



Hidden Treasures

Lou Cataldo goes for a drive in an underrated Ferrari and contemplates a relative's impressive car collection, stashed in a garage in northern Italy

The garage was tucked away at the end of a steep side road that snaked between two anonymous, dull buildings. Despite the lovely countryside that surrounded it, the small town itself looked like a lifeless, post-industrial group of old houses cobbled together without too much care; never in a million years would anyone have suspected that about a million pounds' worth of vintage cars were stashed behind one of the doors.

I caught sight of an incredibly beautiful car, parked with care in a corner of the large room; a late-60s Alfa Romeo GT Junior, black and shiny with round, clear headlights. I asked Nino to tell me its story, as

I was sure such a beautiful object could only have an interesting story behind it. I was right; there was.

He'd bought the car in 1965 as a young man with a passion for everything fast; it had been his first car, and I think few will argue your first car is hard to forget. If you are, indeed, a car enthusiast who has just put together enough money to buy yourself a stunning, state-of-the-art Alfa, it's pretty much impossible to forget. But life got in the way of things, as it often does: marriage and the arrival of children had to be bought, and money was tight once more, so there was no option but for the Alfa to be sold.

He, however, never forgot it, and vowed that one day he would find it and buy it again.

Twenty-five years later, he did just that, managing to run a search on the license plate number through a police officer friend who had access to the database. Success!

"He was willing to spend any amount of money to get it back into shape"

The car was found, only a couple of miles away, belonging to an old lady who had been the registered owner for almost ten years. He immediately called her to make an offer and, fingers crossed, buy the car back from her, bringing it back to its home. But yet another obstacle got in the way: the lady wouldn't let go of the car, no matter how much he offered. It was, she said, the only thing she had left that belonged to her beloved brother, who apparently had spent years cruising around in it and had later died of an illness. She told him she would keep it in the garage and never sell it, and that he should put it out of his mind.

He wasn't going to give up so fast. His beloved first car left to rust in a garage without ever seeing the road again? He could never let that happen. For two weeks straight, he kept phoning the old lady at the same time each day, each time proposing a higher sum until he reached a point where he offered whatever amount of cash she wanted, even three times the actual value of the car, just as long as he could have it back. The lady's patience wore out progressively, until one day she picked up the phone, showered him with a string of colourful Italian insults and told him she would call him back herself if she ever changed her mind about selling the car. He put down the phone and thought maybe now it really was time to give up; he thought she would never call him again and that the car was now lost forever.

But miracles do happen, and only a couple of days later, a phone call arrived. For reasons he still doesn't really know, the woman finally convinced herself to sell the car back to its original owner; it was not in a good state after years of sitting in a damp garage, but he was willing to spend any amount of money to get it back into shape. After a few repairs the Alfa, by then roughly thirty years old, looked brand new, and became the most cherished possession in my great-uncle's collection. He still takes it out for a drive from time to time, for old times' sake; after all these years, it's basically a member of the family.

The centrepiece of the collection, however, was a bright yellow Ferrari 348; almost thirty years old, but well-kept, it looked like brand new. Sitting close to the ground in the middle of the room, it was illuminated by a rare beam of sunlight that filtered through the dirty glass windows, darkened with years of exhaust gases and oil stains. I'd been staring at it with my mouth open for about two minutes when my great-uncle Nino, lucky owner of the thing, suggested "Wanna go for a drive?"

At the age of 16, I'd never been in a Ferrari -or anywhere near one- before; one more thing off my bucket list, I thought. A blast through the countryside, driven around by an ex-aspiring racing driver and proud track-day enthusiast, sounded like a good way to spend an afternoon. I waved goodbye to my mother (only two seats, of course) and stared down the road ahead, looking to see what came next; the acceleration pressed



The famous Alfa, with the 348 lurking in the background. Also pictured: rally-prepped Defender and Fiat 600

"My favourite thing happened: it started to rain"

me against the back of the seat, unable to peel my neck forward for a couple of seconds. After the first couple of corners, my favourite thing happened: it started to rain. Not full-blown rain, mind you; a light drizzle, but just enough to make things interesting down on the tarmac.

"This" the driver said, "is the last car Ferrari produced directly under the direction of the Old Man"; the Old Man being, of course, none other than Enzo Ferrari himself, affectionately called *il Vecchio* among the motorsport community. "A racecar for the road" he continued, clichéd but not inaccurate, going on to explain the minuscule details of the car's inner workings that made it such a special creation. I listened, mesmerized, trying to remember as much as I could to impress my mates from the karting club when I went back to Warwick in January. (It worked. They were pretty much green with envy.)

We came back half an hour later, the battery suddenly giving up just after the car had made it to the end of the uphill driveway; all good things must come to an end, I suppose, but don't worry, my great-uncle said, he was gonna get



Two Fiats and four Alfas, including Nino's beloved GT Junior

it replaced soon anyway. It'll be ready by this summer when you come back, he added with a smile; told me he took it up to Monza to spend a whole day at the track every year. I looked at him while he was talking and I caught a glimpse of the fearless, young driver who scraped together money from odd jobs to sustain what was already more than a hobby.

There were a dozen more cars in the garage; a little Seicento he had built himself nearly from scratch, a Land Rover with its engine taken apart on a table for repairs, a seemingly harmless Fiat Tipo where only a badge on the back

("sedicivalvole", Italian for 16 valves) gave away the presence of an engine that shares its DNA with the Lancia Delta's. Each with its own character, each with its own background story; I spent the rest of the afternoon listening to my great-uncle telling tales of holidays and races and road trips and flat tires, until it was time for me and my mother to catch the bus back home. Before leaving, I told him I would be back for the summer, ready for another trip in the Ferrari; he smiled and said the new battery would definitely be ready by then.