

When I look back at it now, I should have tried to save my badly smacked-up '54 sedan, the car that gave Volvo its worldwide fame and fortune.

But I was in no mood to think rationally after my altercation with the 1968 Chrysler New Yorker, whose driver had made a sudden left turn in front of me. In an instant, I had not only lost my trusty steed, but one of the most impressive and enjoyable cars I've ever owned.

The cop attending the accident scene suspected the distinguished-looking gent who perpetrated the illegal turn had probably been downing a few. But this was back in the pre-breathalyzer days of the early 1970s, so his degree of intoxication was uncertain. Today, I can only reflect on its unique place in automotive history.

My dearly departed Swede looked similar to its predecessor, the PV 444, that was originally displayed in Stockholm in 1944. However, due to steel shortages, full production didn't commence until 1947. In car-starved Sweden it was not unheard of for owners to part with them for more than double the list price.

The 444 looked like a pocket-sized 1940s Ford Tudor and was often referred to — usually with affection — as the 'humpback'. It featured an unusual-for-its-day unitized construction (instead of the more common body-on-frame method), fully independent front suspension and a two-piece laminated windshield.

The 444 quickly gained a rep-

utation as a sporty sedan that was virtually indestructible, despite Sweden's mostly unpaved highways. By the late 1940s, the car had also become popular with the racing and rallying crowd, successfully competing in events all over the globe. Before the end of its more than 200,000-unit production run, the 444 had also become the basis for a station wagon (called the Duett), convertible and sports-car models.

A thoroughly refreshed version of the original, designated the PV 544, began arriving at Volvo's world-wide dealer network in 1958. Although closely identical to the 444, there was a fancier mesh grille, one-piece windscreen, larger rear window and a more modern interior. Under the hood, a 60-horsepower 1.6-litre engine was mated to a bullet-proof four-speed gearbox. An automatic transmission was never offered.

My personal pride and joy was a bluish gray '62 '544 equipped with the improved 1.8-litre engine and twin SU carburetors that churned out a reliable 90 horses. I had acquired it through a bankruptcy sale for not a lot of money, an important consideration since I was an impoverished student at the time. Still, I was forced to part with my stereo and a few other earthly possessions before securing the pink-slip. The most desirable aspect about my nine-year-old purchase was that it had recently arrived from the West Coast and was virtually rust-free. In my corner of the world, most cars half its age had already come down with a bad case of terminal rocker-panel cancer — or worse.

Upon first sitting behind the wheel, only the Volvo's pointy hood was visible through the windshield with the fenders completely hidden from sight. The rear-view mirror also yielded little in the way of useful visual clues and the gunslit back window was simply created an enormous blind spot. But the

engine purred like a contented cat and the shifter, with its unbeatable synchros, was magic in my hands. I could hear and sense lots of mechanical whirring and buzzing noises inside the largely insulation-free interior, yet the car felt as tight as a drum. The 544 felt tippy in the turns, but the suspension hung on

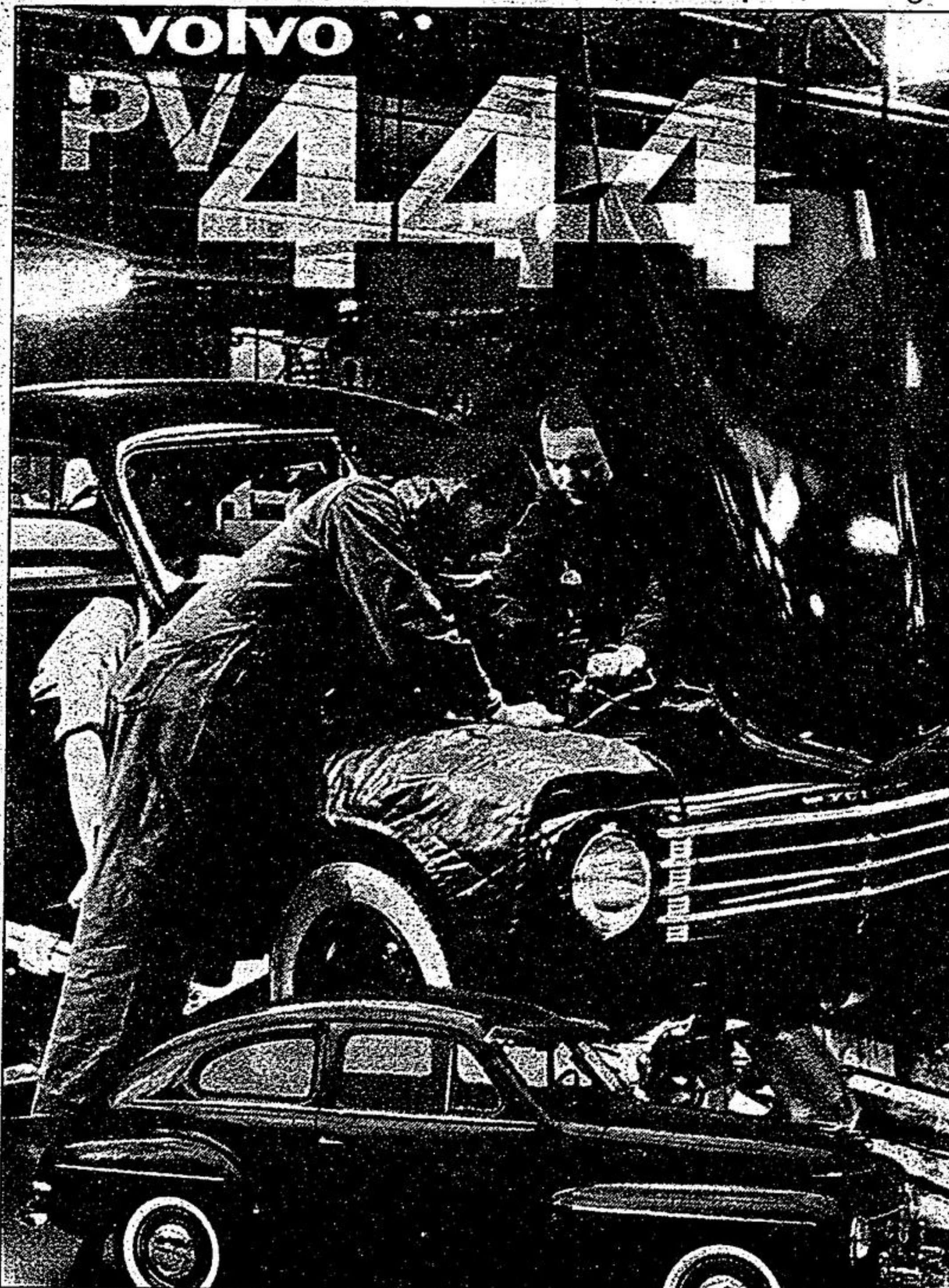
for dear life and it steered arrow true without any of the vagueness that plagued my old man's corpulent '69 Mercury. This five-passenger sedan possessed the soul of a sports car.

The winds of change had already begun blowing through Volvo long before my 544 had even been assembled. In 1956, the company introduced its 120 series of two- and four-door sedans and four-door wagons. This model, dubbed the Amazon in Europe, was every bit as rugged and durable as the 444, but its larger size, bigger four-cylinder engine and contemporary shape gave it wider acceptance among fans of the marque. By the early 1960s, the 122, as the export version was called, had become an increasingly more popular rival to the 544. It also became the favorite of teams on the rally circuit who began to have great success with this tough customer.

The last of the nearly half-million humpbacks left their Gothenburg, Sweden home in 1965. They will always be revered for their unique, albeit quirky, styling, their reliable, fun-to-drive nature and anvil-tough drivetrain.

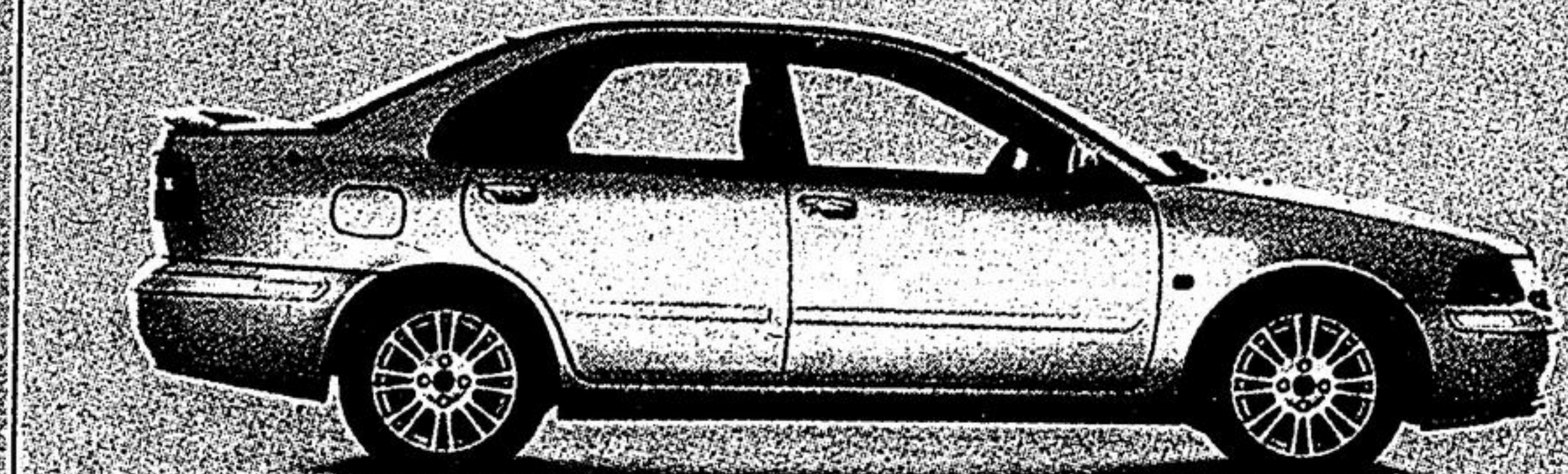
Mine became a wrecking-yard parts donor and I eventually moved on to other cheap wheels. But at least the memories of my all-too-brief experience with the 544 remain unbreakable.

■ *Malcolm Gunn is Wheelbase Communications' chief road tester and historic writer. Wheelbase is a world-wide supplier of automobile news, reviews and features.*



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