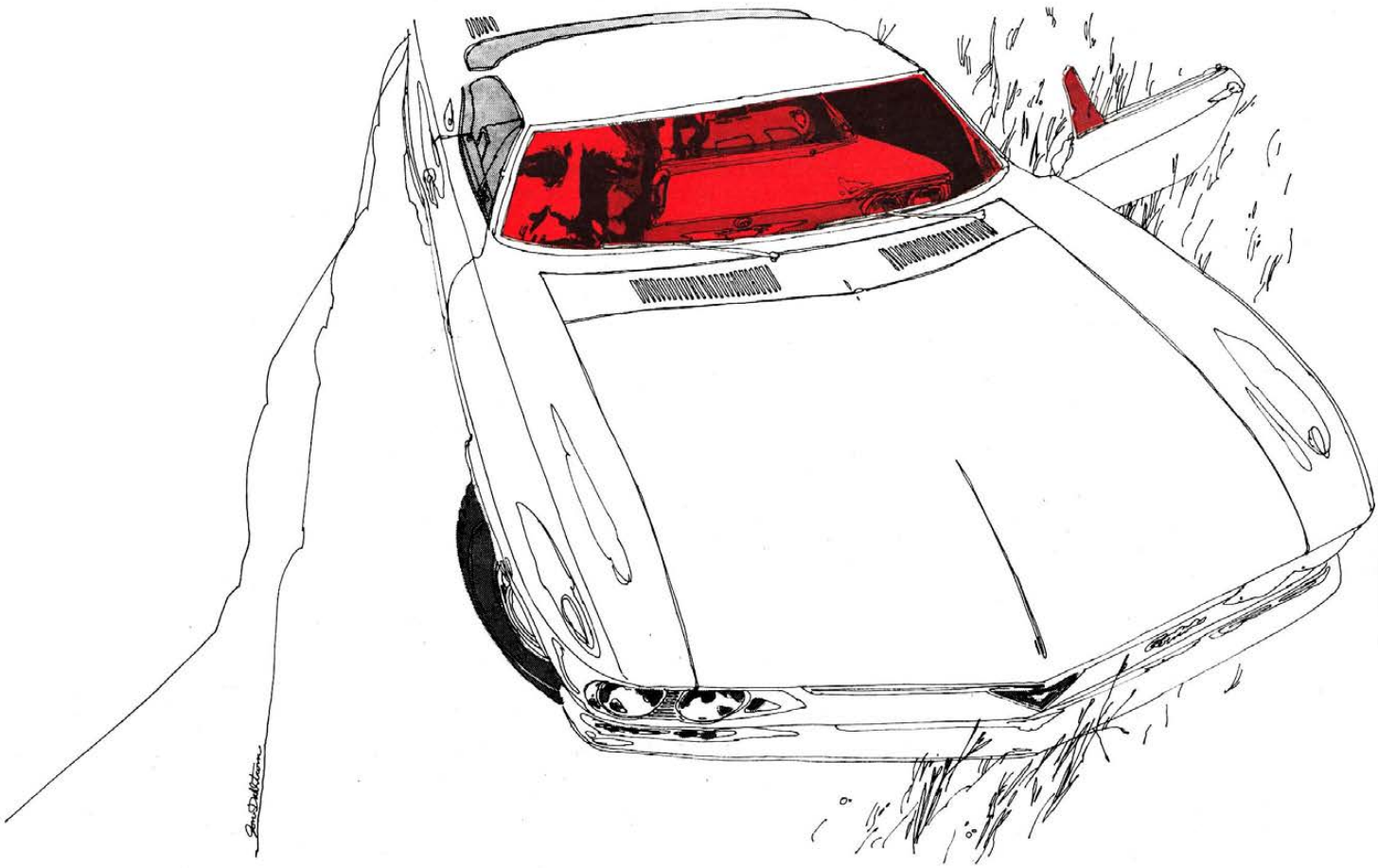

swan song

"Once upon a time there was a car called the Corvair . . . it was beautiful, it was fun to drive, it handled much better than most people gave it credit for, but the General Motors top brass didn't like it, and it died. Long live the Corvair!"

BY JOHN TOMERLIN **ILLUSTRATION BY JON DAHLSTROM**

JUST DRAW THE shade a little farther closed, sonny, all that light hurts your old grandpa's eyes. . . . Yes, I saw her, she's a beauty, all right. Atomic-powered electric turbine—my, my, what won't they think of next. . . . A revolutionary new idea? Well, now, maybe that's good and maybe not. They had some pretty revolutionary ideas for automobiles back in my day, too, but not many of them lasted long. The air-cooled Franklin, the front-drive Cord, the Chrysler Airflow . . . no, I don't expect you'd have heard of those. But, say, did I ever tell you about the Chevrolet Corvair?

Now, come back here, boy! Sit down in that chair—no, this one here, where I can see you—and pay attention while I tell you about the ill-fated Corvair.

It all began back in, hmm—nineteen and sixty, as I recall. Yes, that was it, the year of the first Corvair. The Chevrolet folks had decided to build a small car, what was called a compact; they wanted something that would carry five or six people, get good gas mileage, and be small enough so it wouldn't need a lot of power equipment, like for steering and brakes. So they looked over all the possibilities, and fed a lot of information into early-style computors, and added up the pros and cons, and decided to put the engine in the rear. . . .

Durn it, I *know* every car in the world today has its engine in the rear! Even then, a lot of foreign cars, and almost every racing car built, did. Designers knew you could save weight—make a car handle better, brake better, and get better traction—by putting the engine next to the drive wheels. Point is, for nigh-on half a century, every large-production U.S. passenger car had had front engine/rear drive and folks had grown used to the idea.

I suppose the reason was that, in the beginning, automobile engines had been six and eight cylinders "in-line"—long, heavy affairs that needed lots of cooling, and so had to go in front to keep things simple (driving the steering wheels requires a lot of complicated gearing). It got to where a long hood sticking out there meant a big, powerful engine, and that was sort of a status symbol, you see.

Of course, by the time the Corvair came along, engines had gotten more sophisticated. You could build them small and light, and tuck them in back. You could cool them with air, and get rid of radiators and water pumps and hoses—and they wouldn't boil over in ▶

swan song

summer, or freeze up in the winter. You could eliminate that big, heavy drive shaft, and the hump it made down the center of the floor that meant the middle passenger—front or rear—had to be a contortionist, able to fold his legs around his ears, or a multiple amputee, in order to sit there. The Corvair seemed a pretty logical answer, but it was different. Revolutionary for an American car. And when it made its appearance, there was quite a hue and cry.

Hah! Funny how rear engines stirred the emotions in those days. Honest-to-goodness passions, I mean. There was one expert, stood up in front of a panel of experts, holding an arrow that he'd weighted in the rear. Showed how that arrow wouldn't fly straight with the weight in back. Course, someone might have told him that an automobile isn't an airplane, so the analogy might not apply—but I don't know whether anyone did. Another fella, man who built "specials," used to go around saying that the Porsche (one of the finest machines made, then) would be a pretty good car, "if only the engine was up front, where it *belongs*." And when rear-engined racing cars (long since having proved their superiority everywhere else) came to Indianapolis, and started winning—why, you should have heard the hometowners holler! You'd have thought the French were coming back with their Peugeots!

Well, anyway, there was a lot of excitement that fall of '59; everyone who cared anything about cars was interested, and no one was without an opinion. Some said it handled wonderfully, and some said it didn't, some said it was a great idea, and some said it was nothing but a domestic Volkswagen; and about the only thing everybody agreed on was that it was beautiful. The neatest, cleanest American design in years.

Rumors? You never heard the like. It was rumored that the car was all but uncontrollable; that it would spin every time you went around a corner (unless you just happened to have slowed down to look at the legs of some girl waiting for the bus). It was said that Chevrolet had been forced to design special rear wheels, and put on special tires, and specify enormous pressure differentials in order for you to keep the car on the road at all. The general impression given was that it would trip and fall going over a bottle cap, and you were taking your life in your hands to drive it. (Can't imagine who started all the talk; I refuse to believe that dealers for competitive makes had anything to do with it.)

The facts were simpler. A rear-engine car will oversteer—the tail will tend to come around—if you can get it going fast enough through a corner. You can correct some of this, as Corvair did, by using wider wheel rims and tires with good lateral rigidity at the rear, and by running higher pressures in back, where most of the weight is. There are other things you can do that Chevrolet didn't do (I'll tell you about some of them later), but ultimately a rear-engined passenger car will oversteer, just as a front-engined passenger car will *under*steer. If cornered too fast, it will leave the road tail-first, while the front-engined car will exit nose-first. The point is, the Corvair may not have handled better than conventional cars (though many expert drivers do prefer oversteer to understeer), but it didn't handle worse, either—only different.

People fussed about the Corvair's weight distribution, which was about 40% in front and 60% in rear. At the same time, some station wagon owners had discovered that, with stiffer springs and shocks in back, and carrying a pretty good load, their wagons really *handled*. Of course, loaded, the wagon had a weight distribution of about 47/53!

What had happened was, some wagon owners had unknowingly taught themselves how to use oversteer—and were enjoying it—while many of their neighbors were climbing into Corvairs, insisting on driving them like conventional cars—and then blaming all their problems on the automobile!

It's just possible that, if Chevrolet dealers had made an effort to explain the characteristics of oversteer to their customers—had encouraged them to learn the "feel," and develop the necessary techniques—all the later trouble wouldn't have happened. Maybe the Corvair would have stayed on the market a little longer than it did.

Look here, now, I'm not trying to tell you the Corvair was perfect. Far from that, there was a lot wrong with it. The brakes were terrible in the early models (which was odd, because rear-engine cars distribute braking loads more evenly, and brake better as a rule), and they stayed that way, until the factory began supplying sintered metal linings. Even more annoying was the incredible steering ratio—almost five turns, lock to lock—on a car that had light steering to begin with, and that needed quick correction at the wheel for proper driving technique. For years, the factory ignored complaints about this—and did other unhelpful things, like putting the spare tire back with the engine, and finally getting the weight distribution to a really nervous 37/63%.

Funny how the factory neglected the car, in fact. Neglected to tell people how to go about driving it; neglected to correct some of its most obvious and simple flaws; neglected the suggestions made by those who worked to develop the car in competition. But, you see, Chevy had started out to build the Corvair as an economy compact, and they were stuck with the concept. They didn't fully realize that the buying public had turned away from the whole domestic-compact notion; that maybe they never really wanted it, despite what they told the consumer-survey pollsters. Be that as it may, the real market for Corvairs developed among automobile enthusiasts: people who found out how much pure fun the little "pusher" could be, and how much potential it had when properly prepared.

Fellas like John Fitch on the East Coast, Bill Thomas and Bill Corey out West—a lot of others, too, I guess—put together kits that solved most of the Corvair's problems. They reduced roll resistance in front (so the car wouldn't pretend to understeer), and raised it in back with stiffer springs and shocks, and by putting a little negative camber on the wheels, and they freed the engine up to breathe a little better, and they turned the Corvair into a real little bearcat. Why, your gramps drove one of the Fitch conversions, once, and I want to tell you, that was as exciting a little machine—as controllable and responsive—as anything you'd ever want to cut an apex with.

And Chevy thought it was an economy compact!

Why, if they'd have gone to half the trouble they did with the Corvette—taken the car out and given it some competition development; paid a little attention to what the folks who were drag racing, and running in sports car and small-sedan events with it were telling them—they could have ended up with something really special. A good looking, good running, good handling little sports/road car, for a thousand dollars less than the Corvette! Instead of that, they kept putting the

car out as though they expected it to be bought by the Little Old Lady in Pasadena—the very one who had believed most of the ugly rumors in the first place; who didn't know anything about cars—didn't know understeer from underwear, and didn't care—and who was scared out of her wits every time a real Corvair owner went blasting happily past her in a corner!

Would the car have sold in quantities to the market for which it was best suited? Well, you figure it out. The sportiest versions—the Monza Coupe, and later the Spyder—were the hottest items in the line almost from the beginning. The Corvair became "The" groovy car, for a time, with the high school and college set. Why, during the first five years of its production, it sold like contraband cigarettes, in spite of its faults.

It survived poor brakes, slow steering, and compromise suspension; it survived the misuses of an uninformed driving public, the rumors, distortions and outright slanders of those who didn't understand it; it survived the engineering and promotional blunders of a factory, which seemed as confused about which direction the car was heading as a man who had just taken a fast turn in one with the wrong tire pressures. It survived all of these things, and kept coming back for more, until what finally stopped it was a book.

Laugh if you want to, what polished off the Corvair was a book, written by a man named—let me see, now, Nailer? Nasser? Something like that. This what's-his-name came out, 'round about 1965, and just gave American automobile manufacturers Billy-damn about sacrificing sound engineering for styling, and not making U.S. cars as safe to drive as they ought to have been. He tore the chrome strips right off American cars, and the Corvair worst of all.

He had a point, you understand, a good one. Carmakers had been spending hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising and promotion to convince the buying public that black was white, and up was down. They had folks talked into believing they needed four and five hundred horsepower to get them around town—in states where the speed limit was 65, mind you. They persuaded drivers that power brakes were safe, when they'd lock solid the first time you laid into them really hard, and disappear entirely if you tried it more than a couple of times. Why, they even convinced a lot of people that a heavy car would hold the road better than a light one. Durndest nonsense you ever heard.

Anyway, this fella (Nadir?)—he said the manufacturers should quit worrying so much about trying to make passenger cars go 180 mph (in another world), and try making them so they'd turn, or even come to a stop.

As I say, he was in the right, and his book stood to do a lot of good. It got mighty tiresome, back then, driving along the freeway in the rain, and seeing all those two-and-a-half tonners go floating by sideways, after using their power brakes. Trouble was, of all the cars he might have singled out to make a horrifying example of, the one he picked was the Corvair. One of the least guilty of them all.

Why? Well, one thing, Newman didn't make out to be any kind of an automotive genius. Just between you and me, to read his book or listen to him talk, you kind of got the idea he'd need his wife to help him change a tire. Of course, he never admitted this, either; he just went on like he was a qualified engineer and knew all about things. My own opinion is, he picked on the Corvair for the same reason others had, because it was different. It was strange, and therefore suspect, and that made it an easy target. (Same way some animals will turn on the odd one in the litter and kill it.)

What I mean is, he stomped the Corvair till it made your teeth itch. Claimed the swing axle was a hazard —just like he'd never heard of Mercedes-Benz or Porsche, two of the best handling cars in the world, and *both* of them with swing axles. Tore Chevy apart for mistakes they'd made on early models, and never bothered to mention all the things that had been corrected *before* he wrote his book.

Unfair? I would say so. Sort of looked like he needed a "goat," and took on Corvair without much regard for opposing opinions—of which there were plenty. Mr. Nagler said he was after the whole auto industry, but it was Corvair that got hit. Sales dropped about 50% the year after the book was published.

Now, maybe you say to yourself: All right, that was a bad break, but the car was basically good and so something could have been done for it. After all, Corvair was Chevrolet, and Chevy is General Motors, and that's a big time outfit. Lots of smart engineers, and designers, and ad men, and lawyers; they could get in there and make the necessary improvements, and tell the public about it, and maybe support the owners who were competing with the car. Lots of clever, intelligent things they might have done. You want to know what they *did* do? Reckon you won't believe this, but they hired a private investigator to check up on the author. Find out how he spent his spare time, or something like that.

The author learned of it, and sued the company, and Corvair sales didn't pick up much for some funny reason.

The next thing the company tried was juicing up the engine. Never mind what the car really needed, give it more horses—the Detroit "touchstone." Add carburetors, raise compression, put on blowers. Reached the point where even the most loyal Corvair boosters were admitting having trouble keeping the new models in tune more than a few days at a time. Began to be talk about the 1964 model being a "classic," and anything after that a headache. Maybe that's exaggerating a mite, but one thing's sure: hopping up the engine wasn't the right answer.

It was something different, a departure from the same weary ideas. That kind of thing is rare, but nice to have around. Sort of opens up your thinking, and lets some fresh air get in. When it dies, who knows how many other "unusual" ideas are discouraged from ever happening?

It was something lovely, too, one of the most pleasing designs ever. Many experts called it one of the ten most beautiful cars this country ever has built, and it won a scad of national and international awards.

Most of all, it was fun. The basic layout was excellent, and for a couple of hundred dollars (money the factory wasn't willing to spend), you could bring out its good points. You could make little changes in the steering, springs, shocks and rear wheel camber, and come up with a light, agile, wonderfully capable little machine. On top of it, you had all the advantages of air cooling, independent suspension, no drive shaft or tunnel hump, and the rest. Plently of people took time to find out about these things—and about how to drive the car properly, too—and they liked it so much they formed clubs, and went on rallies, and held gymkhanas, and just generally had a high old time with their Corvairs.

Not enough folks did though. Most, who'd felt from the beginning there just *had* to be something wrong with a car that unconventional—and didn't trouble themselves to find out any different—just believed the bad things they'd heard and read, and in the end, Corvair went down the drain.

That was all a long time ago, sonny, but it goes to show you what could happen to a "revolutionary" idea—and a *good* one, too—back in the nineteen and sixties. My, my, I'll never forget that little car. Bet a lot of old fogeys my age feel the same way, too.

. . . Yes, I'm finished, and you were sleeping, weren't you? . . . Oh, never mind, dad-burn it, go on out and drive your new-fangled atomic-powered, electric turbine car. Enjoy it while you can. If it's as good as you say, they may not be building them for long! ■