



The cockpit told me London's temperature was zero degrees Celsius! After leaving the thirty-degree norm behind in Singapore it promised to be a shade on the cool side. Trudging through Heathrow's drab, grey corridors at six in the morning, while looking out on the frosty scene, didn't lift my spirits much either. It was supposed to be Spring, but felt more like one of those dark, cold days from winters past.

Outside, blowing steam clouds and rugged up against the biting wind, I hired a brand-new *Ford Mondeo* estate from Hertz: the largest motor on the block, with a rear compartment the size of a pickup; logic being that with a partner and two growing girls, plus a mountain of child-supporting luggage to boot, we needed more than our fair share of space. One of the larger bags - a cheap, but cavernous affair - had burst its stretched zipper, embarrassingly in the Changi departure lounge, and was now held together with knotted strings; pajama arms and doll's heads poking out here and there.

The vehicle, in black, was uncharacteristically posh, and large for me: the significance of assuming the *Mondeo Man* label and all its thinly veiled intimations did not rest easily with this new age man from the antipodes. Those thoughts aside, driving out of Heathrow for the first time in my life - new country, swish car, unfamiliar motorway - certainly brought the brain cells up to speed, but after a while the soporific effect of an empty M4 at 8.00 o'clock on a Sunday morning had the opposite impact, nullifying the earlier adrenalin rush.

At the end of the hire, that vast space of the *Mondeo* was replaced a week later by a slightly ancient *Fiat Uno*: a car which definitely ranked at the other end of the size

spectrum. The only similarity was the colour – black - though even that, after a short while, was tinged with an increasing number of pimply, brownish, rust spots! My argument, apart from not having enough money to buy a *Mondeo*, was that we didn't need too much luggage space for tootling around town. "*Small is beautiful*", I told the girls, in the true spirit of E.F. Schumacher, a green guru I had admired for several years.

The little *Uno* was a delight to drive ... and a snip to park, but its main failing seemed to be a propensity for the motor to cease motoring at unexpected times - and sometimes in the most awkward of places, such as crowded, mid-town intersections. In hindsight, I had to admit that this blanking out at important moments was a serious flaw, which I should not have entertained for more than a week or two, but which I let drag on way past its use-by date. A year or so later, after a succession of engine failures, ranging from mildly to very embarrassing, I replaced the *Uno* with a comparatively sleek *Austin Allegro*. Iridescent silver in colour and with a motor which not only kept going at traffic lights, but accelerated away from them, with G-forces that slammed me back into the driver's seat. "*Way to go!*" I thought to myself. "*Let's put Schumacher – the environmentalist, not the racing driver - on the back-burner for a while.*"

My new age speed machine - bought incredibly cheaply at auction with a somewhat dubious friend (who knew all about such things) - was to be undone by another friend's wife, when I made the mistake of offering it up as a vehicle for her to practice driving skills. I soon found out why her husband had been reluctant to do the same, when after a reasonably competent start and about five minutes into the first *lesson*, we rounded a sharp bend and drove straight into a very solid stone wall. The car, as a whole unit, never really recovered from this mishap, though its engine torque remained true to the last. Before reselling the *Austin*, I lovingly filled and buffed the numerous rust-holes that were multiplying quite quickly on its front and rear wheel arches. Eventually it moved on to a (more-than-likely) half-suspecting buyer, who fortunately for me, seemed totally distracted by its well disguised power.

The upgrade from the *Allegro* turned out to be a dark blue, *Nissan Bluebird* ... the one shaped like a box. Its cabin had a soothing ambience, with steering wheel, dash and

seats all finished off in various shades of inter-matching azure. I figured out later that I must have bought it for the sound system, which with *Whole Lotta Love* at full blast, on a free-wheeling down-hill run, could rock the walls of any street in the West-country. The vehicle's main problem, in sharp contrast to the *Austin*, turned out to be power, or lack-of it that is. In addition, its lettuce-leaf suspension felt at times like being locked in a bouncy castle, surrounded by a multitude of hyperactive kids. If you suffered at all as a passenger from travel sickness, then this was not the car for you. Fortunately for me, for the majority of the time, I was the driver.

A dramatic finish to the *Bluebird's* tenure of my roadside parking space, came one day, when its expansive, forward-opening bonnet, flew up and smashed the windscreen! This memorable event happened on a down-hill slalom run into Cheltenham, my hometown at that point in time - which ensured enough forward momentum for the incident to occur at all - accompanied of course by a suitable volume of music, thus making it a more visual, rather than audible experience. After that, I went backwards in time, regained my Schumacher smalltime principles, and traded up to a much newer model *Fiat Uno*, which unlike its predecessors had miniscule boot space, very few rust spots and unremarkable power, but at least unlike its earlier namesake, its engine did ensure a trouble-free ride from A to B.

These dealings at the hazardous end of the UK's automobile world, caused much joy and misery, most likely in equal proportions, but my real car hay-day was many years before, in Australia. It all began with a leaden-weight motor – another *Austin* – from England. This vehicle, a pastel-green A55, was built around a small four-cylinder engine which struggled at the best of time to pull its weight plus the driver; but with passengers aboard, the struggle became an uphill battle. For me however, I was able to forget its obvious power-related failings, because this same vehicle provided in effect, my passage to an adult world: it enabled me to pass my driving test (at the second attempt) and – perhaps even more significantly – to explore the realms of blossoming sexuality on its wonderfully upholstered back seat. Thus, my first car, holds a special

place in my life that could never be replaced by any other, no matter how sleek or powerful.

A few years after those combined power struggles, both on the road and in the back seat, I obtained a job which catapulted me into the arena of new and late model cars. The company provided the wheels, I just had to make them move. It was a career path, which in hindsight almost always seemed to involve significant time behind a steering wheel. A succession of company cars followed company cars. This was Australia where the world divided into *Holden Commodore* men, as opposed to those more common types who preferred the rather more brash and gaudy *Falcon 500*, from *Ford*. Obviously I was a Commodore man, and my cars, courtesy of Holden, went from a very basic, olive-green station wagon (as estate cars are known down under), to a shit-coloured sedan which was almost undone by a lengthy private excursion to Alice Springs and the centre of Australia. Later, and with another conglomerate, my favourite was a brilliant yellow model which had a lush wall-to-wall black interior, a short manual gearshift, bucket seats and a mountain of power! I became known by this car, my last company vehicle, before I returned to those sensible Schumacher principles, and the depths of owning and taking responsibility for my own purchases.

After jumping off the company band wagon, the standard of vehicle I drove plunged dramatically, from late model workhorse, down to old and sometimes battered, objects of derision. A decrepit *Volvo*, which required the bumper bar to be straightened before it could even be driven, was perhaps the low point. But in fact I liked the freedom of having my own choice, even though the wheel I sat behind connected to a 20 year old bright orange *Volvo* 'tank', or an eye-watering, lime-green Datsun 120Y, which was so light that it seemed in danger of parting company with the ground if it reached the speed limit, or came into contact with a modest breeze. I enjoyed being master of my own destiny, rather than a servant for someone else's plans.

During this retro-phase, my most forgettable purchase was probably a rather ancient Morris Campervan, which in hindsight it could only be assumed I bought because of its wonderfully ornate (and heavy) camping set-up, built into the rear interior. Because of

the weight of the beautifully finished hardwood cabinets in the back, the vehicle actually required something of a downhill slope to get up speed, while approaching any slope from the downside end was quite a problem, even with only the driver on board; with a full family complement, almost impossible. After a while I came to the obvious conclusion that the van worked best as a stationery, rather than moving object, and that's how it stayed for a year or two at the back of my house, until I finally managed to sell it on to some other ornate wood lover ... after a well-researched, down-hill trial run!

Following several years of bumming around in beaten up bombs, I suddenly saw the light and acquired the type of car I had always dreamed of. This purchase probably reflected some early form of male menopause, because it coincided with separation from my first wife: bachelor pad, bachelor car, and all the trimmings. But I was not *Mel Gibson*, so it was not an Italian *Ferrari* or *Lamborghini*, just a fairly modest Japanese *Mazda: Ferrari Red* admittedly; my very own style machine, with a fair degree of speed. In fact a two-door coupe, with a five-speed manual box and loads of pizzazz! This little red rocket stayed for a couple of years and gave me lots of pleasure. One tightly held secret (which I am now almost ashamed to admit) is that I sold this cherished auto in the rain, to disguise the fact that its roof had been dented by a severe hailstorm. I remember being almost in tears when it sold (though on reflection they may have been crocodile tears, to ensure the sale).... but I just had to move on.

Money from the *Mazda* sale enabled the crucial down-payment on travels to the UK with my new partner and daughters ... which brings us back to our arrival at Heathrow and the *Ford Mondeo* saga, at the beginning of this story. On reflection, Britain provided almost as many car-type anecdotes as Australia, even though the time span back in my home country was much less. Most of these UK-based vehicles all came with their own idiosyncrasies. I remember for example, quite vividly, barreling down a car-jammed M4 motorway towards London, in my then current low-budget and bright red hatch-back work-horse. We were shifting house, it was teaming rain, and the car was packed to the rafters, with just enough space for me to exist behind the wheel. On top of all that, I had injured my back just before leaving Cornwall and had been given strict instructions to

stop, get out, and move around at every available service centre, during the five or six-hour journey. This was a formidable experience, to be recounted but never repeated ... in this life, or the next!

During my ensuing stay with family, in the Muswell Hill district of London, the red car was sold, and an even cheaper model came on board. This was a dark brown chocolatey coloured *Triumph Toledo* (and probably worth a mint today as a collector's item). My youngest daughter, a toddler at the time, nicknamed it *Funny Brown Car*, which, with a floating rear bench seat, lack of working safety belts and extremely audible exhaust, was on reflection, a fairly apt description. After purchasing this rather unique machine from a young veterinary surgeon, in a rural area north of the city, I recall driving it back, with no registration and no insurance, and presenting it to family outside our rented house in the city. My young toddler thought it was great; the older ones with some element of reason, were aghast. But at £200 I thought it was a snip: probably the cheapest, and one of the most unforgettable cars, I have ever owned.

One of the Brit vehicles I remember best, was my last purchase before leaving to live in Kenya: a surprisingly cheap, but very sporty *Ford Fiesta V16*. Was this because it was all black inside and out? Or that its purring engine seemed to deliver an incredible amount of power? Or perhaps because my elder daughter told me it had *cool* sports seats? It could have been any or all of these, but I think the main reason I remember the vehicle was because one day, on a quiet Cotswold country road, it nearly killed me!

The negative take would be to say that knowing the car's power got me into a situation where overtaking a slow-moving truck, on a narrow road, was possible but risky; while the positive angle would be that the quick response of the V16 under the bonnet actually got me out of the predicament I had chosen to land myself in. I sometimes recall the vehicle and the events of that fateful (almost fatal) day, under a balmy English summer sky. I escaped by the skin of my teeth, which might be the reason I will remember that little black *Fiesta*, perhaps more than all the others that went before it.

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