

BY MATTHEW BUDMAN

Guys And Dodges

The 1982 Subaru wagon dumped on me—er, given to me by my father last May—sounded kind of loud, and I asked him to drive it around the block for diagnosis.

"It's the muffler," he said decisively. "Take the car to Midas in the morning. It should cost around \$19.95."

The muffler shop employees put the car on the rack, studied it briefly and stared at the floor sheepishly.

"Well," one began hesitantly, "your *muffler's fine*."

Bad sign. No. 1.

"See, it's these *pipes* here, leading from your catalytic converter."

Uh-huh.

"See," he continued, knowing an explanation was futile but pushing on anyway, "your *timing's* off, and the *temperature's* running too hot, and the pipes have *crystallized*."

Whatever.

It's often assumed that guys are good with technology, especially things mechanical, and *particularly* cars—that is, the inner workings of cars: how they run and why.

We're supposed to be autoliterate—having the ability to identify a rattle, install a radio, fix an air conditioner, change a tire—but in fact most of us are completely helpless. We clatter into auto-repair garages waving open wallets just like the stereotypical woman.

I think my car's broken, we say. What's wrong? we ask. What else needs to be replaced? we ask. Wow, that's expensive, we say just before signing the credit-card receipt.

Since every other customer was puttering out of the shop, smiling, having been charged a total of \$19.95, while

I had been told the part alone for my car would run—I am not making this up—\$850, I figured I might as well get some free advice out of Midas.

Can you guys see anything else wrong?

"Well," a different guy spoke up, "you get a clicking sound when you go around corners, right? That's your *wheel joints*."

My what?

"Your *wheel joints*," he repeated, "are *shot*." This new complication, he told me, would run another \$400 to \$600.

All right, I said, exasperated, what's the worst thing that could happen if I didn't get them fixed right away?

"Well," he said, "your front axle could break."

You learn so much when your car's repaired. I never even realized my wagon had all these parts. In the last 15 months everything from the battery to the clutch to the alternator belt—whatever *that* is—has needed replacing.

Once I drove home and Dad wandered outside to look over his old car. He kneeled by one of the tires. "You see this *metal* sticking up here?" he asked me. "It's nice to know you're driving on steel-belted radials, but you're not supposed to be able to *see* the metal."

Every time the subject of the Subaru comes up, he asks about something called a "lube and oil job," and have I gotten one lately?

The car's running relatively well, so why is this necessary? I mean, I see billboards indicating I'm supposed to get a lube and oil job, but then again I see signs telling me I need to eat at Carl's Jr., too.

In high school everyone snickered at the kids who took auto shop rather than yearbook or psychology or calculus. After all, they were wasting the opportunity to broaden their minds, expand their horizons and learn something useful.

At my five-year reunion Saturday, it was clear that the autoliterates had done just as well as the rest of us—maybe even better.

It's pretty obvious why.

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