



Illustrations by Tanya Lam

## Why the kids **DON'T DRIVE**

For many reasons—social media, cost, fear of injury, improved public transit—the Millennials are turning their backs on car culture.

By Omar Mouallem

**T**he only time Islam Aboutaha drove, it was in a straight line through a quiet suburb, in her older brother's car with him in the passenger seat, and she barely reached the end of the block before she put it in park. "It's too nerve-racking," says the 17-year-old.

It's been five years since Chris Doleman, 27, last got behind the wheel, to drive a load of drunken friends home after the bar, a trip so stressful that he's made up his mind never to drive again. Says the economics graduate, "There are too many variables out of my control."

Of the four times Elysia Turner has driven, twice she panicked at the sight of a car in her rear-view mirror, and once because the hood of her company vehicle was smoking. The last time was to get her licence. That was 17 years ago. She's 33 now. "I just don't feel equipped to deal with any possible scenario that will occur," Turner says.

The three Calgarians live on opposite sides of the city, have disparate interests and will likely never cross paths, but they represent a trend across North America of young people saying to hell with driving. Compared to the same cohort a decade ago, 16 to 34 year-olds are driving fewer miles, delaying getting their licences or abstaining from it altogether. Even in Calgary, a city that is by all definitions car-centric—busting at the seams with triple-car garages and strip malls bigger than the Saddledome—it is happening fast.

After peaking in 2001, the number of young people in Calgary with a driver's licence fell from 46,669 to 32,152 in 11 years, according to Alberta Transportation. That's a 30 per cent drop. Meanwhile, the same demographic has grown by a quarter.

For decades a Class 5 card wasn't just a licence to drive but a passport to freedom, independence, a bigger world, *sex*. It was a rite of

passage, what made Sweet 16 sweet. But in just under two decades nearly half as many 16-year-olds carry a licence—not even a learner’s permit. This once-baptismal tradition has seemingly become a burden.

**H**ow could I be so stupid? I wondered this even before I reached the other side of the intersection. I had mastered the shoulder check, nailed the lane change, showed parallel parking who was boss, but I blew the big red octagon that spelled it out for me: STOP. I heard my passenger’s pencil scratch the exam form, no doubt in two criss-crossing lines. It could only mean one thing: an automatic fail.

Afterward, I sulked in the backseat of a green Chevy Blazer, failing to contain my tears as my mom steered my 16th-birthday present home. Three weeks later, though, my dignity was restored as I pulled up to the doors of my high school blasting Insane Clown Posse—alone. Over the next six years, that ’97 Blazer was my “third place,” the term for comfortable community environments separate from home and workplace (or in my case, school). I made out in it and got dumped in it. I hot-boxed it and got busted in it. I drove it through almost every milestone of my youth until it started to sound like I was sharpening knives with every turn and it was finally time to part ways. I’m 28 now and drive a more practical Dodge Calibre. Gone are the subwoofers; present is the talk radio.

Though I’m young, the virtues of driving might seem old-fashioned to my fellow Millennials, a.k.a. Generation Y. The year I got my licence, 2001, marks two significant turning points in car culture: It was the last time oil was under \$20

a barrel (now it’s over \$100) and it was also when the drop in young drivers occurred, not just in Calgary and Edmonton, where I live, but in cities across Canada and seven other industrialized nations.

Jeff Caird, director of University of Calgary’s Driving Simulator, part of the Cognitive Ergonomics Research Lab, watches young people

drive. Inexperience being one of the most common factors contributing to car accidents, he puts them through high-risk and quick-reflex situations for research. But lately he’s noticed a change: “When I grew up, getting your licence was a stamp of entering adulthood; it’s just what you did. Some view it that way still; maybe they buy into the car culture, but now it’s a bit different. The norms may be changing.”

Take Islam Aboutaha, for instance. The 12th-grader lives in Cougar Ridge on the southwestern edge of Calgary. The closest retailer is a 22-minute walk away. Every morning she has to drag herself out of bed and onto a packed bus for an even longer trip to Ernest Manning High School. If she’s lucky she gets to sit. Still, she has no desire to

get a learner’s permit, not even after her dad offered to buy her a car, cover the insurance and, until she gets a job, give her gas allowance.

In the kitchen her mother Ghalia overhears this offer for the first time, but instantly approves if it means she doesn’t have to schlep her daughter around anymore. “It’s not the money, it’s just that I don’t want to,” retorts Islam, balled up on a sofa, rapidly thumbing her iPhone. Besides, none of her friends drive.

“So it’s not like I’m missing anything.”

**N**inety-six years before the first Facebook friending, a Model-T Ford rolled off the assembly line and allowed an American to connect with another American more efficiently than ever before. The love affair with cars was immediate and passionate. Even as pedestrians were killed or maimed by automobiles, North America paved the way for car culture with traffic signs, freeways and laws such as jaywalking that favoured steel over bone. As John Steinbeck wrote in *Cannery Row*, “Two generations of Americans knew more about the Ford coil than the clitoris.”

But that romance has chilled. Up until this summer, Detroit’s Big Three saw U.S. sales decline for six years. At the same time, insurance premiums rose and, most dramatically, so have fuel prices. In 2002 it cost \$72 to fill up Canada’s most popular vehicle, a Ford F-150. Now it’s \$115. “Once a symbol of freedom and America’s can-do spirit, the automobile has become for many a financial straitjacket that limits life options,” reads *Transportation and the New Generation*, a report by the Frontier Group, a progressive U.S. think-tank. “The open road that once beckoned to an earlier generation of young people has been replaced by congested highways traversing a landscape of suburban sprawl.”

Meanwhile, the other highway, the one paved with information, has become faster and cheaper to travel. Many of our former in-person interactions have been replaced by connections through the parlours in our pockets. But it’s not just a boon to our relationships. Social media allows for a novel sense of freedom, privacy and self-expression that Henry Ford couldn’t dream up. Aboutaha’s iPhone is her third place.

“People are connecting in different ways,” says Calgary senior urban planner Rollin Stanley. “I sit there looking at my 16-year-old stepson; he couldn’t lift his head from the iPad long enough to steer a car in the right direction.”

As general manager of planning, development and assessment, Stanley oversees the city’s urban development, which historically has been planned for the ease of drivers and the newer residences they live in. Some have criticized him for championing policies that are at odds with suburban life, but he calls it smart growth, a philosophy that puts density, the environment and long-term planning first.

Three-quarters of Calgaryans still commute to work by automobile, according to Statistics Canada, but since 2001 public-transit ridership has grown by half. Downtown bike commuting has increased by one-fifth in the past year alone. The population boom is partly responsible—and one need only experience Deerfoot Trail’s daily gridlock to know that—but it’s also because alternative transportation is less intimidating. The city has designated more lanes for bikes and invested



more in public transit, while Google Maps and other apps make trip planning for these alternative commuters a cinch.

Smart phones are also a handy time-killer for passengers on said transit, but in the hands of someone driving a vehicle, the ubiquitous cellphone is just a killer. Reza Safai, a driving instructor for longer than most of his students have lived, says that after decades of being the primary cause of car collisions, speeding has taken the backseat to human error (read: distracted driving; reread: texting). “When I started driving the atmosphere was completely different,” Safai says. (See sidebar on page 26.) In his opinion, this generation just doesn’t value driving. But what, if not the joys that come with a set of car keys, does matter to them?

**A**ll week Chris Doleman has been waking up at 5 a.m. to catch two city buses and then a Greyhound to High River for flood-relief work. With the travel there and back, he’s lucky to get five hours of sleep. But today is his day off and he’s going to enjoy it. He strides through his inner-city neighbourhood to the retail pleasures of Marda Loop, drops a couple of Woody Allen movies in the Casablanca Video slot and heads to Phil & Sebastian’s for two bags of beans and a bottle of cold-brewed coffee. The total is \$42. “That would last my dad six months,” he says. “But I wouldn’t be buying craft coffee if I was driving. I’d be at a Tim Hortons drive-thru, blocking the road.”

Doleman grew up in Fort McMurray, surrounded by half-ton

trucks and an economy built on the energy that fuels them. On commutes to his job at Taco Time, it dawned on him that, at 17, he was the oldest one on the bus. It seemed everyone his age drove but him.

“A lot of kids put on skates and it feels really unnatural to them,” he explains. “To me, driving didn’t feel like a natural extension of my body.”

At University of Alberta, where he completed his bachelor’s degree, he discovered Edmonton’s pedestrian-oriented urban communities, so he prolonged not driving a little more. Tuition left him too cash-strapped to seriously consider it anyway. The only cost to spike as dramatically as gas prices might be a university education, which on average is \$5,800 a year in Alberta, up from \$1,551 when Doleman entered Grade 1. This is also what’s driving almost half of 20-something Canadians to live with their parents. By skipping on having to pay rent, maybe they can afford tuition, or save money for a car. But for those who insist on living alone, like Doleman, a car only competes with their independence instead of enabling it.

Doleman recently completed a master’s degree in economics. He hopes to become a “suit” some day soon and finally end those yawn-inducing commutes, instead riding 20 minutes by bus to one of the glass towers downtown. Still, Doleman sees himself much like his dad, middle-class, only Doleman’s chosen to spend his money differently. He buys mostly organic groceries at Market 17, where his wife works, and they like to eat out together at trendy restaurants like Una Pizza + Wine or Ox and Angela. “These are luxuries we otherwise couldn’t afford,” he says. “It does suck to be tied to these bus schedules, but I feel like I’m not tied to a car and payments either.”

**“...he couldn’t lift his head from his iPad long enough to steer a car in the right direction.”**

For this cohort that's increasingly eschewing cars, it may all be about opportunity cost. This might mean higher education or eating out (Millennials eat out at upscale restaurants more than any other age group, even more than Generation Xers, the Food Network's prime demographic), but it also might mean paying premiums to live somewhere where everything one needs, including friends, is close by.

"I've always been more of an urban person," says Elysia Turner, a public-events programmer at the Museum of Contemporary Art Calgary. "I have no desire to live out in suburbia, where I'd be forced to drive." The 33-year-old grew up in Vancouver, lived in Europe, moved to Calgary for university, and now shares a home with her husband in Bankview. She walks 35 minutes to work, five minutes to her sister's and not much longer for friends and groceries. She got her licence at 16 because "that was the thing to do," but she's not sure why she keeps renewing it (or, for that matter, why she's allowed). Anyone can get around without a car, she says, so long as you tailor your life to it. That's the easy part. But tailoring a city to citizens like her is a different story.

**R**ollin Stanley loves cars. Once he owned five of them, including a '61 Alfa Romeo, a '67 Mercedes Benz and a '73 Camaro. He's now down to a Volvo station wagon and a motorbike. But the planner also knows that to a growing number of young people, cars are a thing of the past—or, perhaps, when they finally have kids, a thing of the future. Either way, he has to build a city for them, as they are now, Canada's youngest metropolitan work force.

Stanley says there are already some advantages for young non-drivers in Calgary. It's unusual to have an LRT system go so deep into new suburbs instead of just serving older neighbourhoods, for instance. And for those who are willing to drive a car, just not their own, there's the car-sharing service car2go. Since the Austin-based company introduced a fleet of 150 Smartcars in the summer of 2012, it's gained 35,000 local members and added another 250 vehicles to meet the demand. Calgary is now the fastest-growing car2go market in North America.

The Municipal Development Plan, adopted by city council in 2009, also espouses more density and improved transit. Currently, cycling makes up two per cent of all daily trips; in 50 years planners hope it will be 20 per cent. But Stanley is not naive and admits there's a long road ahead. Developers are still more gaga for greenfields than infills, and retailers continue to flock to big-box centres requiring vast parking lots. Taking away a car lane for bikes can bring out the worst in drivers who see it as an assault on their way of life. Re-appropriating a parking lane is no easier when it's adjacent to businesses.

"The other challenge is finding money to improve our pedestrian streetscapes," says Stanley. But it's not just sidewalks that are limited. There's no plan to replenish GreenTrip, Alberta's alternative transportation development fund endowed with a healthy \$2 billion in 2010, once the tank is empty.

"Obviously, if you have fewer people driving and fewer kilo-



## A DRIVING INSTRUCTOR DISHES

**I**n his 44 years of driving, Reza Safai says he's gotten zero speeding tickets, but in his 24-year career as a traffic-safety specialist and driving instructor, he's accumulated a heck of a lot of harrowing tales. "I have many, many stories," says the owner of Calgary Driving School. "Do you want a scary one?"

Yes, please.

There was the time a young student driver almost barrelled into pedestrians at a crosswalk that wasn't just delineated with white paint but had flashing lights overhead. "I had the feeling she wasn't going to stop for them because she just kept checking her speedometer—this is not the time to check it!" A metre from impact, he slammed the safety brakes on his side of the car and pointed out the obvious. Her rationale? "You told me my speed should be 30 kilometres at flashing lights. My speed is 25."

Sometimes, his experiences with student drivers were not so much harrowing as puzzling. Once, after he had concluded a session with an older student, she complained to him that he

had promised to lead her home. He assured her that he had, pointing out the house from which he picked her up and reciting the address, but none of it registered. He pointed to the window. "How about those children—do you know them?" he asked. She said, yes, those were her children, but she didn't understand how they had gotten there.

But nothing beats the time an elderly driver looking to brush up on her skills panicked and stopped dead in the middle of an icy intersection. He told her to gently apply the gas pedal so that traffic could continue. "She pressed it all the way to the floor. I tried to push my [side] brake but guess what? The impact of the gas was so hard the cable came off!" He undid his seatbelt and grabbed the steering wheel, but the car spun out of control and slammed into an electrical pole.

"When I opened my eyes, I was on the hood, the pole had fallen on my head and there were two or three ambulances." The student, however, was fine.

The lesson? *Always wear a seatbelt.* —Omar Mouallem

metres driven on roads, you're likely not going to invest as much in roads in the future," says Alberta Transportation spokesperson Trent Bancarz. "But it's hard to predict what an 18-year-old who makes a decision today will decide in another 10 years." And, of course, the population boom across the province has only added wheels to the road—hundreds of thousands of them.

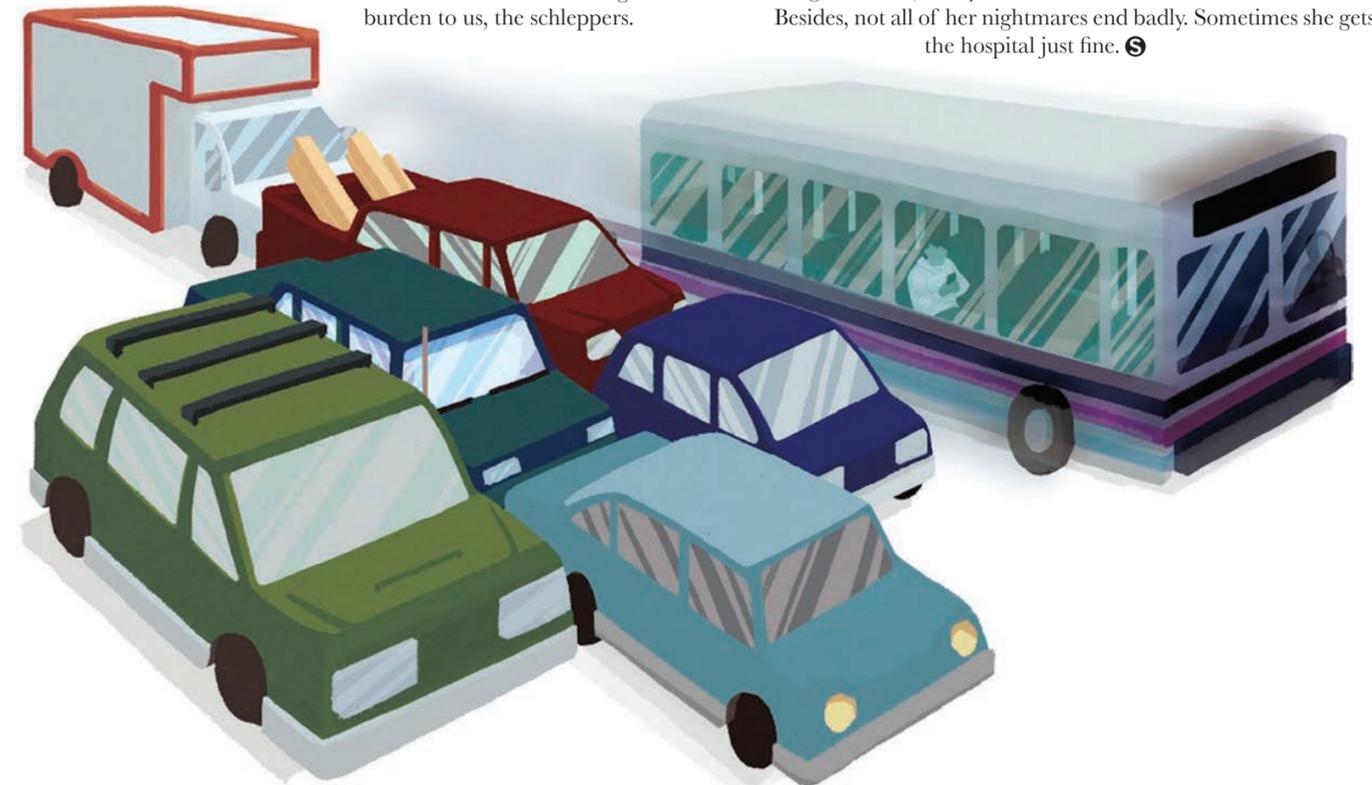
Stanley hopes that over the next generation, a substantial number of those drivers will decide instead to park it and ride public transit or bicycle instead. He sees no downside to this. It benefits the environment, drives the price of transit tickets down, decongests roads and adds to their longevity, too.

It's also good for the soul, he says.

"Cities with great public transit tend to have tremendous civic spirit, tremendous integration and more civic engagement. You see people of different ethnicities or income brackets, people who aren't as fortunate. It pulls communities together."

But are there also virtues to driving at a young age? Though I have, like many of my generation, extolled urbanism—purchased a condo close to downtown and become the kind of bike commuter you want to chuck your latte at—I can't pretend that the unique memories from that Chevy Blazer didn't colour my life richly and permanently. For me, it was my first taste of adulthood, spawning a strong sense of accountability, leadership and caution.

And, let's face it, people who absolve themselves of designated driving, grocery runs and putting time behind the wheel on long highway stretches are annoying. I don't know a single non-driver who passes up a ride when it's offered, or prefers a Greyhound to a road trip, or hasn't called a Class 5-carrying friend to help with moving, but few will ever admit to being a social burden to us, the schleppers.



If these Millennials finally come around to joining our car culture—and they very well could, as the number of 30-somethings getting their licences has grown over 20 years—they will only contribute to public safety.

"If you start driving later you're less likely to be in a crash," says Caird at the U of C. "There's more maturity and possibly less risk-taking."

That's good news for Turner, Doleman and Aboutaha, all of whom admit to a phobic, almost pathological fear of driving.

"What if you crash, what if you kill someone, what if you get killed?" worries Aboutaha at the thought of driving. Asked if she's gaining anything by avoiding it, she says dryly, "I'm still living."

These are not irrational fears. It's the No. 1 killer of people her age. And mine. In August, on the four-hour drive to my high-school reunion, I counted three people from my yearbook who'd been killed in an auto accident since we graduated.

In her teens, Elysia Turner competed in dressage, and would jump over hurdles on horseback. Driving, however, causes her such anxiety that she has recurring nightmares of having to drive a family member or loved one to the emergency room. But lately she's been looking at that little plastic card in her purse and scouting out car2go vehicles—which she thinks are "cute" and "manageable"—and has been thinking to herself, "Maybe it's about time."

Besides, not all of her nightmares end badly. Sometimes she gets to the hospital just fine. ☺

**"I have no desire to live out in suburbia, where I'd be forced to drive."**