

She makes their hearts go ... vroom ... vroom ... vroom

By Christine Negroni

My husband's first love was a Jensen-Healey, a 1974 two-seater British sports car. We have been married 25 years and he has never really gotten over her.

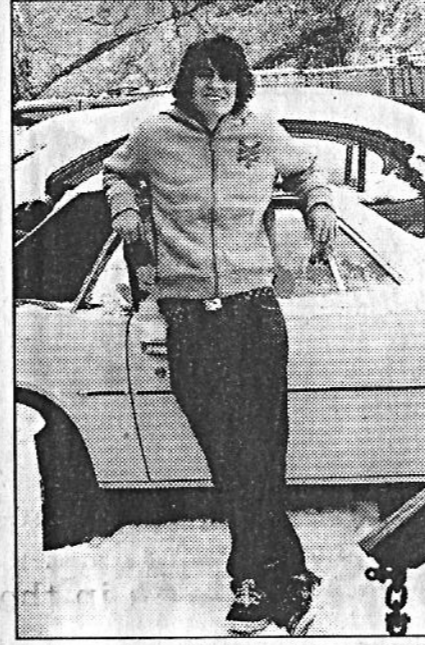
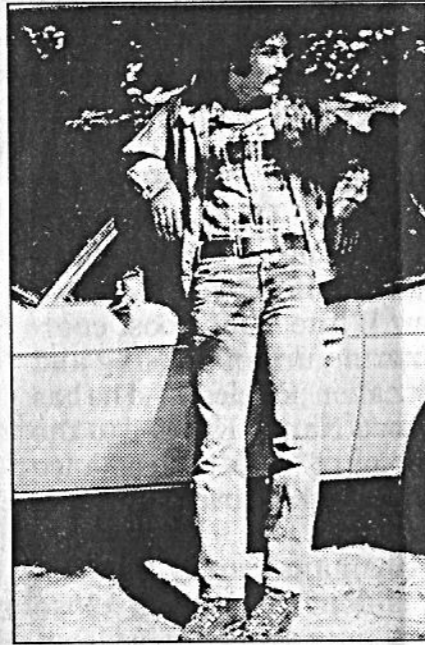
Jim bought the Jensen days after being discharged from the Navy and the controversial Vietnam War. He spent every cent of his savings on her in an exuberant response to re-entering the civilian world. The Jensen was small and fast with a throaty roar that to Jim surely sounded like "free at last." She was long, low slung and as yellow as a gumdrop.

After two years working on an ammunition oiler in the South China Sea, Jim was something to look at, too; hard and tan with a head full of dark brown hair. When he drove the Jensen-Healey onto campus after enrolling in the University of Connecticut — older and worldlier than the average freshman — I have no doubt the two of them turned many a head.

A car like that has an impact on a young man in his formative years and when we married he was loath to give her up.

I didn't push it. In fact, we made our honeymoon trip in the Jensen and we drove her to Chicago when I got a job there the following month.

Years passed. We had children and we moved back east. The Jensen came back with us, though this time she was carried on a specially built platform inside the moving van because Jim worried she would not be able to make the



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Like father, like son.

thousand-mile drive. She was getting older. So were we.

Well into our 30s now, I set out to convince Jim that it was time to say goodbye to the Jensen. It was an impractical car. We had four children, a dog and a minivan for Pete's sake. We'd have to hire a babysitter just to take the car out for a drive. Repairs weren't cheap either. The company stopped making Jensen-Healeys in 1976. Replacement parts and mechanics who could work on it were hard to find. In the winter when the Jensen could not safely be driven on snow and ice, it was removed from our insurance policy. I frequently reminded my husband that I knew of no other antique car worth even less than the day it was purchased.

The year Jim turned 50 I had a small victory. I'd come into a small inheritance and as his luck would have it, I bought him a pre-owned

BMW he'd been talking about. It's true that nothing cures an old love like a new one, or maybe it was gratitude, or simple practicality — whatever, at that point, Jim had to agree with me that it made sense to put the new car into our one-car garage. The Jensen could be stored at a rental property we owned in northwestern Connecticut. It would be out of sight. I was hoping that it would also be out of mind. Surely Jim would soon see the wisdom of getting rid of her altogether.

While all this was going on, my children were growing up and learning to drive. My boys started to notice cars, especially my middle son Sam who loved to drive and seemed to have an aptitude for mechanics. One weekend Jim and Sam went to check on the Jensen in storage. In a scene worthy of Shakespeare, Sam took one look at the Jensen-Healey and was smitten. He

wanted her and begged for her with adolescent ferocity. With the Internet, he argued, it would be easier than before to find the parts. He was working, and would pay for everything, even towing the car back home. He would do the work, he promised to get her running once again.

A woman can deny many things to a husband. But a son's pleading is much harder to resist.

So on a night not too long ago, I sat at my desk overlooking the street while a large and shiny black and crimson tow truck rumbled to a halt. On a platform high atop the tow's large wheels sat the Jensen. The truck backed into our driveway accompanied by a rhythmic warning horn. The Jensen

rolled off the bed, rumples and worn, all soft tires and faded paint. The years spent in the company of my husband were as apparent on her as they are on me.

But standing in driveway watching the return of the car, this is not what the men in my life saw. Jim was seeing his past. The coeds he'd wooed on foliage drives through rural Connecticut. The summer he'd driven coast-to-coast, camping supplies stowed in the Jensen's tiny trunk. Perhaps he even remembered starting his married life in her, rumbling across the states from Connecticut to Illinois in the summer of 1983 with the top down and the sun baking our heads.

Sam, was envisioning his future; most likely some

contemporary variation of his father's adventures, also including girls, independence and the open road.

And so as I watched from the window, my old rival evolved. Where she had once been an annoying symbol of my husband's attachment to his youth, now she was an avatar for my son's journey into adulthood. Rejoining us from the past, the Jensen would be a bridge to the future.

My husband's first love is back in our lives. I can live with that.

Christine Negroni is journalist and writer. She is currently at work on her second book, "The Crash Detectives." She lives in Old Greenwich.