



The 500 Dollar Car

Every time somebody tells me they're going to pick up a 500 dollar beater, I develop a nervous twitch near my right eye. Invariably, the friend...no change that...the "associate" who decides to share this uplifting news, is doing so because he hopes I'll bail him out if he gets into a bind with his Find. All donations of time

and advice on my part are precisely that—donations.

Just this week, I saw a pal of mine named Dave get suckered into a few *minor* repairs in a similar situation. A gifted amateur mechanic, he decided to play Good Samaritan and help a friend—no change that—an "associate" of his who had made the 500 dollar mistake.

Sent on his mission with the standard instructions, "Don't spend much on this thing, it's only a 500 dollar car," he soon found himself up to his eyeballs in grief. Did he call me? But of course he did. Not because I'm good, but because I'm easy. As the third party in this car-catastrophe conference call, I watched as the two principles in our story poured another 1200 dollars in parts into a car which is still worth something less than the original purchase price. Investments like this make stock in a hula hoop factory look good.

The poor Celica has 175,000 hard miles on it. No two tires are from the same manufacturer, although one has some tread, and three of the four are the same size. Hey, happiness is where you find it.

Aside from the glass and plastic parts of the car, the only remaining component not covered with rust is the rubber bungee cord holding the badly mangled trunk lid in a semi-closed position.

There's a combination of gear oil and brake fluid flowing freely from the left rear brake drum. The right side is dry, and Dave has prudently decided that disturbing the fragile ecological balance keeping it that way would be unfair to generations yet unborn.

Under the hood is where the fun really starts. There's so much oil leaking that we thought we were watching a rerun of the Exxon Valdez episode. Digging deeper, we find that the stuff on the dipstick and the stuff in the radiator are the same! Each sample looks exactly like goat's milk fudge.

Under the valve cover we find that the head bolts are all finger tight, and that three of the cam cap bolt holes are stripped out. These added bonuses were thrown in by the last doctor of motors to grace the engine with his presence. He had apparently tried to halt the commingling of vital fluids by tossing in a head gasket.

Dropping the oil pan to properly remove the fudge, we discover ancient artifacts which strangely resemble pieces of chain tensioner. Dave is starting to get a twitch like mine. We twitch in unison for a few moments, then we proceed.

The inside of the 22R's timing cover confirms our worst suspicions. The chain has stretched to twice its original length, and run amuck, destroying most everything in its path. The unkindest cut of all is the one which currently allows coolant from the water jacket to cascade into the oil pan. The water pump is shot. Oil pump gear-to-front cover clearance can best be measured with a popsicle stick, not a feeler gauge.

Dave is not a happy man at this point. He calls the proud new owner to share the glad tidings of the moment, and asks, "Why didn't you call me BEFORE you bought it?"

"Because I didn't want to bother you," came the reply. Dave's twitch is now registering 5 on the Richter scale.

The Point?

There are now franchised companies which evaluate used cars for prospective buyers. They go down a detailed, itemized list, inspect the vehicle for existing problems, and look for the telltale signs of approaching failures.

So why don't more of us offer this service as part of our shop's menu? If the car is repairable and the purchase price becomes negotiable as a result of existing problems, the buyer ends up saving the cost of the inspection, maybe more. Even more importantly, he may bring the car back to you to perform any needed work.

If you charge him for the checkout, and save him from the financial trauma of our 500 dollar special, you've still made a few bucks you wouldn't have otherwise.

But this is a service which needs to be sold like any other. Why not do a mailing to your existing client base, outlining the service, describing the costs involved, and maybe enclosing a copy of this story about the 500 dollar car? Dave and I will be eternally grateful. Isn't that right, Dave.

Dave?

—By Ralph Birnbaum