

Have wheels, will go a-wooing

BY KURT PREINSPERG

ON a Saturday morning the woman from my dance class called to suggest meeting for coffee. I had given her my business card a few days earlier and was delighted she called.

"We have to meet in my area," she said. "I don't have a car to get to your part of town."

"Great," I replied. "I don't have a car either, but I'm happy to take the bus to your neighbourhood."

"What?" she said. "You don't have a car?"

"Actually, I don't like driving," I said, sensing another potential romance fizzle as I offered reasons for being ideologically opposed to cars. I sounded defensive, eccentric and pathetic even to my own ears.

Being a non-driver is readily equated, in our society, with being too poor to afford a car. And evidence that a man is poor is not too charitably received during the early stages of courtship.

The woman's diminished enthusiasm was palpable when we met at the Art Gallery café. Her attitude was one of suspicion. (What's wrong with him? A man in his forties, and he doesn't own a car?)

Later, a colleague said: "Yep, a man gotta have his own wheels. Otherwise women think you're either cheap or kooky."

So here I was, middle-aged, single, employed, trying to explain to my date why I hadn't owned a car in years. Pretty soon I found myself slipping into a lecture about the adverse effects of cars.

First, the stress. I had several small accidents and near-accidents as a roving college instructor when, for seven years, I drove hundreds of kilometres each week as far from Vancouver as Chilliwack. Navigating through heavy traffic is so absorbing that one often isn't even aware of one's wasted nervous energy. My stress level went way down without a car.

Second, the cost. These days, a college instructor's salary is high enough to sup-

A man without a car looks poor or kooky to the women he wants to court — a non-starter in the race for sexual favours. Was my anticar ideology a form of self-sabotage?

port a car, but low enough to make this a sizable expense. No wonder the middle class is emotionally invested in car ownership: We always value most what we make sacrifices for.

Third, the worries. A car accident can be crippling or even deadly to oneself or others, especially pedestrians. Cars usually involve repeat visits to such uninspiring places as repair shops, gas stations, Air Care centres, insurance offices, parking garages and the impound lots of towing companies. Not having to worry about breakdowns, parking, car security, speeding tickets and so forth can take real clutter off one's mind.

Fourth, the environmental damage. Billions of people around the world live in a poison cloud of exhaust fumes in areas of urban sprawl which is both caused by cars and makes cars ever more necessary.

Fifth, the missed romance of bus travel. To be sure, there are indignities associated with bus travel: waiting in the rain while smoke-belching cars roar past, or spending an hour on a trip that would take 10 minutes by car. But public transport not only frees time for reading, it often leads to meeting people. The bus, like the dance floor, is one of the few places where people can invade each other's space without affront. And bus travel frequently offers the delight of glimpsing a stranger whose looks resonate with some deep esthetic reflex inside one's psyche.

Impressed by the down side of car ownership, I vowed to live without a car — and to choose a partner partly on the basis of whether she could accept that.

Well, the evidence is in. The pickings have been slim. The lesson I learned is that a car is almost a necessity for a single

man, both as a symbol of respectable masculinity and as a practical courtship tool.

A woman doesn't want to shiver at a bus stop on the way to and from a movie. A car is a cozy enclosure against the elements where two people can talk and negotiate the next step. Asking a woman "Do you want a ride home?" is a powerful code for saying "I'm interested in you." Without a car, a man deprives himself of one of our culture's most effective courtship manoeuvres.

In what follows, I want to generalize about men and women as statistical aggregates only, stressing that many exceptional men and women do not fit. Over the years I've come to believe in a kind of "sexual Marxism," heavily tinged with the influence of Freud, Foucault and evolutionary psychology. Marx was partly wrong. It is not one's place in the system of economic production that fundamentally controls the shaping of a person's identity, but one's rank in the hierarchy of desirability to the opposite sex.

Members of both sexes compete for what are perceived to be desirable partners. It is no accident that most men's sexual interest is easily ignited by almost any healthy fertile-looking woman, whereas most women's more selective sexuality responds in part to a man's promise as a protector and provider.

Both men and women are strongly motivated to satisfy each other's mating preferences, but male sexual demand invariably faces a scarcity of female supply. This gender dynamic is the single most important driving force underlying all social life.

I'm sometimes tempted to think the human world is a veiled gynocracy and only superficially a patriarchy. Women's

sexual power is the basic power; other kinds of power are largely derivative. A great deal of women's behaviour can be understood from the perspective of the possession or diminution of sexual power, and a great deal of men's behaviour can be understood from the perspective of the quest for a woman's sexual favours.

The economic and political spheres are just part of the superstructure of the sexual sphere; and the political and economic dominance of men is best explained, in large part, as a reaction to the sexual power of women. A very small proportion of men have any significant economic or political power; a much larger proportion of women have significant sexual power.

That is why most young men, propelled by a deep yearning to make themselves more acceptable to young women, are desperate to have a car. The humiliations of being outside the car-owning mainstream send all but the most stubborn idealists off to a car dealership as soon as they have enough funds or credit.

A few weeks ago, on a Sunday, it so happened that I felt shamed, belittled, rejected by three different women for not owning a car. That triggered an internal dialogue. Subconsciously, did I perhaps resist buying a car to punish myself? By not buying a car, was I really caught up in a perverse self-sabotage? In any case, I was clearly forgoing the satisfaction of basic emotional needs for the sake of utterly futile idealism.

The following Monday, I went to a place called Healthy Wheels and bought a used Toyota.

And judging from a recent turn of events, lonely times will soon be past. The carbon monoxide and other pollutants I add to Vancouver's air suddenly seem like a small price for my enhanced masculinity.

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