

The New Car

In fact, this car gives junk a bad name.
That Tommy is still driving the Dart
is more a testament to Tommy's impressive lack of taste
than it is a statement about the Dart's staying power.

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“Dad and I are going to town,” Mom said with a hint of mystery. She wore her Sunday white polyester dress and black flats with a small gold buckle on the toe.

“We’re coming back with a *little* surprise,” Dad grinned as if he were about to burst with pride. Mom and Dad were lovely people who married after WWII, started a family. In the early 1960’s they’d had apple pie in the sky hopes.

We’d never seen them both so excited. My sister and I wondered what they were talking about, but we knew it was big because they never went out together in the evenings and never both appeared this pleased with themselves.

It was a Friday evening in early autumn. We’d probably watch Mitch Miller on T.V. and eat buttered popcorn later. I was eleven years old and safe to be alone at home, but my 15 yr. old brother, Ken, and 16 yr. old sister, Mae, were at home too.

“They’re going to pick-up a new car,” Ken revealed as they drove down the gravel road in our old Ford. Oddly the idea of a new car didn’t seem to impress him.

Our car was a classic 1955 Ford Fairlane Coupe, two-tone blue and white with modest fins above the back lights, V-8 engine. I liked it. It reminded me of Ken’s model cars that he spent hours putting together. Although I was never allowed to touch his muscle car collection, he could talk for hours about the advantages and features of a Ford Fairlane over the Chevy Bel Air.

Lately our car didn’t always start, it used a lot of oil, the engine overheated and the driver’s side door refused to latch. In fact the door flew open when the car took a sharp curve.

We’d never owned a new car. That was a luxury for the well-to-do. Our family, my brother, sister, our parents and I had no illusion that we were anything but middle class. A new car untouched by any other driver would surely make us all feel as though we’d arrived to a higher station in life.

In the mid-60’s new automobiles were getting compact and more efficient than our old clunker. I didn’t like the look of the Studebakers or Ramblers. If my younger self-had a way of

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looking into the future, I'd compare those vehicles to the American Motors Gremlin, the Nissan Cube or the Dodge K car. My parents couldn't possibly purchase an ugly car, could they?

Two hours later Dad drove a new white '64 Dodge Dart onto the front lawn for all of us to see. He couldn't have been more pleased with himself as he opened all the doors and pointed out the impressive features.

"Three on the tree. Slant 6. Gets great gas mileage. Solid steel dashboard. And none of those silly seatbelts like some new cars. Automatic signals so your mom and I don't have to put our arms out the window to make a turn."

Mom was quick to say, "We can't sit in the car until Dad installs the clear plastic seat covers." She pointed to the box in the back-seat marked *clear plastic seat covers*.

I had no art or design skills yet some instinct told me there was something odd about the vehicles' shape. The front and rear fenders slumped to nothingness. The front-end looked short and squat as the back end. The bland color and forgettable squashed shape was an affront to any natural form I'd ever seen. It did not in any way resemble the fluid shape of a dart. It made me think of dinosaur's droppings.

Putting my hands to my face I tried to hide my personal disappointment. How would my parents feel if I told them their new car was a violation to the human eye? I didn't say a word.

Meanwhile, Mae, did cartwheels around the Dodge Dart which sat on the front lawn.

It is difficult to articulate just how ugly the Dart is.
(Adjectives we rejected: "putrid," "vile," "criminal,"
"Jerry Springer-like" and "of or related to a
baboon's ischial area.")

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The new Dodge Dart had a pleasant odor. After Dad installed the seat covers, the inside of the car on a warm day had a chemical smell that Mom called 'new'. Everyone complimented us on our new vehicle yet I never got used to the Dart's unusual shape. I had a complicated relationship with that car. I tried not to share my feelings with my family.

Dad insisted we follow the dealer's advice and never operate our Dodge Dart over 50 mph for the first thousand miles. In fact he thought it was such a great idea that Mother and he didn't drive over 45 mph during the 'break-in' period. Ken and I were especially mortified

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driving down Hwy 101 with every car, truck and lumbering school bus passing us like we were yesterday's news. We scrunched down in the back seat as everything passed us by.

Ken got a job at the Arctic Circle where you could buy a burger for 19 cents and a delicious cheese burger for a quarter. During his high school years he owned a series of older cars and enjoyed a colorful social life which kept him away from our family excursions in the Dart. Ken remembers that Dad never allowed him to borrow the car. Although, even now, he can't recall when he would have wanted it.

My older sister, Mae, had a different experience. She felt wonderful in the Dart. When the Dodge was only weeks old, Marshfield High had a Sadie Hawken's dance where the girls get to ask the boys out. She fancied Dale Lawson. Mom and Mae picked him up at his house driving our brand-new car. Mae and Dale sat in the backseat. Apparently, they were both so shy that during the ride to and from the high school, no one spoke.

Soon after Mae started dating David Wright. David's father was the pastor at the same country church my family attended. The church was conservative and evangelical. They did not believe in dancing. Mae never attended another Sadie Hawkins, Junior Ball or Senior Prom during her years in high school while dating David Wright.

One of Reverend Wright sermon's was etched in my permanent memory.

"Any man who worships false idols forfeits his eternal life. Let's turn to Leviticus 19:4 'Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves molten gods; I am the Lord your God.'" After a long pause Reverend Wright proceeded with a little tremor in his voice, "Any man who worships idols will *parish*. The man who spends his Sunday afternoon washing his new car is worshipping an idol. He must redeem his ways or face the wrath of God."

I can't remember if we were the only family with a new car in the church parking lot, we were certainly the only one with a Dodge Dart, but if the sky had darkened and distant thunder rumbled over the far hills, who would have been surprised? Dad wasn't in church that day. Mom relayed the message to him. He objected to the Reverend's implication that weekly car maintenance was a sin. We lived so far from the church that no one could have witnessed my father's devotion to his malformed vehicle. Was driving a clean car enough evidence for Reverend Wright to say such things? Soon after that sermon, my parents change churches.

Six years later Mae and David had long ago broken-up. She married and had her daughter. Ken joined the Army and went to Viet Nam. My parents were almost 'empty nesters'.

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During my first high school years Mom had plenty of opportunities to drop me off and pick me up at school all hours of the day and night. Living in the country miles from town wasn't easy for her.

The Dodge Dart was getting older. It had picked up some foul odors, the gallon of milk that had spilled, my nieces diaper that had been left in the car. Dad commented a few times that the slant 6 didn't have much power on the road.

Mom had a new job in town and she'd taken a liking to the big Mustang's with their powerful V8 engines. Both my parents had worked hard for many years and could afford better transportation. They spoke about replacing the Dodge Dart with something else. I was thrilled.

Let us be perfectly clear about what we think of Tommy's 1963 Dodge Dart: Despite anything Tommy might tell you to the contrary, the car is pure, unmitigated junk.

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My brother, Ken, had a series of older cars during his high school years. When he bought a different car, he used the one he owned as part of the trade in. I assumed when my parents bought a car to replace the Dodge Dart, they would use it as a trade in too. I was wrong.

Dad shopped around for Mom's vehicle. This time he didn't want to buy a new car and watch its value evaporate as he drove it off the lot. He wanted a car that was relatively new but with low milage. After extensive research, he bought a big Mustang for my mom and a gently used red Ford pick-up truck for himself. The Dodge Dart remained in the driveway.

Mother taught me to drive using that car. She drove us to a dusty country road not far from our house. Once there I moved behind the wheel as she scooted over to the passenger side of the car.

"Now put your foot on the clutch. That's the break. Use the other pedal. Over there. Turn the key. Ease off the clutch." The Dodge lurched forward. The engine died. "Okay, now you have to start it again." Rr Rr rr. "I think it's flooded. We have to wait a minute." My mother's good nature and endless patience astounds me even today.

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The Dodge Dart was still a visual affront to the human eye in my opinion but it was a sturdy little car which survived all the torturous maneuvers I put it through. Eventually I learned how to drive. But my parents didn't let me use the Dodge Dart. I didn't mind at all.

By the time I was a junior in high school all my friends had cars. When I say car, I mean the cute Volkswagen Bug. Marcia, Tina, Karen and Kathy all had Bugs. They were good friends who didn't mind driving a few miles out of town to pick me up when we went out on the weekends.

My parents ways were different than how most people operate today. They paid cash for everything they ever owned. If they didn't have the cash, they didn't buy it. Also they never had a big plan for us, their children. Nurse, teacher, bookkeeper, astronaut were career ideas out of their comprehension. They thought Mae and I would marry. They thought Ken would work in the woods or in a saw mill, find a girl and marry. But they also believed that I would get a job and work until, well, I found that special logger to marry and take care of me forever.

One day Dad told me that we needed to talk. "You know, kid o," Dad said with smoldering enthusiasm as he paced around the living room, "you're going to need a job. Getting you back and forth from work might be a problem for your mom and me."

Mom watched from the kitchen, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Dad was smiling too. He seemed ready to burst open and tell me something mysterious and unfathomable about the operation of the universe. What was so exciting? What was he talking about? He paused. It seemed like he wanted to create the proper effect for his big reveal. "We're giving you the Dodge Dart."

Mom laughed now. She might have clapped her hands or stood up to hug me. I can't remember. They were both beside themselves with joy that I would be recipient of their thrift and hard work in the form of a car.

They were giving me the biggest gift in the world. It was a transformational moment that I will never forget. Instantly I rethought my view of my parents, the funny looking car in the driveway and my life. I now had freedom.

Many years later, Mom and Ken told me the dealership wouldn't give Dad more than fifty dollars in trade-in for the old Dodge Dart. That was the reason Dad kept it. Yet he thought the car was worth thousands of dollars and he gave it to me.

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*Coming to terms with tremendous personal loss
is never easy. Even when the item lost is widely
considered to be worthless junk. [After the Dart was totaled]
...it took fully three minutes for Tommy to touch
his morning cappuccino and biscotti.
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Pushing my earlier misgivings about the Dodge Dart from my consciousness I realized owning a car gave me a new freedom. My girlfriends accepted my car, an outlier compared to their adorable little VW Bugs.

We didn't always take my car when we went out. Yet my friends, to this day, remember the night we wanted to go to a dance in Coquille after the biggest snow storm of the century. Dad had warned me about going out after the coast had recently taken on three feet of snow and the schools and town were closed for two weeks. I didn't take his advice.

My friends loaded into the Dodge Dart and we started for the Coquille Community Center where a live band played rock and roll music. While crossing the Shingle House Slough bridge, the Dart's tires contacted a patch of ice. The car spun around in a full circle and slid into a ditch.

"What happened?"

"Is everyone okay?"

We scrambled from the Dart, disoriented but unhurt, chilled by the night air and unsure of what to do. Someone had brought along illegal beverages. We hid them in the tall grass nearby in case the police were our rescuers. Before we had time to develop a plan, a chip truck drove by and pulled off the highway. Another man in a pickup pulled over too. They talked briefly, determined there was no reason the Dart couldn't drive once out of the ditch. They stood in the icy muck while I put the car in reverse and they pushed it out.

The Dart didn't even have a dent in the front bumper but we were all emotionally shaken. We drove back to Coos Bay and had French fries and coffee at a local diner, talked about our near-death experience and went home without socializing outside our friend group.

After high school I landed my first real job at Madison Elementary School still the owner of the '64 Dodge Dart. I longed for a different car so after a short time and a little saving, I had

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the funds to buy a used Subaru. The Dart didn't have resale value to a car lot so I sold it to a beginning teacher at the school for a hundred dollars. One day the teacher, George, who'd moved to Coos Bay from Minnesota, told me the Dart had started itself without the key in the ignition and drove into the rear end of his neighbor's vehicle.

"Can you imagine my surprise? I looked up from my Corn Flakes and your car was driving down the street with not a soul behind the steering wheel," he said to me.

A few stories and many years later, George, the elementary school teacher, and I married and started a family. Like a bad penny, the Dodge Dart was again in my keeping. The Subaru got traded for a powder blue VW hatchback but the Dart remained in my front yard.

George drove the Dart but, understandably, he wanted something else. We put an ad for the Dart in the free shopper, a young family took it for a drive and they loved it. We negotiated a price. One hundred dollars cash. As soon as the title was signed and they drove away, we raced to town to buy groceries.

An hour after we'd restocked our pantry, the new owners called. "We took the car to a mechanic. It has so many things wrong with it, he couldn't figure out why it still runs. We want our money back."

"That's impossible. We spent it all on food."

The new owners never contacted us again. From time to time I'd see the Dart cruising the highway; eventually the headliner sagged, then the front fender had a new gash. There was a new driver behind the wheel every time.

The old Dodge Dart's cringe worthy appearance, driving itself down the street, spinning circles in the middle of the highway on a chilly night and operating for years against all mechanical predictions, still makes me smile.