the $1 car

THE CLUNKERS WE AFFECTIONATELY DISPARAGE
EVOKE NOSTALGIA OF A SIMPLER TIME

BY MARK LUCE

On May 20, 2000, I was flying high. The previous day was my 30th birthday, my girlfriend (later to be wife) graduated from college, the enormous party we threw was a hit ... and even the cops who came were nice.

That afternoon, I hopped in the car, a red 1986 Honda Prelude (bought for $500), blasted Lucinda Williams’ “Car Wheels on the Gravel Road,” put on my shades, rolled back the sun roof and headed out on the back roads to Kansas City — AC on, windows down. All was good until the off-the-beaten path ended, and I was forced onto the highway. Within a mile, the red car was dead, victim of a busted timing belt that would run me a grand that my bank account didn’t possess.

So I bought a car for a dollar.

I loved it.

There’s a picture of it above. It was white with rust highlights, a 1979 Toyota Tercel. It lasted me nearly three years with nothing spent on it but gas and oil. My buddy Charles and his wife, Laura, sent it my way. Laura bought it years before in Terre Haute, Ind., when her car bit the dust on a trip. I moved right back, so he sold it back to me for $4. I drove it even after my first child was born until it became clear the now $4 car was unfit for normal travel.

Eventually, we moved to L.A., and a random fellow flat-out offered me $200 for the thing. I told him I would take $100 — even though I felt odd about it, as technically I should have sold it for $8. A week later he walked by and reported that the back axle had broken in two.

Lucky me, as that C-Note was worth about 400 diapers. And memories of the dollar car bring at least that many laughs.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, where he’s never had a car payment, nor plans to until he buys his Cadillac.