



# stupidity is a rusted car

TAIT ISCHIA DIDN'T KNOW A THING ABOUT CARS UNTIL HE MET ONE WITH THE RIGHT WINDOWS.

GUESS WHAT? I BOUGHT A CAR. IT DOESN'T HAVE A ROADWORTHY, ISN'T REGISTERED AND DOESN'T REVERSE.

There we are above. Me and my piece of shit. My new pal. It's a Mazda 1500: a classic car from 1969 designed by Italian Giorgetto Giugiaro for Bertone. Legend goes that Alfa Romeo rejected Bertone's design, so Bertone sold it to Mazda. Old men get all excited when they hear 'Italian designed, Japanese made'. Personally, I like the windows.

I met the owner late one night at his house in the suburbs. The car looked great and worked as well as all cars should, particularly the brakes. I slammed those puppies so hard the tyres quietly screeched to a stop, as if to say, "I'm in perfect working order, sucker!" We shook hands and the deal was done. I had a car.

Days later my stupidity slapped me square in the forehead, along with rust, leaking cylinders and an unending amount of worn parts. The structural rust of my own idiocy lay behind a flaky surface of unlearned confidence and I was forced to face the consequences. I could either learn to fix my piece of shit or acknowledge just how dumb I really am.

I found a garage that belonged in an episode of *Twin Peaks*. Car parts were scattered about and guys with greasy hands walked from room to shed and back again. All these things made it live up to my idea of a good, noble mechanics', at least aesthetically. Blue Overalls, at the front desk, asked if I was in for a service. In my best deep voice I explained that I wasn't, that my 1969 Mazda was parked out front, that it wouldn't reverse, but could they please make it reverse, because that's the most important thing to fix right now, wouldn't you say? As I walked to work my brain exploded in fear. How much would it cost? How long would it take? Am I really that stupid?

I've never been a car person. In school I felt left out when the other boys talked cars, but it didn't bother me. Cars were for troublemakers and kids with learning difficulties. I didn't need cars as much as I didn't need to listen to NOFX, because those things were not 'me' things, or for 'me' people. Now my perspective has changed. Restoring a car represents values and lessons completely relevant to 'me' people: lateral thinking, patience, stamina, decision-making, learning a language, problem-solving, being frugal, working with others, confidence and identity. It's a framework for learning about life. I've never read

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, but I imagine that it's about the same thing.

Two days later I found Blue Overalls sitting at the front desk yet again. "It doesn't look good," he said. "The gear shift linkage is worn. We've made some calls, but there's no replacement part." I had a feeling that this might happen. I opened the hood to see for myself. The gear selector mechanism was held together with cable ties.

I consulted the Gregory's workshop manual that I'd bought on eBay. I studied the transmission and began to understand how the gearstick connects to the shift arm. At first it made no sense, but now I think I can fix it myself: a generic ball joint, a new bushing, a U clip or two. There's a YouTube tutorial for everything.

I'm not stupid. In fact, I'm clever enough to find the shift arm on a transmission, goddammit. If anything, this fixing-a-car process has helped me understand my own self-doubt and find confidence to complete a project and complete it well. It's taught me a lot of things, but most of all, it's taught me not to buy a piece of shit, even when the windows are slanted at the most beautiful, '60s, Italian-designed, Japanese-made angle possible. •