

YOU CAN GET THERE FROM HERE



BY CARLA MEROLLA ODELL

On the last leg of our journey up the coast of Maine for our vacation, my husband and I stayed in a hotel south of Portland. During breakfast, we struck up a conversation with Billy, a Mainer who didn't have to travel too far for this year's national Corvair convention just around the corner. An hour later, we were peeking into brightly colored coupes, sedans, station wagons and vans.

"Nobody up hee-yae-vahecahed about the cah back in 1969," Billy told us, waving at the sea of classics, until General Motors decided to stop its decade-long production and the allure of owning one skyrocketed.

"I remem-bah being ten at my grandpa's cahd game. Doc-tah Bischofbur-gah – he was Gahrman – had his cahds fanned out and lookin' o-vah the rim of his glasses, and he says, 'if I'm gonna have a Cah-vair, I want a blue one.' So Doc-tah Bischofbur-gah goes to the Chevy gah-rahge in Augusta, but they didn't have a blue one. They only had a green one, and he says, 'But I don't want a green one.' He settled for a red one that he found in Paht-land, and his friend Paul Shah-

man in Wiss-cah-sett bought that green cah. But he wanted a red one."

A decade later, Billy would follow Dr. B. and Paul Sherman when he and a friend stole into a junkyard and pushed out a powder-blue station wagon, the first of almost 30 Corvairs he'd come to collect – and the one my husband and I were standing alongside side of as we said our goodbyes. "You spin a good yahn," I joked, shaking Billy's hand and wishing him well. But the story of Billy's life-long yearning intrigued me.

There's something about our first car, whether we fall in love with its look or the culture surrounding it, as Billy had, or whether that love grows.... The first car I owned was a red 1974 Celica ST, which I bought from my aunt when I was 17 because she needed to unload it (and I got a "family deal"). But the first car that was mine was a black 2008 Subaru Impreza, which I had "growing up."

Newly separated from my first husband and unable to afford to buy at the time, I leased the Impreza while living in Nutley, New Jersey, from where I drove maybe 20 miles round trip to my teaching job during the weekdays and pretty much not at all on weekends. I called the car "Baby," having been the first car selection I'd ever made on my own. She wasn't my first pick, nor was black my color choice. Still, the summer day I drove her home from the dealer, I stopped and bought her first outfit: color-coordinated seat covers and little black "booties," which my friends kidded were floor mats for the floor mats. I wiped away her first tears when a group of my students (in a rare moment of synthesizing information) made fun of her name, her license plate being WCH. "It's better than BCH," I soothed. And when a bully threw a first punch (in reality, a man backed

into her in a parking lot), I fixed her boo-boos.

A lease had been a smart move, I'd thought – until I married for the second time and moved to the country, where the closest grocery store was 13 miles away. With the prospect of paying over-mileage when I turned her in, we bought a knock about car and sidelined Baby until trading her in would make financial sense.

Baby was the only car I'd named since the Celica, which I called Magoo after a fender bender caused, I explained to my father when I got home, by nearsightedness: the car's not mine. Since Magoo, I've been a co-owner of more cars than I can remember, but Baby represented an independence and empowerment I hadn't known in years.

Once upon a time, I put her to bed in a driveway of a home that was mine alone and where I was, for the first time since my first marriage, on my own. I needed – and did – rise to the challenge. Whenever I am asked where I'm from, I always respond, "I was raised in South Jersey, but I grew up in Nutley." That's why I cried the day I finally turned her in. While many of us surely have sentimental connections to inanimate objects, like books and jewelry, there's something about our first car. Maybe that's because we drive them...places. In them we move. Or, in my case, move on.

The thing is, you can go home again. And the fastest route, for many, is by car.

