

INSIDE EVERY SHINY NEW AUTOMOBILE lurks a junk car waiting to come out, and in the case of my '82 Honda Civic hatchback, it has started to emerge. Sounds like a horror movie, you say. Well, yes. But it's also a love story.

You know the Civic. It's the little one. In Boston, where I live, you can fit two of them in a single parking space. That's one reason we bought it. Another was the price—real cheap. And a third was reliability. Durability is another story, however, and we forgot to ask about that.

It seems like just last week that my wife and I drove the little beauty out of the dealership, our noses merry with that new-car smell, and took her for a spin around the Charles River basin. She was the first car we'd ever bought together, and we felt a little giddy with the guilty pleasure of our purchase, just as we had after our other First Time. Her engine idled so quietly that when I stopped at a light, I thought it had stalled out; she glided over Boston's pot-

## KIN SHIP

*Some cars don't just take you places.*

*They become part of the family*

sides and rear where those inevitable dings have chipped the paint. The roof of the car is creased where a tree limb fell on it during a storm. The front fenders are crumpled in perfect symmetry, as though a giant had taken the car between thumb and forefinger and squeezed. (Actually, demonstrating the parity of our marriage, the damage stems from two separate but equal accidents, one my wife's and one mine.) And finally, thanks to a hit-and-run artist in a parking lot, the left door (our Civic has just two doors) opens only halfway, whereupon it gives a groan like Chewbacca in *Star Wars* and goes no farther. So only thin people can drive it.

What God and man have done to the outside, our 4-year-old has done her best to equal on the inside. The floor of the car is strewn with empty juice boxes, gum wrappers, popped balloons and rice-cake crumbs; the sides are festooned with teddy-bear stickers; and the formerly plush gray backseat has been scored with orange rust marks from the metal supports of her car seat.

And there are other little nagging problems that we can't blame on our daughter: The radio tuner jams in the low nineties of the FM dial; the warning light that tells us our hatch door is open never turns off, leaving us uncertain about the safety of suitcases and groceries; and the muffler rattles in second gear.

We've gone through two clutches and three-going-on-four mufflers and more flat tires than I would like to count. I do remember the first one. Setting out with the family for my high school's tenth reunion, I heard a strange click emanating from the back of the car. We pulled over, and I discovered that a nail had imbedded itself in the left rear tire. Eager to show off my mechanical prowess, I used a pair of pliers to pull out the nail and proudly went around to the

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holes like a Hovercraft and handled corners like O.J. Simpson. The car had spunk. When we got home, we closed the doors—with twin thunks that conveyed all the precision of Japanese engineering—and stood there for a while holding hands and admiring our purchase. We could see ourselves reflected in the car's shiny silver sides.

But now look. Seven years later, the new-car shine has long since vanished. In fact, a good bit of the car itself is gone, too. Rust has taken several bites out of the wheel casings; it's been nibbling at the edges of the doors, on the hatch door and the gas lid; and it's begun to dig into the

«elements of style»

(continued from page 48) passenger side to show my wife. Meanwhile, ssssssssssss. We were the last ones to get to the reunion; I think the car was trying to tell me something.

Let's face it, the car's a mess, an embarrassment, a blot on the neighborhood, a crime against nature. It's gotten so bad that for business appointments I park at least a block away from my destination, lest the person I'm calling on see my car. I dread giving rides to people because of their invariably pitying looks. And, for the same reason, I scrupulously avoid valet parking.

Time for a new car, you might say. Well, you do have a point there. And I can't say we haven't considered it. But we're just not ready.

For one thing, I'm starting to identify with the car. Sure, it's an '82 Honda. But I'm a '54 Sedgwick, and I've got a few dings on me and I don't start too well in the morning myself. If my wife were ever to think she might be able to solve the car's age problem by trading it in, then she might look over at me and... well, you see what I'm driving at.

I'm joking. She'd never trade me in. She wouldn't get anything for me.

No, the thing is, the Honda is simply our car. It's part of the family, like the dog we don't have or the goldfish that died. We had our car before we had our daughter, and, for all her flaws, we love her (the car) only a little less. What are we going to do? Sell her for parts?

Other people, I know, regularly trade in their cars after a few years, but I never understood that. Just when you're starting to get acquainted, out it goes like an empty beer can. That assumes all cars are replaceable, mere rentals.

But cars don't just take you places. They collect a few things along the way—all that life you see out the window, like the moose on the way to Nova Scotia or the lightning storm in the Catskills, and the adventures that you have

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en route, like getting lost in the South Bronx (that was memorable) or being stopped for speeding in Texas. These experiences gather in the car along with the old maps and empty potato-chip bags, and they stay there.

Even the dents have a story in them. I smushed in the car's right fender when I was dropping off our friend Steve at the train station. He was departing Boston to begin life as a corporate lawyer in New York. Momentarily nostalgic, I turned my head as I drove off to watch him disappear into the station and, without realizing it, drifted into the right lane and collided with a camper. I straightened out the squashed fender with my hands and tried to paint over the damage, but there it was—our first dent. My wife was even happy about it—she likes it when I get emotional.

And it left her free to take some liberties with the chassis herself. Sure enough, a little later she was cruising along in downtown Boston looking for a parking space. She spotted one on the other side of the street, and, being a Boston driver, she pulled a U-ey—and smacked into an Oldsmobile. *Et voilà*, a matching dent on the left front. I didn't say anything. I know how that can happen.

We are our cars, after all, just as we are our families. The driver's seat is now molded to my shape, as is the passenger's seat to my wife's and the rear left to our daughter's. I don't even hear the rattle of the muffler anymore. I've learned to drive with my hand on top of the wheel to block out the open-hatch light, so I don't notice that either. And while I can't say that I have been able to ignore the car's decaying exterior, I have managed, as the psychologists say, to accept it.

The only thing wrong with the car is what it looks like—and isn't that true of so many things? Do appearances really count? Under the hood, she still has all the pep of a youngster. She's got only 65,000 miles on her, and the mechanic says I can get another 65,000 "at least." If there is any chassis left to ride in, that is.

Don't get me wrong. I won't be heartbroken if she doesn't roll on forever. Even Honda Civics die. But in the meantime, my junk car and me, we're going to go on.

—JOHN SEDGWICK

John Sedgwick wrote about Martha's Vineyard in the March issue of GQ. He is the author of *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Year in the Life of America's Oldest Zoo*.

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