

the \$1 car

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 back from law school. They insisted on gifting it on the title; I insisted on paying a token amount — one buck.

The dollar car drove like a dollar car.

THE CLUNKERS WE AFFECTIONATELY DISPARAGE

EVOKE NOSTALGIA OF A SIMPLER TIME **BY MARK LUCE**



The handling was atrocious, with U-joints a-squeakin' and wheels a-rattlin'. The tape deck didn't work; the radio could only pull a couple of FM stations, and the speakers turned what came out of the radio into a sound that resembled Charlie Brown's teacher. The brakes required the force of Fred Flintstone, and the steering wheel shook like a jackhammer. The transmission would labor; the doors wouldn't lock; the glove box wouldn't open; the emergency brake didn't work; I could see the ground when I lifted the floor mats, and the keys would literally fall out of the ignition while I was driving. Once you could bring the beast to a halt, you would have to hold in the brake, fish along the floor for the keys and then reinsert the key to shut it off.

I loved driving it, and to this day it's still the best car I have ever owned.

Eventually, we moved to L.A., so I sold it to my friend Byron for \$2. We 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.

One afternoon I sat on the porch, 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.

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