

# Are You Under the Influence?

My Dad loved foreign cars. He had this little Italian made Blue Fiat for many years, but in the mid 70s, he discovered a German make - Opel. He carried a lot of tools and diagnostic equipment in his job as computer service tech. So he bought a 1974 Opel wagon. It was bright Signal Green, fluorescent, almost. He loved that car, but his mid life crisis meant he really wanted the Corvette look alike known as the Opel GT. Dad was smart, and realized this crisis was best disguised by living vicariously through his sons.

My older brother was not much of a car guy, so he got an Opel Manta Sedan. Perfect starter car, and the beginning of an addiction to Opel cars for my Dad. I think he was trying to wear down my Mother. The sportier two door GT was the next purchase, this time under the guise of "Tim's going to need a car soon."

Soon was about two years away, since I was only fourteen at the time. I liked working on this car and I loved the idea of having it, but it was a little frustrating having a car I couldn't drive. Dad would drive it to a local park on some evenings and let me drive the parking lot. And since I didn't know much about working on it, not much happened until Dad got home. So I did a lot of sitting and pretending. Fun at first, but then it became like fishing without bait. After a while, you know you're not really going to catch anything.

So I was ripe for the picking when the neighborhood misfit came to tempt me. He was an only child being raised by his over indulgent grandparents. Sarcastic and witty, he was often in trouble at school. I knew he was a bad seed, but I was drawn to him like a

fly to manure. Maybe it was because he was a grade older and I was honored to be noticed by this upperclassman.

One day he came walking by as I was working on my car. My parents were gone and I saw no harm giving him the tour of my car to be. "Lets take it for a drive."

"What are you chicken?"

"No one will see!"

"We'll just go down the street, not main roads."

"Your parents will never know."

This was the gist of his evil argument. You can fill in the blanks for what I said in return, but you can imagine my resolve was weakening.

I knew I shouldn't. I knew, I knew, I knew...

But I did it anyway. Why?

Apparently, my desire to be cool, accepted - overcame my desire to be obedient to my parents.

Next thing you know I'm driving down the street. Fourteen, no license and no common sense, whatsoever.

My evil companion right next to me, hoopin' it up, having a good time. I was scared to death, but I was his pawn now, and he knew it.

"Keep going, you can turn around down there. Look! There's Joe!"

Down the road I saw a familiar face walking towards his car, parked next to the curb in the street. I'd seen it many times, a 1975 Monte Carlo, long and black with a half vinyl roof.

I began waving like a mad man at Joe. He had this puzzled look on his face. He knew I was too young to drive. He laughed and shook his head, wagging his finger, mockingly.

Suddenly, his eyes got big and he was staring at his car.

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I looked in the same direction and wondered, to myself, ‘Why is Joe’s car moving up in the back like that?’

Oh, no! While I was cheesing at Joe, I moved too far left and ran the little GT’s right fender up under the chrome bumper of his Monte Carlo!

I was shocked, scared out of my wits.

The fender made a sickening sound as I backed out from under Joe’s Monte Carlo. I popped out and looked at the paint mark left on his chrome.

Joe said, “Didn’t do nothing to my beast, but look at your fender!”

Ooof, it was smashed good. The fender was pushed into the little rollover headlights that once turned over and opened like frog eyes.

They wouldn’t open now.

Evil influence was scared too - at first. But now he was laughing hysterically and I could feel my face grow red at the sudden betrayal. He looked at me and said, “Hey man. I can’t get in no more trouble this year. I’ll just walk home from here.”

My parents had pounded it into my head all my life.

“Bad associations spoil useful habits.”

It was scriptural. It was sage advice and, I now knew, a concrete principle you cannot dodge.

I limped the car home, but Dad tried to drive it that night before I could tell him. Of course he figured it out when the headlights wouldn’t roll over.

He didn’t kill me, but his disappointment felt like manslaughter.

I bet you have a story just like this. A saga of influence where a “friend” talks you into doing something you know you shouldn’t.

Peer pressure.

Only happens to young adults and children, right?

Nope.

Though I’m getting better, I still fight my need for acceptance and peer approval.

For you, since you are older, it will show up in much more subtle ways.

The family member who dogs you for trying PDR, the business contact who sucks the life out of you. Still, the principle stands.

If you are trying to move up, you must amputate those who would influence you in negative ways. A true friend will understand, an evil companion will make fun of and scorn you, often publicly.

Pay attention to your gut. Its not judgmental, it is self preservation. If you feel something strange in your tummy during or after spending time with someone, listen to this.

Find companions who will lift you up and kindly remove the ones who cost you energy, money or influence you in bad ways.

Meantime, strive to be the kind of friend who uplifts and brings out the best in people.

Oh, and watch out for that Monte Carlo!

See you soon,

Tim Olson

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