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A Heap of Memories Rolls Along

By Michael Leahy
Washington Post Staff Writer
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BOSTON, Va. — You need to be secure to endure the smirks. John and Beth Boyd must be tuned up very well, emotionally speaking, to own a 31-year-old Chevrolet Kingswood station wagon that hasn't been washed since Jimmy Carter was president.



John and Beth Boyd use one of their other vehicles to jump-start their '69 Chevy. (Bill O'Leary - The Washington Post)

Known locally as "The Beast," it's a rusted muddy-brown heap with iffy brakes that, to a visitor's stunned nostrils, smells like a mummy might be under the seats--probably because generations of mice have invaded the car from the nearby woods, followed recently by a large, black snake in pursuit of the mice. You sit gingerly on the Chevy's gouged vinyl, look down and there, right there at your feet, is a rodents' nest--a little molehill of chewed leaves, crunched twigs, gnawed wads of toilet tissue and some kind of mouse goo.

What would compel two modest, well-educated and otherwise restrained and conventional professionals--he a public school librarian, she a teacher of English to foreign students--to keep this car, especially when they have two vehicles that are clean and miceless?

"Well, it's like a member of the family now," says Beth Boyd. "We're emotionally attached to it. It's been through too much with us. Besides, the kids and people wouldn't let us get rid of it now."

Shortly after the birth of the triplets in 1977, Beth Boyd received the car from her father, who bought the Kingswood--its dreadful brown hue then new--off the showroom floor in May 1969, in the early days of the Nixon administration and a full two months before Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon.

The car has become the Boyds' time capsule. In the 1970s, they listened to Iron Butterfly's "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" on the AM-only radio that no longer works. They turned the air conditioning up full blast during a blowout 1984 Florida vacation with their three young children; the A/C system perished long ago, but the image of the kids sleeping serenely in the back of The Beast has not.

Now the 23-year-old triplets have graduated from college and The Beast is old, bleeding oil everywhere. Its brakes respond only after several swift taps. Its aging fuel system, like clogged arteries, requires John Boyd to pump the accelerator in the morning before the station wagon . . . leaps.

"It's old, and it's got some problems," concedes Beth. "But I guess we're not the types who throw away things easily. . . . It's gotten to the point where our kids are already lobbying to inherit the car and protect it. How can't you love something

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that's endured like that and given you so many memories and pleasure?"

She and her husband love the car not as one loves a classic Corvette or Mustang, as a hip and valuable antique, but rather as one cherishes a mangy, eccentric old relative, whose quirks have come to feel bound to their lives. The Boyds might never own a Ferrari, but they believe they found the keys long ago to a perspective on what would make their family happy.

"We've never been much into showing off what we can buy," says Beth, whose living room still features the sofa she and John bought for \$100 from a dorm at Randolph-Macon College shortly after their graduation in 1969.

Nothing says quite so much about the Boyds' ethos as The Beast, a moniker hung on the car years ago by their children's friends. Sitting out on their dirt-and-gravel driveway, fronting their modest home with its 12 compost gardens and its backyard nestled into the Piedmont northwest of Culpeper, the old wagon is just one more reminder to the Boyds of how their frugality has borne riches never to be measured by a bank account.

"We probably never imagined we'd keep it this long," says Beth, 52. "We never got it washed because it was always getting messed up on these dirt roads anyway. . . . And the mice find their own way in there now, so what will cleaning it do? It has so much character, you know?"

A few feet away, standing beside the driver's door, an eager John Boyd asks, "We gonna take a ride?"

Beth is squirming her way along the torn vinyl of the back seat when something worrying in her sparks the question: "We fumigated all around back here, right, John?"

Behind the wheel, her 53-year-old husband twists his bifocals and looks at her askew in the rearview mirror, the busted, dangling one that needs to be lifted and adjusted to see anything. "Sure did," he reassures her.

A few weeks ago, The Beast faced a mandatory state inspection. Not wanting any unwelcome surprises for the state inspector, John doused the car's interior with an entire giant can of Raid. A half-dozen mice promptly scattered out. But no one spotted an exit by that black snake.

So Beth is sitting a little nervously now, remembering those old movies where the big, coiling snake comes from behind its prey and . . . well, don't go there, she says.

John takes a quick look around. Sometimes a mouse or two will dance benignly over his feet while he drives, a light sensation no more troubling to him after all these years than the cold, incessant leak from the car's roof on rainy days.

It's sunny today, though, and The Beast starts up on the first try, chugging down the gravel, the rocks hitting its underside sounding like grease crackling in a skillet.

"Running fine," says Beth from the back. "See, it just keeps hanging on. It won't give up no matter what happens to it."

That the Boyds and their friends anthropomorphize The Beast, that they talk about it as if it were an invincible wild man, has everything to do with the station wagon's stubborn refusal over the years to be towed off to the boneyard with the skeletons of corroding Pintos and Corvairs. Nobody knows anymore how many miles the Chevy Kingswood has logged ("Could be anything from 164,000 to a half-million," says John), but everyone in the family can relate its close brushes with destruction.

On a cold, winter day five years ago, John Boyd turned on the car's heater, rolled away from the house and was a mile down the gravel road when The Beast

suddenly caught fire.

Mice nests under the dashboard had been ignited by the heater, and gray, acrid smoke poured out of The Beast's every orifice. Blinded by the billowing fumes and choking on carbon monoxide, John opened his door as the car approached the narrow bridge over the tiny Hazel River on the Culpeper-Rappahannock county border and bailed out. The Beast came to rest in a ditch, consumed by smoke.

Call the wrecker. Goodbye.

"I ran the mile home," John remembers. "I fully expected the car to be engulfed when I got back. But the car would not burn up. The smoke went out. Geez, it was like one of those flame-retardant California redwood trees. The Beast would not die."

It's a nice day now for The Beast and its passengers, the tall orchard grass swaying, the scent of wild honeysuckle filling the air, that hill known as Old Rag shrouded in an ethereal mist in the near distance. Boston is one of the last remaining slices of backwoods America, and to travel bumpily along its narrow roads transports one back in time, much like a ride in The Beast.

"People get alarmed when they don't see the car for a couple days," says Beth. "They'd be upset if we let it go. . . . They all love it so."

Well, most, maybe.

The other day, Beth took a ride into Culpeper, a good 13 miles away. There, she got out and plunked down for a few minutes on the hood of The Beast, talking and waving to her friends on Main Street, where The Beast is an institution. A few passing motorists pointed and waved, though not the wife of a local attorney, who frowned from behind the wheel of her late-model black SUV. "You could see this woman's total disgust," Beth says. "Her car was all shiny"--a word that coming sideways out of Beth Boyd's mouth means "pricey" and "predictable."

She laughs, unbothered by the power of The Beast to offend a few, and looks out the window at the high grasses. John Boyd glances down a couple of times at his feet, but spots nothing unusual. The Beast and the snake are still on the loose.

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