

# Nancy's First Car

by Dick Woodside

Don Robertson says that hand-me-down cars don't count, so this is the story of the first car Nancy got with her own money. Working at Simpson's head office in downtown Toronto at Bay and Queen Street, and living at Bay and Gerrard, Nancy's 900 metre walk to work meant that she didn't need a car. But a promotion to National Women's Wear Coordinator meant that she would be visiting stores and would need a reliable car.

The requirement for "reliable" meant that the lime green, smoky, hand-me-down 1977 Plymouth Colt we were filling with oil regularly, and driving occasionally, would have to be replaced. A bright red 1986 Nissan Micra fit the bill and, as astronomical as the price of a new car seemed, we bought it.

The brand new Micra racked up the mileage pretty quick too, at 900 km a week. For two weeks, at least. Returning from a store visit in Scarborough, Nancy started down the ramp onto the 401. The Micra was the middle of three vehicles. Ahead of her, at the bottom of the ramp, the 1974 Pontiac Parisienne came to a full stop instead of accelerating onto the highway. The little Micra came to a screeching halt just a few inches behind the Pontiac, but the Chevy Suburban following behind just plowed into the Micra, shoving it into the Pontiac. So, with all of 1,820 km on the odometer, the bright red Micra had both ends completely collapsed and the roof buckled. No surprise, really, given the difference in weight between the Micra and the two enormous bookends it was sandwiched between.

Nancy and her work colleague had an ambulance ride to North York General where they were examined for their whiplash injuries. After the x-rays came back, Nancy's colleague had a mild whiplash that required a collar for a few weeks, but Nancy had a dislocated vertebra in her neck. The only neurosurgeon on duty in the GTA that evening happened to be at St. Michael's in downtown Toronto, so a transfer was ordered. But the ambulance paramedics refused to take her due to the risk of further catastrophic damage. Eventually, potential liabilities were sorted out among the various parties, and Nancy got a second ambulance ride to St. Michael's, where she spent the night and the next day, waiting for the swelling to subside enough to see what her future might look like. After a few long months with an enormous foam collar and chin support, Nancy was good to go.

The Micra, of course, did not go anywhere other than a salvage yard. I expect it's barely-broken-in drivetrain eventually found another Micra to power, but the rest of it had a quick trip to recycling.

## **Nancy's First Car – Do-Over**

Something a little bigger and safer. Something that would last longer than two weeks without killing us. That was the mandate for the 1986 Micra's replacement. Car shopping all over again, we settled down to the choice between a Honda Accord or a Volkswagen Jetta. The higher seat height of the Jetta became a decisive factor. But VW Canada had cleverly created a special model called the Carat that was loaded with all the options and sported an exclusive colour, metallic champagne or gold, so that was what we wanted. Apparently, so did everyone else, and there was a six-month waiting list.

High school friends of mine were the children of the salesman and the VW dealer principal of a very small VW dealership in a very small town, where there were few big spenders who would gravitate to a top-of-the-line foreign car. Despite the long waiting list, they located a 1986 Jetta

Carat with the manual 5-speed rather than the 3-speed automatic that normally accompanied the top of the line, and arranged a dealer trade. It takes two guys to go pick up a car. And they were doing a second dealer trade for another customer the same day. With such a small dealership, the closer trade was handled by the dealer principal himself, while our Jetta was further away and so was assigned to a mechanic.

On the Saturday scheduled for delivery, Nancy and I took the bus (or two buses, actually) on a milk-run through much of our scenic province. This afforded us the small-town opportunity to be let off in front of our salesman's house, for the short walk to the dealership. We learned that the dealership was closed but the salesman was going to deliver our Jetta anyway.

While our Jetta was just fine, the other dealer-trade customer's car had been totalled in a collision on the way back, and the dealer principal had been killed. We felt so badly for my high school friend's loss of her father in his early 50s, due to a driver who was intoxicated in the middle of a weekday.

Somehow, that terrible event was not the end of this series of unfortunate events, although it was by far the worst. In the first few months of ownership, Nancy's Jetta suffered mechanical failures of every variety. The most common problem was the fuel injection. The last trip to the service department, for the fuel injection anyway, ended with the statement that VW had no idea why the fuel injection didn't work but, rest assured, the factory in Germany was working on it and, when a solution is found, we would be called. At about this time, Audi was in the news for problems with unintended acceleration. Our Jetta experienced that on two occasions, one of which was pretty exciting for a brief moment, when it took off at full throttle out of our parking spot in an underground garage. Hitting the clutch and the brake, I stopped short of the opposite wall, but the engine red-lined itself as I switched off the ignition.

Other faults and foibles presented themselves, and our Jetta probably had its own dedicated service bay at the VW dealership. A good many defects were cured after only one or two tries, but the fuel injection was not. My letter to VW Canada listed the 42 faults that had befallen our Jetta and the status of each one. VW invited me to drop the car off at their preferred downtown VW dealer, so their zone service guy could have a look. "Keep it as long as you need to", I told them. When I was called to pick it up, I was a little surprised driving off the lot into the rush hour traffic on Avenue Road, only to discover no brakes whatsoever. Hand brake on, and shifting to reverse, back onto the dealer's lot. Back into the service department. Handing back the key. More head-scratching in the service department, no doubt, since the brakes were not even part of that week's complaints.

By this time, Nancy had transitioned to another position that didn't require a car, and so the Jetta was relegated to weekend duty with frequent visits back to the dealership to solve each new disappointment from the engineers in Germany.

As our twelfth month of the joy of Jetta Carat ownership rolled around, VW Canada, to their great credit, offered to buy the Jetta back from us. It's tempting to think that they were very sorry that we'd been unlucky enough to get the one and only lemon Carat to roll out of Germany. But I suspect they had been flooded (pun partially intended) with fuel injection complaints and so they instituted a buy-back program for the most unsolvable cases. With an entirely fair deduction for mileage (which proved it did run, sometimes), VW Canada traded a cheque for the keys and Nancy and I became happy pedestrians once again.

## Nancy's First Car – Mulligan

Another job transition required Nancy to get on the road again. We were now occasionally enjoying being seen in a Maserati convertible, despite the infrequency with which we could get it out of the Maserati service department. By this time, we had learned a bit.

The hunt for yet another first car for Nancy was now focussed on buying a used car. One that had already had most of its manufacturing defects fixed, at the cost of someone else's time and trouble. And one that wouldn't collapse our finances if its insurance pay-out wasn't a fraction of its cost two weeks earlier. Reliability was still a desirable quality. So the hunt was on for the right used Honda Accord.

Then, as now, the Hondas retain more of their initial cost than most others. To get a lower than normal priced used Accord, we had to get one with higher than normal mileage, but not beat up. The perfect combination appeared in a 1986 Accord advertised in Whitby.

As we drove out there to see it, I realized that negotiating a good price could be compromised by showing up in a red Maserati convertible but, I hoped, maybe the seller wouldn't recognize it. As we inspected the Accord, I wondered just how often can one person have bad luck? The Accord was being sold by an auditor with the Retail Sales Tax Branch, which explained its high mileage. So, the car was fine, but our negotiating position was somewhat compromised. A reasonable price was soon agreed on, although I wasn't able to achieve the degree of daylight robbery of an unwitting seller that I initially hoped for.

Nancy and I drove that Accord for many years with only one "incident".

Starting out on a vacation to the U.S., we stopped at Canadian Customs to fill out the form to record my camera equipment, to prove it was already mine and not being smuggled back in. With parking at a premium, I parked the Accord at 90 degrees between two transport trucks. With the customs form in hand, as soon as we got back in the car, the truck carrying rolls of steel started backing up right at Nancy's door. Encouraged by Nancy's screams, I started the Accord and put it in reverse, while spinning the wheel to arc away from the corner of the trailer. The Accord's passenger door was very severely crumpled inward, while my turning manoeuvre managed to save the rest of the passenger side of the car. No damage to the trailer carrying 30 tons of steel and no damage to Nancy. Most surprising of all, I had not backed into any other cars or pedestrians! Did you know that there is a Peace Bridge Police force, since the bridge is outside the jurisdiction of municipal, provincial and state police? The things you learn! With the passenger door crumpled shut, our entire vacation was spent with Nancy climbing in and out the driver's side and clambering over the shifter and centre console. It was either that, or sitting in the back seat, either of which was a lot better than what could have happened. A lot better.

Eventually, even ordinary repairs and maintenance cannot prevent the inevitable. So it was actually very good luck when the Accord's radiator, brakes and transmission all began to fail at the same time. With 308,000 km, we were glad that it had the courtesy to save us from spending money on repairs we wouldn't benefit from.

After all this, it might be hard to believe that our next four cars were all hand-me-downs from relatives, saving us from buying a car from 1993 until Nancy got a \$1,000 winter-beater in 2002 and I bought a ten-year old car in 2006. Her winter-beater is gone, but I still have my 1996 Roadmaster Estate Wagon. And a few others.