

Seduced... *BY A CAR!*

BY MAXINE PAETRO

Boy meets girl, girl meets car. How she fell fast and hard for 2 tons of Detroit steel

IT WAS JULY OF '64. High school was out. In September I would be leaving my home in Miami, driving off to college hundreds of miles away.

I had my own car. While my parents had two newer models—a Chevy Impala and a Chrysler—mine was a burlap brown, third-hand Peugeot, with a stick shift and a cranky disposition. I called it “the Grunt,” and I drove it all over town, getting speeding tickets and bucking up to stop lights when I forgot to engage the clutch.

I had met Carl 3 months earlier, just before graduation, and he became my first boyfriend. He was 6-foot-2, but if you counted his stand-up butch haircut he was even taller. He had a pleasant face, an easy smile, and just the right amount of confidence. We weren't lovers. The early '60s were still too '50s for that. And we weren't in love. We had drifted together in a companionable way.

I wasn't sure how I really felt about Carl, but maybe that didn't matter, since I loved his '57 Mercury Turnpike Cruiser without reservation. He called it “the Tank,” and it was everything my car was not: hulking, protective, with a push-button automatic on the dash and an engine under the hood that pinned

me back against the seat every time Carl hit the pedal.

The Tank was an unforgettable car; a four-door, two-tone blue-and-white coupe, with Quadri-Beam headlights and fancy gold-trimmed, backswept fins. The interior was cavernous; it had a high domed ceiling and a front seat that was described at the time as “living-room size.” Bench



style, protected with a pizza-proof covering of tough plastic, it was as wide as a bed.

There was a wraparound windshield, like a wall-to-wall movie screen; a rubber bezeled instrument panel; and a semicircular steering wheel, like the letter “D” lying on its back. The backseat was heaped with guy junk: schoolbooks, spare parts, and cartons of 45s. “Victor,” a stuffed tiger mascot, guarded me from the ledge below the rear window. The Tank's doors closed with the solid thunk of steel, and the chassis rode high above its white-walled balloon tires, which spun the asphalt into seamless black silk.

Carl and I both worked at WQAM, a radio station that was joined in the Battle of the Big Sound against rival station WFUN. We were summer help, mere foot soldiers answering phones for small change and promotional T-shirts plucked from the call-in prize box. Carl wanted to be a deejay for real. I didn't know what I wanted to be and was anxious about how my life would go once I'd left home.

Carl lights up two Marlboro cigarettes, passes one to me. I crank down the window.

The Tank has speakers front and back, and the music is loud. As the transmission shifts into third gear, Jan and Dean croon *Dead Man's Curve*. Then, QAM disk jockey Jimmy Dunlap announces the latest hit from the Fab Four. The Beatles sing, “If I fell in love with you...” Carl reaches out and draws me close as we head off the downramp. He parks the car on a dead-end street facing the ocean, and we make out in the Tank's steamy interior.

Summer ended.

I packed my belongings and drove off to college in the Grunt. Back in Miami, the Battle of the Big Sound continued without me. Carl wrote often and sent the stuffed tiger as a keepsake. I kept it on my bed. He traded in the Mercury Turnpike Cruiser for a powder-blue '62 Plymouth Fury convertible, and on the next summer break, we drove around Miami Beach with the top down. Speeding across the causeway, Carl slipped his arm around me, the hot wind whipped my hair across my face, and I flicked burning butts out into the torrid night.

But it wasn't the same. Because it wasn't the Tank. ♦

Would I have sex or not? And if I did, what would happen? And if I didn't, what would happen? I worried about living in a dorm surrounded by strangers who would be cool—I was not—and I was afraid that I would flunk out in the first year. But those fears receded every time I slid across the seat to sit next to my boyfriend Carl.

I remember many nights like this: Carl and I are in the Tank, heading over the Rickenbacker Causeway toward Miami Beach, that strip of coastline lapped by the Atlantic Ocean and festooned with a shimmering strand of glamorous hotels.

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