



Love at First Drive

At work one day, a co-worker told Hylen that he knew just the place to find a vintage car. He'd seen a house in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range with about 30 junk cars scattered throughout the property—including a 1969 Firebird. "This old guy has one parked under a tree that's been there for 10 years," Hylen recalls the co-worker saying. So he drove out to take a look.

First Sight

White with a blue vinyl top, the Firebird was in terrible condition, but that made no difference. Hylen loved it anyway. He knocked on the owner's door and offered all his money for it. His offer was accepted.

With his dad's help, Hylen hauled the Firebird home on a trailer and devoted hours of work to get it running, rebuilding the car's motor and transmission. He drove it everywhere through his junior and senior years of high school. "Once, I hit a tree in our driveway and had to put a different fender on it," he says. It was a black fender that someone had lying around, so the car developed a multicolored look.

After the accident, Hylen wanted badly to do a proper restoration of the Firebird, but he figured he'd never have the \$30,000 or \$40,000 it would cost to do things right. Plus, after graduation, he was leaving town to join the Marines. So he bid a sad goodbye and sold his beloved car.

Love and Loss



Fall in Love Again

You can also browse, buy, or sell classic cars on the Bring a Trailer website, on which car buffs bid for curated vehicles, from boats, tractors, and campers to vintage hot rods, race cars, and unfinished projects. Its vast collection currently includes a 1956 Ford Thunderbird for \$11,600, a 1977 Ferrari 308 GTB for \$50,500, and a 1981 DeLorean DMC-12 for \$29,900.

Cars, especially vintage cars, have their unique personalities. It's hard not to smile and sigh when remembering the loyal, if flawed, rust bucket that shuttled a fresh, enthusiastic, and younger you to dates, dances, jobs, and adventures. Even when it broke down on occasion or you got into that first accident, those difficult moments became memories of growing up.

A first-love car isn't just a machine. It's a trusty sidekick, a partner in crime, a taste of freedom, and a gentle reminder of responsibility, usually at a time when life feels like an open road ahead of you.

For many people, a first-love car isn't the first car they ever drove or owned but one they spent time dreaming about, saving for, or fixing up. Because they feel a close connection, losing that car can feel like losing a friend or family member, like it did for Hylen.

A Reunion

Hylen kept the Firebird in the back of his mind as the years went by. He served in the military; returned home to the Sacramento, California, area; got married; and became a sergeant in the Sutter County Sheriff's Office. Six years ago, he dug up the number of the guy he'd sold the Firebird to and called, asking hopefully, "Do you still have it?"



He didn't, but referred Hylen to someone else, who gave him yet another contact. Hylen doggedly left messages and followed up on leads. He searched online for clues to its whereabouts using the Firebird's vehicle identification number, but it didn't appear. Hylen figured it was likely off the road, parked somewhere in a yard or garage.

Nearly two years later, he finally reached someone who had information. "I heard that it got torn apart," he says. "I found it in a field. It was open, with no windshield— rotting away. It was in worse condition than the first time I bought it."

Again, Hylen knocked on a door. When the owner learned of the car's special meaning, he initially asked for \$5,000, despite the car's dilapidated state. Hylen managed to talk him down. "I've bought it twice, for a total of \$1,900," he laughs.

The Second Act

Since reuniting with his first-love Firebird, Hylen has taken great pleasure in a painstaking part-by-part restoration. "This time, I'm writing the checks to get the restoration done perfectly," Hylen says. "That was the money I couldn't spend to fix it up back when I was a teenager."



The Hunt

Had the car been registered, Hylen's search might have taken minutes, instead of years.

If you're trying to track down your own first-love car, you can find information on the vehicle identification number (VIN) through websites like CARFAX and AutoCheck. Your local motor vehicle department may also have some clues. The use of VINs dates back to the 1950s, but the modern, 17-digit format wasn't standardized until 1981, so older cars may have variations.

To locate a specific vehicle, you can also try posting information on social media auto groups. For example, Facebook has many groups dedicated to particular makes and models, like the Audi Owners Club and New Jersey Tesla Car Club. Owners often share buy-and-sell information, maintenance tips, personal experiences, and photos.

Your former car—or one that's just as special—might also come on the block at a collectors' event like the ones hosted by Bring a Trailer or Mecum Auctions.

"I'm not restoring it to factory condition," he says. "I'm modernizing it to a pro-touring car, with updated brakes, tires, engine, suspension, heat, and air conditioning. Each body panel has been replaced. It has a modern motor and transmission: an all-aluminum LS3 from a Corvette." So far, he's spent well over \$10,000 on the interior and ordered specially cut rims for \$8,000.

The mismatched blue-white-black color scheme is gone, replaced by a custom gunmetal gray paint job he has wanted since his high school days. He drove from dealership to dealership—Audi, Porsche, Land Rover—to compare different finishes and get just the right shade. "I love that it's tough looking but still sleek," he says. "It's actually a Porsche color."



The restoration and modernization, or *restomod*, is on track to be completed in 2023. “It’s been a 25-year journey with this car,” says Hylen. “I’m 41, and I’m finally getting the car I wanted when I was 14, except it’s so much better. This car is going to drive like a new Corvette or Camaro.” He’s spent \$100,000 altogether and plans to insure it for \$140,000.

During the nearly five-year restoration, Hylen has connected with an active community of classic-car buffs in his area. Friends frequently bring their own rehabbed or restored vehicles to local auto shows, but Hylen hasn’t gone to any yet. He is biding his time for his car to be finished to debut it at a huge car show. “This summer, I’m going to drive it up to Reno for Hot August Nights,” he says. “I’m so excited.”

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