

August 16, 2008

## My Car

Those two simple words - "my car" - are enough to elicit groans from those people who know me.

I love my car. Absolutely adore it. I've had my car since I was 17 years old, and it's the only vehicle I ever owned. It's been with me through all my adventures in Long Island, Binghamton, San Diego, and San Francisco. It's transported me to and from school, reliably to work, safely through snow, all the way cross country, and on countless road trips.

My adoration would be completely understandable if my car was a classic Mustang, a sporty Corvette, or a fun Miata... or maybe something cool like an electric car or one that runs on french fry grease. But, alas, my car is a boring, unspectacular 1987 Chevy Nova. Groan.



## No Go

Have you heard the story about how Chevrolet had problems marketing the Chevy Nova in Latin America? Because "no va" means "no go" in Spanish, car buyers wouldn't go for it, and Chevrolet had to pull it out of the market. Can you believe that? Well, you could if you were a total loser! It's an urban legend as reported on [about.com](http://about.com) and [snopes.com](http://snopes.com). So stop spreading rumors!

Ironically, I selected the Chevy Nova way back then because Novas in the 1980s had Toyota engines beneath their American hoods. I knew the car would go... and go and go and go. In fact, I've traveled quite a few miles in my car - 231,867 to be exact!



OK. I admit it. My speedometer only registers up to 85 miles per hour, and I've only hit that speed once or twice. Plus, my car overheats in the desert, and I have to drive in the searing heat with the heater on full blast. And the engine rattles badly when the car is not in motion, so I have to put it in neutral. And my CD player no longer works, and I have no intention of replacing it. And there is no cruise control, airbags, or GPS. The truth is, my car is simple and imperfect... just like me. Perhaps that's why I love it so much.

As a gift last year for my car's 20th birthday, I got some body work done (for the car, not me) and painted it a beautiful sapphire blue. Now my car matched the fun, blue City Boy whale tail license plates.



## Car Blues

To be honest, I haven't driven my car much since its fantastic paint job. Soon after, I moved to Paris (sans voiture), which has the best public transit system in the world. After 7 months in Paris, I moved to San Francisco, where a car is also not needed, at least not in my neighborhood.

My drives nowadays consist of little more than a drive around the block once a week searching for a new parking space to avoid a street sweeping ticket. In a way, it's kind of sad, though I must admit it is nice not having to buy gasoline anymore.

## Miserable Failure

A few weeks ago, I questioned whether my car would pass the smog test (inspection), which I have to do once every two years. Being so old, my car must be taken to a special smog-only test site, and the likelihood of failure is pretty high. This I did on July 26, nearly two weeks before my registration was due on August 8. If my car failed the test, I'd have plenty of time to fix it up and get it re-tested.

Making matters worse was that I now live in an "enhanced area" in which the most modern type of test equipment is used for testing. That's the price you pay for living in an environmentally-friendly region.

I took my car to the smog center and sat around for an hour or so waiting for my car to get tested. The customer before me got good news.

"Sir, your car passed!"

Maybe the machinery wasn't so sensitive. Perhaps there was hope for my car after all. I held my breath when the result of my smog test was announced.

"Sir, your car failed... miserably."

It didn't just fail, it failed miserably. That puts it in the same category as George W. Bush. The truth is, my car passed the 25 mph test but failed the 15 mph test. It also failed the visual inspection. The technician made it sound as if my car was belching out black smoke. The paperwork labeled my car as a gross polluter. Not only was my car a polluter - it was a gross one. I was so upset.

"Do you still want your car?" he asked.

"What?"

"Do you still want to keep your car?"

"Uh, yes," I said, suddenly not so sure of myself.

"Because the State of California will buy the car from you for \$1,000."

"Really. That's a lot of money."

"Well, they want to get cars like yours off the road. If you want to keep it instead, you could apply for \$500 from the State to fix the car. It'll probably need a new engine, however, so I recommend you sell it."

I took a brochure and application for the Consumer Assistance Program and went home. Can you believe that the State of California would actually give me \$1,000 to buy my car or \$500 to fix

it? No wonder the legislators can't pass a budget. My car is probably worth only \$500 as it is. The program is apparently only for old cars like mine. Not a bad deal. Not a bad deal at all.

## Fate

Fate would determine whether I would keep my car or sell it to the state. I brought it to my mechanic to examine it. I decided that if repairs were to cost over \$800 (meaning out-of-pocket costs after the \$500 rebate would be greater than \$300), I would sell it. I was very nervous. The phone call from my mechanic came. Fate was in his hands. I held my breath.

"The needed repairs for your car would cost \$650," he said.

Whew! I sighed with relief. I'll get to keep my baby after all, and it will be as good as new (almost).

I mailed my paperwork to the Department of Motor Vehicles the next day, and I waited for what was supposed to be a few days for a response. I waited and waited. Every day I would check my mailbox to see if I got notification from the State of California to go forward with the repairs. It probably didn't help that hundreds of Department of Motor Vehicles employees were recently laid off as a result of the State budget crisis.

The August 8 registration due date came and went. I paid the registration to avoid penalty fees. Luckily, the registration sticker on my license plate says "August," so I have until the end of the month before police officers would notice. Finally, after three weeks of waiting, a letter arrived yesterday.

"Dear Applicant:

We have received your application for the Consumer Assistance Program (CAP), and we are pleased to inform you that your application for Repair Assistance has been tentatively approved.

However, due to the Governor's Executive Order issued July 31, 2008 concerning the state budget, the Consumer Assistance Program has been suspended until further notice. As long as the Executive Order is in effect, you will not be able to participate in the Vehicle Retirement or Repair Assistance programs.

Once CAP services have resumed, you will receive an official letter of eligibility, at which time you may participate.

Sincerely, Consumer Assistance Program"

My only option at this point is to rent a garage somewhere and store my car until the state gets its act together. I don't expect that to happen any time soon. Arnold Schwarzenegger acts just as pathetically in the governor's mansion as he does in Hollywood.

At this point, I may as well start referring to my car by its Spanish name, "no va!" Groan.