Last week, Toyota’s recall of some models due to accelerators sticking made more headlines than a corduroy pillow. The panic and anger felt by the owners of the affected vehicles was substantial, but I bet it was nothing like the panic and anger felt around the Toyota chairman’s boardroom table. I can picture in my mind in exquisite detail, that first meeting after the CEO learned a massive recall had to be made. Unfortunately, it’s all in Japanese so I can’t make out what they’re saying exactly but I’d bet money that somebody was blaming somebody, though.
Having an accelerator stick is not a... ahem, foreign experience to me. Years ago I owned a Chevette (Yes, I admit it) that had more problems than a gay infidel at a Taliban training camp. Commuting in winter without freezing to death required me to wear a snow suit, two sweaters and four pair of long underwear. I looked like Marlon Brando in his later years. I would try to arrive early so I could sit in the bathroom stall at work nicknamed “the crematorium” just to defrost.
One day on the way in, I had just reached the bottom of Devon Hill and had begun to accelerate to make it up the other side. Suddenly I realized, with a stab of terror, my gas pedal wasn’t coming back up when I lifted my foot. I was indeed fortunate that it happened where it did because the climb up Devon Hill at full throttle in a Chevette doesn’t even put you at the speed limit. It gave me time to think of options, other than hammering my foot on the obstinate accelerator over and over and over and screaming like a girl.
At the top of the hill, the car began to pick up speed. I was no further ahead in planning how to deal with my little accelerator issue. I had to do something, though, as I was hurtling toward the back of a semi. Although it was entirely possible the little car may have fit under the chassis of the trailer, I didn’t want to take that chance. Braking wasn’t helping, other than to burn out my pads. I even tried taking it out of gear so I could slow it down but the engine screamed like a chain saw on full bore.... well, ¾ bore and was shaking the car so violently, I thought the tiny, 400 hamster-powered motor might leap right through the hood. I was pooping cinderblocks, let me tell you..
It finally occurred to me to simply turn the key off, and coast to a stop on the shoulder of the highway. I turned on my four-way flashers, the international symbol for “Yes, I’m having a bad day. Yes, I’m having a bad day. Yes, I’m having a bad day.” I sat there for a few minutes, willing my heart to stop pounding and resisting the urge to roll up into the foetal position.
‘Calm down,’ I thought to myself. ‘Everything’s fine, for now.’
‘CALM DOWN??’ I answered. ‘Are you nuts? I might have been killed!’
As I sat there wondering what to do about the situation and dreading the hit my wallet would take if I had to pay for a tow, suddenly, the accelerator popped back up. I was as elated as I was suspicious. I gave it a few test presses but was afraid of flooding the engine. I weighed the risks of driving back to Devon to get it fixed but having Devon Hill between me and the dealership made me nervous. I knew I would have to floor it again to get up the other side and was scared to death it might stick again in the ‘lethal missile’ position.
Gingerly I started the killer machine up and braved the perils of Devon Hill. The thought of having my throttle sticking in the city, overpowered my fear of the icy climb I’d be facing again.
Safely at the dealership, the mechanic explained the problem. Apparently, in the cold, the throttle cable would accumulate ice and freeze against some other lump of ice when the pedal was completely depressed. Sitting on the side of the road with the warmth of the engine heating the motor cavity, it melted the ice and freed the mechanism. With some WD40, a new chunk of cardboard jammed in my grill and moving a rad hose closer to the throttle gizmo rectified the issue immediately.
“Happens all the time with these types of cars,” the mechanic assured me.
“What type of cars do you mean?” I asked.
“Crappy ones,” he responded with a wink.
There was never a recall of Chevettes, despite all their foibles. I learned a lot about what makes cars go and stop from my buddies, thanks to that car. Although the motor would never die, everything around it had to be replaced eventually. On the other hand, it was cheap to run and mostly got me to where I wanted to go. When I traded it in for another Chevette, it had over 350,000 kilometres on it. I loved that little car, other than the day it tried to throttle me to death. All I can say to the recall victims is, “I feel your pain”.