

Erin Ergenbright

## The Karma Car

Though the road of karma winds behind all of us, I think I've actually driven on it in the karma car itself. The karma car is a red 1983 Subaru hatchback with white racing stripes on the hood and over the top. It came with a red and white striped helmet and an umbrella for propping up the broken hatch. It had a wonky headlight shining high and to the right, a horn like a bleating sheep, and an oil leak to the tune of a quart a day left in Rorschach patterns on the street. But you don't look a gift car in the mouth.

Thanks to a combination of me and the post 9-11 economy, I'd lost a job, a car and a boyfriend all at once. Actually, I'd lost the job and the car first, which led to the lost boyfriend, because he was a musician who didn't have a job or a car either, thus we didn't see each other very often. We could rarely afford to go out so we just spent a lot of time talking on the phone across town from one another, wondering who should take the bus to the others' apartment and whether it was worth the time or energy. It wasn't worth either, finally, but before our promise to stay friends went the way that that promise so often does, he told me his band mate Alex had an old car that he didn't need anymore since they had the "band van." The only stipulation was that I pass the car on when I no longer needed it.

"But why don't you take it?" I asked my ex-boyfriend.

He said he didn't have money for registration or gas. He said he barely had money for food. I thought he was being melodramatic, but when he pulled up his shirt I saw how thin and bony his chest had become.

“You’re right,” I said, and took him to get a cheeseburger.

I *loved* driving the karma car. It made me giddy, and when people pulled up alongside me in traffic, sort of worried and curious, they’d see me smiling, and they’d always smile back, and then we would both feel better about ourselves, and about the world and our place in it. This was before we were at war, when it was a little easier to be giddy about things like smiles with strangers.

I drove the car for four months, and during that time I got a new job, a new boyfriend and spent two hundred and three dollars on motor oil. So when my sister left to teach in South Korea and needed someone to watch her Honda, I passed the karma car along to my friend Anna. Anna didn’t find it quite as charming as I did; then again, Anna has ridiculously beautiful honey-blond hair, on which she uses over thirty kinds of product.

“People kept looking at me funny,” she said, when she returned the car after only a week.

I felt slightly rejected, but within a few days offered the karma car to my co-worker Tom, who didn’t have a car, said he wanted one, and was used to people looking at him funny.

Driving the karma car I’d become so accustomed to sharing smiles with my fellow drivers that the first few weeks in my ubiquitous Civic were heartbreaking. I’d glance over at the next car, happy and expectant, and they wouldn’t be looking. They’d be talking on the phone or fiddling with the radio. I felt invisible. The world seemed

colder. But I could now reach my destination without leaving a trail of oil, and the karma car was safely in Tom's hands.

Then Tom and I had a little misunderstanding.

Then, happily, he changed jobs and we lost touch.

And then, a year and a half later, Peter, the new guy at work, asked me if I'd ever had a Subaru. I never really thought of the karma car having a brand—it was a philosophy embodied, so I said no. "You didn't have a red Subaru with white racing stripes painted on it?" he asked.

The karma car! Yes! Of course I'd had it!

And, as Portland is a town built on the backs of exes, it was not surprising to hear that Peter's ex-girlfriend worked with Tom. And she said that Tom had passed the car to his friend Henry; then Henry had passed it to Brad, and Brad had passed it to his father, a down-on-his-luck house painter who'd been unemployed because he had no vehicle. The karma car had *saved* his business, in fact, saved his *life*!

I got teary. This was *exactly* the way it was supposed to work. I decided I needed meet Henry and Brad and Brad's father, and just see the car one more time. I asked Peter if he could help. "I have their numbers!" he said, happily. "We're on the same whiffle ball team."

Henry and Brad were a little sauced by the time we met up at the Lowbrow Lounge, and it was quickly apparent that our experiences with the karma car had been different. They told me that Tom had driven the car exactly twice and then let it sit on the street for over a year before giving it to Henry. "Tom doesn't have a license," Henry said.

I sort of thought everyone had a license. Or if they didn't, they were just about to go to the DMV. But as the karma car revealed, people don't always act the way you think they should.

So, once the excitement of getting a free red Subaru with white racing stripes had waned, Henry realized he didn't really need the car. He also had no license, so it was probably for the best that his friend Brad decided to take it.

"It just seemed like it was kind of a heavy thing around Henry's neck," Brad said, worrying off the label of his bottle of PBR with his thick thumb.

"Um, like an albatross?" I asked.

"No," he said, patiently. "Like something heavy."

Remembering fondly my days behind the wheel of the karma car I asked Brad and Henry how other drivers had responded to them.

"You'd get some weird looks," Henry said, chewing on his cocktail straw.

"I was embarrassed to be behind the wheel," Brad said.

Brad didn't have a license either, of course, and said he liked walking to work. So he gave the karma car to his dad.

"The tags were expired so he just took a pen and wrote '05 on them," Brad said.

"He puts like 40 miles a day on that car. It runs like a champ."

It seemed the karma car's bumpy road had finally evened out.

And then Brad mentioned that his father wanted to sell it.

"Wait! He can't *sell* it," I said. "That's not how it goes."

“My dad’s totally tits up,” Brad said. “Your cute little story wouldn’t mean anything to him.” He took a swig of his beer. “Actually, though, I think your name’s still on the title. I keep meaning to cross it out. I wouldn’t want you to get stuck with anything, you know?”

I didn’t know, actually, but then I thought, wait a minute, my *name* is on the title? Then it’s *my* karma car, right? I could go over to their house and take it back! “I just want to see it one last time,” I fibbed. “Maybe I could have someone take a picture with me sitting in it, wearing the helmet.”

“Sure, but it smells pretty bad inside,” Brad said. “Like something nested in it and died.”

Henry said he’d saged it, but it didn’t do any good.

The outgoing message on Brad and his father’s answering machine was garbled and angry-sounding. With each message I left I was more frustrated, and hanging up the last time I suddenly remembered driving the karma car on the freeway one October afternoon. I was singing along to Beast of Burden when a pick-up headed for the dump pulled in front of me and hundreds of dry leaves flew wildly about. But now, obsessed with the karma car, I was very far from such joy or openness. I had to let it go.

But I didn’t exactly let it go. A month later I called Brad again and miraculously, he answered. When I asked if I could see the karma car he said, “Actually, there’s been a little snag. Last night the car got T-boned in a hit and run. My dad’s fine. The passenger side is all bashed in, but it still drives.”

They were moving the next day, and Brad said I could see the car when they got settled. I waited two weeks and called. There was no answer, no forwarding number. I tracked him down at work.

“The thing is, the car’s gone,” Brad said. “They towed it last night.”

His father had been pulled over and had no insurance.

“Isn’t he going to try to get it back?”

“He doesn’t have any money,” Brad said, strangely cheerful. “It looks like your story ends here.”

I called Retriever Towing, as I have a history with them, and they kindly referred me to City Records, where I was less-kindly informed that they tow about 250 cars a day, and without the license plate or VIN# or even one piece of paper linking me to the car there was no way to even begin looking. I had to let it go.

That night at work I told my co-worker Peter about the sad fate of the karma car.

“What do you mean *sad*? The possibilities are endless,” he said. “It could become a demolition car, or it could be sold for parts. It could be like an organ donor, providing a new liver or a new heart to someone who really needs it.”

Peter said the first degree of karma is causality, and you don’t always get to see the results, which are directly related to rebirth. The karma car’s pieces could be spread like so many seeds. Perhaps its tires would become playground swings, or its steel would be melted into pogo sticks or much-loved souvenir thimbles. I felt better.

Two days later someone propped a letter from the police bureau against my door. Whoever had mistakenly received the letter had waited two weeks to pass it along. It

said, “Dear Erin Ergenbright. Our records indicate you may have an interest in the following vehicle.”

I laughed out loud—an interest! I had an obsession! But one must claim a car within fifteen days of its being towed, and now I had only a single day in which to prove the car was mine, obtain a police release, and pay \$428 dollars to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Towing on Bybee. Besides the fact that I had to teach all day, I didn’t have one scrap of paper linking me to the car, and when I called the towing company, they said that without the license plate number or VIN there was no way to even being looking for it.

I was weary. I imagined the karma car was weary, too, eager to move forward, to be released and reborn. So I let it go for good. And though it likely no longer exists in the form I knew, I like to think it’s happy—insofar that a car can be happy—and that transformation is possible. For all of us.