealer I knew and liked unless I had already 'crunched' some prices elsewhere. Amazingly, the best deals are generally struck by complete strangers from out of town. Let me illustrate this.

Bryan came in to the dealership four or five times, generally spending close to an hour chatting with me each time. On the verge of 60, Bryan was ready to buy his retirement vehicle. He had made his choice and I knew he

would eventually buy and I believed it would be from me. But there was a catch. He had rung a same-make dealer on the other side of town ('I always get a second quote') who quoted him a fantastic price over the telephone. Of course I had to match it. There was $100 profit on the deal, which happened to be on one of the most sought-after cars available through the dealership! So why did the other dealer do it? It required the investment of maybe 10 minutes effort and provided the chance to keep the local dealer (me) honest.

Repeat customers are cherished by dealers—not in terms of special prices (unless a higher price is 'special'). Those who have bought several cars from the dealership will probably not 'shop' you. I use myself as an example. Having offered my journalistic background and one-hour weekend motoring program on a prominent Sydney radio station as credentials, I believed that I had established the world's best relationship with a Sydney Ford dealer. When the time came to hand back my vehicle at two years under a guaranteed minimum future value scheme (Ford Credit's Red Carpet Options), it was a matter of rocking up to any Ford dealer and handing it over. I had already decided to order the new car from the same Sydney dealer. The Melbourne dealer asked for an opportunity to quote me on a new car. Indulgently, politely, I said yes, feeling sure he would not come close. But he matched the deal and, for all I knew then, probably still 'grossed' two grand or more.

'Grossing' is one of the key terms used in the car industry. It's shorthand for profit—i.e. gross profit. When a customer

trusts you he or she is unlikely to get prices from other same-make dealers. Thus you can get away with building decent 'gross' into the deal. Having said that, the profit margin on new cars is not nearly as high as on some other products, such as white goods and appliances. The margin for example, on a 68-centimetre television set that retails at $1200 could be as high as $500 or around 40 per cent, but a Falcon or Commodore sold at recommended retail price will yield closer to $4000 gross (10 per cent is a good rule of thumb), and very few are sold at full tilt. Sometimes the special price in the newspaper advertisement or in the side window leaves a profit of less than $1000.

Even family members are not immune to this rule, while staff members have to use good powers of persuasion to buy cars at cost or maybe at cost plus $500. 'My own brother-in-law doesn't trust me,' said one new car sales manager. 'He shops me.' Well, of course.

What dealers do

- Managers pit salespersons against one another. The whiteboard in the new car sales manager's office charts the performance of each salesperson—it's the greasy pole of sales success or otherwise. Some of these desperate and mostly young dudes promise anything to get you to sign (delivery date, specification) and give you the excuses later.

- All the sales staff lose interest immediately the car is delivered, and sometimes before.

Dealer and sales staff also:

- 'load' trade-ins to correspond more closely with the buyer's viewpoint.
- drive everything in the yard. Just stick a trade plate on the back and off you go, Uncle Bob. Really there is no such thing as a new car. Customers thrash brand new cars on test drives, and so do some salespersons.
- make up facts to suit the story.
- make the most money out of friends and the least out of 'shoppers'.
- worry about the 'gross', i.e. the total profit in the deal. The higher the profit, the higher the salesperson's commission. Why sell a car for $19,000 if you can get $21,500?
- sell cars at a loss on occasion, especially when sales are slow or it's near the end of the month, when the sales are tallied and the good or poor performance of each salesperson can be examined in a staff forum (inevitably on a Monday morning with frequent tantrums).
- vary interest rates and try not to disclose them. What the customer gains on the purchase price can be lost on the finance. The finance/insurance person earns commission on sign-ups and the higher the interest rate, the higher the commission.

- get desperate near the end of the month, especially the end of June.
- try to fool you with 'tiny numbers', e.g. 'This car will cost you just $94 per week.' Sometimes people will sign up without taking any notice of either the price of the car they are buying or the trade-in price offered.
- It's less common now but some dealers will go to great lengths to stop you leaving. Refuse to be intimidated. Even the newest salesperson can be expected to adopt the role of a senior manager in a bid to double-close. Ask for business cards—a good way of seeing through the 'This is John Wright, our general manager' line. If cars are in sudden inexplicable short supply, write names and titles down.

What dealers don't do

- Learn about the cars they sell and the opposition's products
- Have thorough customer follow-up procedures
- Give you the best price first
- Understand car enthusiasts
- Sell cars more cheaply to their friends (although there are exceptions)

How to buy a car

- Never say you have a trade-in until after you have been given what you believe is the sharpest price you can negotiate.
- Produce written quotes from other dealers (not showing the trade-in price and thus the changeover figure).
- Be prepared to make a commitment but not on the spot—the price will go down if anything (not up) if you make the salesperson wait a day or two.
- Be honest (apart from declaring that you have a trade-in). Most customers lie more than salespeople.
- Be nice to the salesperson. Be nice to everyone.
- Don't try to convince the salesperson how good your trade-in is (your car instantly becomes 'the trade-in' when you walk in the door). Being interested in your car is not part of his job.
- Say that you will refer people if you are given the right treatment.
- Have a look at the service and spare parts facilities (and maybe make a couple of phone calls with special questions).
- Buy a car that the dealer is especially keen to sell (if you can work this out). 'Demos' getting up around the 10,000-kilometre mark may make sales managers edgy because the newness can be seen to be wearing off.
- There is no such thing as a fixed price for a car. The recommended retail price is a merely a starting point for negotiations in at least 90 per cent of cases.

- Never say yes to the first price given because it will *never* be the best price.
- Do not invite a salesperson to come over to your house with a car unless you have already decided to buy—the industry view is that once you're in the buyer's house the deal is as good as done. (See also 'Candy Apple'.)
- Always check the compliance and build dates, which are not the same thing. In the end, the year of build is more important. Say you buy a car built in December 2009 with a January 2010 compliance plate: it will be judged to be a 2009 car and technically already a year old in 2010! Make sure you are buying the latest version. In 1983 BMW Australia introduced a four-speed auto to its 323i just months after the car's launch. Imagine what that did to resale value of the three-speeder! The same applies to used cars. I once owned an Audi that was sold new in 1989, bore a 1988 compliance plate and was actually built in 1987.
- Never agree to sign up based on weekly or monthly repayments without seeing the total purchase price and the trade-in price.
- Dealer delivery is pure profit, thinly disguised. The actual cost of pre-delivery is about $150 plus cleaning (maybe $100), but many dealers charge $1495, or more. Some BMW dealers charge more than $2500 for a Mini delivery.

Tips towards a good deal

- Buy at the end of the month.
- Never buy a brand new model in high demand.
- When you have finished negotiating the price, negotiate the delivery fee. Dealers are not supposed to be non-profit organisations, but suggest that a $750 delivery fee for work that costs about $250 is more than fair!
- You will almost never get more than the true wholesale price for your trade in. (The extra is disguised discount). The only people who get more than wholesale for the used car deducted from the best new car price are fleet buyers or government departments where sometimes as many as twenty or 30 dealers put in tenders.
- Do not buy on price alone—you may pay later in poor service and customer relations.
- Watch out for dealer-customised specials. There's a big chance of buying with heart rather than head when you see a 'special' of this type (which may hold a huge 'gross').
- If a dealer promises good availability of a rare model, ask for proof, i.e. a computer printout from the stock controller.
- Take your own calculator. Ask how the numbers are worked out. Some dealers will fudge the stamp duty even if it's only by $40 or $50.
- Beware of promises like, 'We can fit a third seat to this Commodore ute' or 'This exhaust system adds 20 kW to the standard Falcon V8'.

- Don't be pressured into buying a vehicle in dealer stock. Remember, it's a buyer's market.
- Don't start the conversation by asking for the best price. This is guaranteed to infuriate the salesperson who is asked this maybe twenty times per week.
- Salespeople are taught to take control. Don't let this happen.
- Insist on staying with your vehicle while the valuer looks at it. Then park it in the street, lock it up and hang on to your keys. This gives you control over when you leave the dealership. (There's little more embarrassing than walking decisively out of the door only to see that your car is parked in by four others.)
- When the aftermarket salesperson rings, negotiate for any items you want. Profit margins can be up to 500 per cent. Don't get rustproofing or underbody protection. 'Crystal Glaze' retails at about $1000 but actually costs the dealer $300 or so. Say you have a friend in the business and that you understand 'grossing'.

Yes, these things really happened

- A used car salesman was so eager to get a customer to sign that he wrote in a clause 'Subject to wife's approval'. Nobody was surprised when the deal 'fell over'.
- How important is service? Some dealers are so price-focused that they skimp. During the unhappy life of the

AU Fords, a customer asked a dealer to include the more ornate LTD grille in the quote for his new Fairlane. On delivery he noted the car still wore its original grille. 'What about my LTD grille?' he asked. 'In the boot,' replied the salesman. 'You didn't say you wanted it fitted.'

- Tampering with odometers still occurs. I heard of a repairer who was pulling the dashboard out of a trade-in vehicle to 'recalibrate' the speedo. When he finally pulled the instrument out of the car he found a note taped to the back of it that read 'Oh no, not again!'
- A people-mover will come in handy for the boys' night out. Just whack on a trade plate, put an esky full of beer in the centre aisle and off we go! But it's important to clean out all the empties before taking the vehicle on a demo.

Quick guide

1. Know what you want before you start looking, i.e. family six, small Japanese four, $35,000 sports coupe.
2. Shop around.
3. Evaluate the dealers, e.g. Were you treated well? Offered a test drive?
4. Never say yes to the first price.
5. Never admit to having a trade-in until the last minute.
6. Always check the compliance plate and build date.

Glossary to the car sales business

bad egg: Any customer whose finance application fails despite the best efforts of the F&I operative.

come-on car: Very attractively priced teaser used to bring people to the yard (where they then discover it's just been sold or has done exorbitant kilometres for its age, or has been 'hit by the Southern Aurora').

country cousin: Rhyming slang for a dozen (as in $1200 or $12,000): 'It's worth a country cousin.' Also **a handful** as in $500 or $5000. More arcane is **legs**.

gross: The profit in the deal, e.g. 'Have you got a fat grosser up your sleeve?'

highball: The buyer is suckered in with an unrealistically high price, has his/her hopes raised and then dashed. This works especially well in tandem with the **puppy dog** close.

in the nude: A car minus some of the luxury options especially 'air' (-conditioning) and 'steer' (power steering). Also used especially of old BMWs and Mercedes with wind-up windows and steel wheels.

legs: Eleven ($11,000 or $1100).

lovely car: Any vehicle a wholesaler is trying to sell that has no obvious major defects.

lovely, lovely car: A better than average car.

lowball: The opposite of **highball**. The buyer is quoted an unrealistically low trade-in price as a scare tactic. This is then raised and the relief can lead to a sale.

nutcracker: A lovely car.

off the pill: Generic term used to describe poor selling performance. 'Bill's been off the pill ever since his girlfriend shot through with another bloke.'

puppy dog: Used as noun or verb. 'Tom, why don't you take this vehicle home for the weekend and see how you like it.' The principle is that any new car will feel fantastic after the customer's worn out Nissima Falcodore and that he/she will fall in love with the new car, like a child coming home with a puppy.

skinny: Used especially in regards to registration, i.e. 'skinny reg' (expiry looming).

trade-in: Your existing vehicle (which the salesperson sees merely as something from which to extricate you).

wood duck: In less common usage now but very popular up to the 1990s. A wood duck might be pictured as a middle-aged gentleman wearing a tweed jacket with elbow patches and keen to buy a Rover Vanden Plas; anyone who is an easy sales mark, a pushover.

woody: Verb, as in 'to woody in'. 'I think he might woody into this (outrageous deal)'.