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Produce Your Own Damn Movie!

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LLOYD KAUFMAN
WITH ASHLEY WREN COLLINS



Focal Press

Produce Your Own Damn Movie!

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Produce Your Own Damn Movie!

Lloyd Kaufman
with Ashley Wren Collins



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DEDICATION

This Book is lovingly dedicated to my beautiful wife, Pat Swinney Kaufman. She has produced my own damn life for the past 35 years.



Pat Swinney Kaufman circa 2005

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Table of Incontinence

Introduction:	Charlie Kaufman Is My Doppelgänger or Why I Want to Blow My Fucking Brains Out	xiii
Chapter 1 Preamble:	Penniless in Pittsburgh Asks Lloyd	1
Chapter 1:	Producing Models and Car Models or Producing America's Next Top Tromodel	3
	Producer Vocabulary Lesson #1: Executive Producer	5
	Out with the Old. . .	6
	. . .And in with the Who?	6
	The End	7
	Five Producing Models	7
	1. The No-Budget Model	7
	2. The Credit Card Model	8
	3. The Troma Model	8
	4. The Presale/Cross-National Model	10
	5. The Big Hollywood Movie Model	10
	• Attempt #2 to Define "Executive Producer" by Avi Lerner	11
Chapter 2 Preamble:	Nervous in Naples Asks Lloyd	13
Chapter 2:	How I Got a Rabbi to Hate Jews or How I Let Oliver Stone Beat the Crap Out of Me to Hone His Producer Skills	15
	Producer Vocabulary: Co-Executive Producer	15
	Speaking of Yale. . .	16
	But Enough About Halitosis	17
	• Mark Harris Finds Art in the Passion, Not Necessarily the Deal	21
	A Possible Reversal of Fortune?	21
	Don't Believe in the Top 100, Top 10 or Top Anything Lists	22
	Just Like <i>JFK</i> and <i>Nixon</i>	22
	• How Steven Paul Got Started at the Ripe Old Age of 12	23
	• Joe Dante Explains the Ideal Relationship	27
	Back to the Big Fuss	27
	• Mick Garris Distinguishes the Masters of Horrors	31
Chapter 3 Preamble:	So Close in So. Cal Asks Lloyd	33
Chapter 3:	Film School or Porno? Taint No Difference or My Dinner with Louis Su	35
	Producer Vocabulary: Producer	35
	Sage Advice from Roger Corman—Also Some Oregano Advice	37
	• Who Is Louis Su?	38
	• Ernest Dickerson Does Not Dickerson Around	47
	• The Core of More from Corman	49
	• In the Trent-ches with Trent Haaga	52

Chapter 4 Preamble:	Losing It in Las Vegas Asks Lloyd	61
Chapter 4:	Producing Movies Inevitably Gets You Stoned (And Is Really, Really Hard) or A Union Dose of Some Shirley Jackson Optimism Goes a Long Way	63
	Producer Vocabulary: Co-Producer	63
	A Note from My Editrix	64
	• Who Is John Carpenter?	65
	The Ultimate Self-Stoning Job, or There's a Hole in My Begel B agel, Man: A Short History of David Begelman	68
	A Lottery Ticket with a Big "?" on the Prize	69
	• How Shanley Gave Lloyd the Shaft . . . ley <i>by Matt Lawrence, Resident Troma Bitch</i>	70
	• Getting Stood Up by Oscar	72
	You Don't Have to Be a Shithead to Be a Producer	74
	Which Way Went Blair Witch?	74
	Climbing High Up at IHOP: Lessons from Stan Lee	75
	• Terry Jones Tells Us Why His Producer Was Not the Messiah, Just A Very Naughty Boy!	77
	• Quoth the Draven, Evermore	80
	• Why Tamar Simon Hoffs Always Makes Up Three Different Budgets for the Same Film	81
	The MPAA Lottery	82
	• Paul Hertzberg Advises Against Falling in Love with an Un-Commercial Project	85
	• Avi Lerner and Buddy Giovinazzo Say Unions Cause America's Lottery	88
	My Perfect Night In	90
	• Making a Movie Sucks: "Why Are We Doing This—We Hate Making Movies!" <i>by Stoning Victims Trey Parker and Matt Stone</i>	90
	This is Fucking Depressing . . . Anybody Else Want to Stop Reading and Go Out for a Beer?	91
Chapter 5 Preamble:	Eager in Erie Asks Lloyd	93
Chapter 5:	Is There a Business Plan? Is IMDB Ass? or Secrets of Financing and Producing from the Pickled Brain of an Elaborate Non-pyramid Schemer	95
	Producer Vocabulary: Line Producer	95
	A Note from My Editrix	96
	Line Producer	96
	A Few Words via E-mail from my Co-Author Ashley	97
	• Compare, Contrast, Coagulate: Lloyd's Producing and Acting Resumes on www.lloydkaufman.com and www.imdb.com	102
	The Accidental Business Plan	117
	• Roger Corman Puts His Finger on the Money Question	119
	Real Talk About Real Estate and "Reel" Mistakes	120
	• Avi Lerner Reminds Us That Producing Is Not Just an Art: It's a Business	121

	Simple Math is My Favorite Kind... Call It Tro – Math	123
	• Brian Yuzna Tells You How Money Has Changed Over the Years	123
	A Little More Exploitation for the Road	124
	Jist So This Chipter Don't Seam <i>Two</i> Poifect...	124
Intermission:	Andy Deemer's Production Diaries	125
Chapter 6 Preamble:	Starstruck in Starbucks Asks Lloyd	131
Chapter 6:	Pre-Sell Your Flick in a Game of Five-Card Stud or Go For a Straight Flush	133
	Producer Vocabulary: Associate Producer	133
	What Is the IFTA and Why You, Mr./Ms. Producer, Ought to Give a Shit!	135
	• Just How Does the IFTA Define an "Independent Film"?	136
	Why the Heck I Ran for IFTA Chairperson	137
	• What's so Friggin' Important About the <i>United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.</i> (1948)?	138
	• What Are the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules?	140
	• Comedy Central Proves My Point	146
	• Brian Yuzna Gives You a Lesson on Evolution from the Video Boom to the Modern Age	147
	• What <i>Is</i> Pre-Selling?: Lloyd Asks Paul Hertzberg	148
	• More on That Pre-Selling Thing from a Sales Agent (Who, In My Opinion, Is Also a Producer): An Interview with Kathy Morgan About Her Game of Five-Card Stud (Actor, Director, Producer, Script, Domestic Distribution)	152
	• But Why Would I Need a Sales Agent? I Know How to Hustle! <i>by Jean Prewitt</i>	158
Chapter 7 Preamble:	Anxious in Anchorage Asks Lloyd	163
Chapter 7:	Fuck Me Jesus on a Pogo Stick! Where Am I Going to Produce My Own Damn Movie? or The Secrets of the Location Vocation	165
	Producer Vocabulary: Location Manager	165
	Producer Vocabulary: Unit Production Manager	166
	Location Locution: Choosing a Location and Getting It in Writing and Lots More	167
	<i>Hanger</i> : A Case Study and Melvina Gets Her Groove On	169
	What <i>State</i> Are You In?	172
	• The Unstoppable, Legendary Pat Swinney Kaufman	173
	• Paul Hertzberg Gives Us a Reason to Stop Making Fun of Canadians	180
	Bunny-Hopping My Way to a Movie of the Future	182
	My Catering Standards	184
	How Do You Even Pay People to Begin With? Setting Up an LLC	184
	Whatever You Do, Get Insurance!	186

• How Debbie Rochon Did Not Get a Hand or Can You Digit? <i>by Debbie Rochon</i>	186
• Brian Yuzna Also Defects North	192
• Trent Haaga Gets Thrown in the Trent-ches on Location	193
• Brian Yuzna Ran From the Indies to the Andes in his Undies—or at Least From Indonesia to Spain	194
• Long Before There Was Charlie Kaufman, There Was Charles Kaufman <i>by Charlie Kaufman</i>	197
Chapter 8 Preamble: Pumped Up in Peoria Asks Lloyd	203
Chapter 8: How to Do It Hollywood-Style or I am the Herpes of the Film Industry: I Won't Go Away	205
Producer Vocabulary: Assistant Producer	205
• Producing, Directing, and Lloyd, Oh My <i>by James Gunn</i>	210
• Working at Troma Isn't Always Toxierrific!	215
The Two Heads of Lloyd Kaufman	216
• Avi Lerner: A <i>Rambo</i> -Style Rebel in Hollywood	217
• Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor <i>Crank It Up</i>	221
• The Duplass Brothers' Motto: "Make Movies, Not Meetings"	222
• <i>Kingpin</i> Brad Krevoy Unmasks the Hollywood Mystery	223
• The Way In: High-Voltage Wisdom from Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor While Larry Cohen Says "God Told Me to Write a Great Script"	232
Chapter 9 Preamble: Frustrated in Frankfurt Asks Lloyd	237
Chapter 9: Face the Music: Post-production and Distribution or Pump Up Your Production to a Higher Level	239
Producer Vocabulary: Internet	239
• Joe Lynch Likes Makin' Music (Videos) <i>by Joe Lynch</i>	246
• The Duplass Brothers Say Go for the Volume (and Neveldine and Taylor Interject)	250
• Thank You for the Music <i>by Dennis Dreith</i>	252
• Editing and Post-production: A Troma Fan Teaches You Everything You Need to Know About Free Software to Produce and Edit Your Own Damn Movie <i>by Daniel Archambeault-May</i>	256
• Herschell Gordon Lewis Says "Distribution, Distribution, Distribution"	259
• Doing the Distribution Dance <i>by Mark Damon</i>	262
A Late-Night E-mail from My Former Assistant and Former Co-Writer, Sara Antill	265
Afterword Preamble: Frugal in Fargo Asks Lloyd	269
TromAfterword: Dammit! Why Are You Reading This?!	271
A Trio of E-mail Exchanges Among Ashley, Elinor, and Lloyd, and A Final Final Ending to This Book About Producing	279
Index Gyno's Bitchin' Index	285

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Dr. Phil	Billy Baxter
Steven Paul	James Gunn
Joe Dante	Mark Neveldine
Mick Garris	Brian Taylor
Reed Morano	Jay Duplass
Ernest Dickerson	Mark Duplass
Roger Corman	Brad Krevoy
Trent Haaga	Robby Benson
Stan Lee	Larry Cohen
Terry Jones	Joe Lynch
Danny Draven	Dennis Dreith
Tamar Simon Hoffs	Daniel Archangeault-May
Paul Hertzberg	Herschell Gordon Lewis
Buddy Giovinazzo	Mark Damon
Trey Parker	Jack Gerbus

And I'd like to direct a special thanks to the "Exit 47" sign on Route 95, which has produced some valuable and practical direction throughout the years.

Introduction

Charlie Kaufman Is My Doppelgänger or Why I Want to Blow My Fucking Brains Out

Everything I touch is fucked. No, seriously. I could take a piece of gold and, with enough effort and influence, turn it into a shiny pile of bona fide chicken shit. I have been aware of this sad fact for over 40 years, yet for some reason I continue to touch stuff and fuck it up. This is the curse of Lloyd Kaufman. Let me give you an example of why I want to blow my fucking brains out.

A few short weeks ago, I rearranged my schedule to attend Spain's prestigious Sitges International Film Festival. I love Sitges, and was especially inclined to go because they were presenting me with a lifetime achievement award. My trip to Rio was abandoned and my appearance on Conan O'Brien¹ postponed indefinitely, but dammit,

¹From what I hear, Conan O'Brien was so upset about the cancellation that he stormed off the *Late Night* set and had to be replaced by Jimmy Fallon.

I was determined to get that award. Seventeen hours after leaving New York City, I sat in a darkened room with 2,000 other Sitges attendees and listened closely as an old man, speaking in broken, somewhat unintelligible English, went on and on about the genius of *Tromeo & Juliet* and Troma's latest masterpiece, *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead*. My heart swelled with pride as 2,000 people applauded me and the little company that Michael Herz and I started in a Hell's Kitchen broom closet in 1974. It was truly a beautiful moment. Before the award was presented, the auditorium lights dimmed and a hush fell over the crowd as they prepared to watch a short video of my career highlights.

And then, as 2,000 pairs of eyes gleamed, transfixed by the images flashing before them, the career highlights of another Kaufman—Charlie Kaufman, to be exact—started rolling in sequence on the big screen. As *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* played before my eyes, my pride-swollen heart dropped into my groin. Welcome to the Kaufman Curse. The good news is, for the remainder of the weekend, most of those 2,000 people thought that I was, in fact, Charlie Kaufman, so at least I got a few job offers out of the whole ordeal. But that's not the point.

The point is, as much as I consider myself a director, I am also a producer. And in this case, I hadn't produced. Being the pessimist and control-freak that I am, I had considered sending my own reel of career highlights to the festival coordinators, but, in the end, had decided to be hands-off. The end result was five minutes of *Adaptation* and a trailer for *Synecdoche, New York*. But hey, I'm not complaining. Considering that 2,000 people had gathered to honor me with an award, I'm just lucky an asteroid didn't aim itself for Spain and choose that moment to strike.

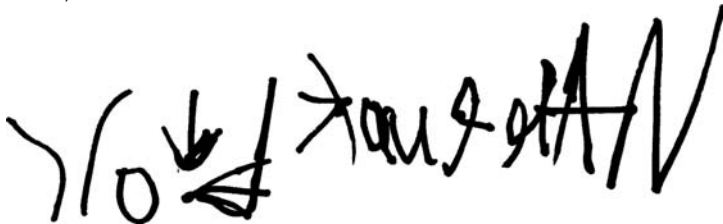
But don't get me wrong. Being a lazy producer isn't always a bad thing. Just look at the George Street Playhouse's recent production of the world premiere of *The Toxic Avenger Musical*. I am listed as "Based on Lloyd Kaufman's *The Toxic Avenger*," because I created the characters and basic story, but I have had very little to do with the actual production. Let's face it—as good as the songs in *Poultrygeist* were, I'm not going to tell David Bryan of Bon Jovi, who wrote all of the show's music, how to write a hit song. Furthermore, the George Street Playhouse is all the way in New Brunswick, New Jersey. And I think I've already told you that I'm lazy.

In fact, that's one of the best things about producing! You can choose to be as involved or uninvolved as you would like. You can be the hands-on, detail-oriented, script-shaping, director-controlling type of producer, or you can write a check and go on vacation. The producing style that Michael Herz and I tend to lean toward is the latter. In other words, we respect the Kaufman Curse and tend to stay out of the way, such as with *The Toxic Avenger Musical*. However, there have been several instances where we have done the exact opposite, with varying degrees of success. When we produced the two sequels to *Class of Nuke 'Em High*, I was incredibly hands-on.

What I'm trying to say is that your role as producer is really up to you. It obviously wouldn't take an entire book to teach you how to be lazy, so I intend to focus more on the role of active producer. But then again, I've already told you that everything I try to do ends up fucked, so by the end of this book, we'll probably end up with 312 pages on the art of check signing.

But stick with me, kid. I've got the greatest signature in showbiz.

XOXO,

A handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is highly stylized and appears to read 'Lloyd Kaufman'. The first part of the signature is a large, looped 'L' followed by 'loyd'. The second part is 'Kaufman', with the 'K' being very large and the 'man' being more compact. The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat messy style.

Lloyd Kaufman, AKA Uncle Lloydie

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Penniless in Pittsburgh

Asks Lloyd

Dear Lloyd,

How do you get people motivated when you aren't paying them?

Penniless in Pittsburgh

Dear Penniless,

- 1.** Fear.
- 2.** Guilt.
- 3.** Threats of suicide.
- 4.** A demonstration of how much you believe in the project.
- 5.** Alcohol.
- 6.** Yelling.
- 7.** Fire the naysayers.
- 8.** Lips.
- 9.** Campfire sing-a-longs.
- 10.** Repeated viewings of *Poultry in Motion: Truth is Stranger than Fiction*, the documentary chronicling the making of *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead*.

xoxo,
Lloyd

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Producing Models and

Car Models

or

Producing America's

Next Top Tromodel

When I married my amazing and adorable wife Pat, she came with a 1969 Ford Mustang convertible. Of course, that's not why I married her, mind you, but I won't deny that it sure did sweeten the deal. When your two great loves in life are musical theatre performed by young hairless boys and a Southern belle with a kickin' car, a decision must be made, and I made it. Ten years after we tied the knot, however, I was inspired by a Sally Struthers commercial late one night, and donated the kickin' car to an orphanage ~~for a giant tax deduction~~ to help the poor orphans. Pat did not agree with my benevolent decision to donate her car to ~~get a giant tax deduction~~ help those poor, less fortunate souls. I stood my ground, and for the last 20 years, I have lived with her endless scorn. So, a few

months ago, I decided to do something about it. I made a few calls¹ and arranged to buy a 1969 Mustang to replace the one that I had so graciously given away 20 years earlier.

The dealership was in Indiana, so the entire deal was conducted over the phone² and essentially in good faith. When I finally arrived in Indiana to pick the car up, I was in awe of the beauty before me. The car was perfect. The red paint glistened under the neon lights. The rims of the tires sparkled. A tear formed in my eye as the jovial midwestern used car salesman handed me the keys and title. My marriage would be back on track in time for me to retire and die peacefully. With nothing between me and the open road ahead, I slid into the sweet-smelling leather seat and began the long drive back to New York.

The next several hours were spent in a haze of self-congratulation. The engine purred like an alley cat in heat. The sun smiled at me, just like Pat would be smiling at me in about 14 hours. Everything was going well, but because I'm Lloyd Kaufman, something of course had to go and get fucked up.

The moment came just as I reached my first traffic light. Suddenly, the engine's purr shifted from that of an amorous kitten to something resembling an 800-pound man with bronchitis, as if he were choking on a wiffle ball. Smoke appeared from beneath the shiny red hood, and the arrow on the engine thermostat, which had been resting comfortably between "Cool" and "Hot," swung definitively toward "Hot." My instincts—as well as my eyes and ears—told me that something was wrong. I pulled over, jumped out of the driver's seat and opened the hood. All around me, cars began honking at the billowing smoke coming from the engine. Once it cleared, I could see exactly what the problem was.

The problem was that I didn't know anything about cars.

I tapped on something with my finger and pounded something else with my fist, a fine strategy that usually worked well when my TV screen turned to snow. I closed the hood and kicked a tire, just for good measure. I got back in the car and, lo and behold, it was working just fine again. In fact, it worked all the way to the next traffic light, where Mister 1969 Mustang and I repeated our Smoke

¹What I really mean by this, of course, is that my assistant made a few calls.

²Again, entirely by my trustworthy assistant.

Gets in Your Eyes tango. In fact, we continued to tango like this for the next 14 hours. Along the way, I also discovered that the passenger side door refused to open and the glove compartment flat out refused to stay shut.

But still, nothing could bring me down! Who cared if I had just purchased a car that broke down in traffic? Everyone knows that there is hardly any traffic in New York City! And so what if the passenger door didn't open? Once I handed the keys over to Pattie-Pie, I probably wouldn't be allowed back in the passenger seat anyway! I had set out to buy a car, and dammit, nothing was going to ruin my high!

You may be thinking to yourself right about now, "Gosh, I've read only a few pages of this book, and already I've learned so much about film producing!"

Of course you have, but fasten your seatbelts, because you are about to learn *even more!* You see, film producing models are a lot like a 1969 Mustang. What worked in 1969 might not work as well now, 40 years later. Producing models are in constant flux. And always remember, as Marie Curie was fond of saying, "You can't fuck with the flux!" To be a great producer, one must keep up with the times.

PRODUCER VOCABULARY LESSON #1

When it comes to defining the term "producer," things can get complicated. There are many titles, responsibilities, and people involved in a film production. Throughout the coming chapters, in the spirit of learning, I will provide detailed, scientific descriptions of different titles commonly used in production. That way, you can pretend you're a big shot by showing off your new vocabulary. You're welcome. Let's begin:

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: This can be anyone from the CEO of a major studio to the Estonian owner of a chain of dry cleaning stores to the schmoozer in the apartment next door who can sucker some poor saps into funding *your* movie. These guys are the Harvey Weinsteins, the James L. Brooks, or, if your karma is down the shithole, the Kaufmans and Herzs.

Synonyms: The Money Guy, The Big Cheese, The Guy You Want for Your Best Friend.

Example: "Today the Executive Producer called and told me that we were \$80 million over budget, and he sounded a little upset."

OUT WITH THE OLD. . .

For more than 40 years, I've been able to produce, direct, write, and make my own damn movies in 35 mm with almost total freedom. I've also been able to produce each one, with a few exceptions, for roughly the equivalent of \$500K, including all production, marketing, and distribution costs. Several of these movies have gone on to receive worldwide acclaim and a loyal fan following, and all of them have gone on to break even—sometimes even making a few bucks.

Under the Hollywood producing model, this is nearly unheard of. Studios spend millions of dollars—sometimes hundreds of millions of dollars—on a single film. And although a handful of these films are remembered 10 years later, most will be forgotten like last week's leftover egg salad, slipping into film limbo along with unbaptized children and Times Square pickpockets.

Troma films compete with the giant studio films by containing commercial elements like a cool gun, a monster, or a naked person while still retaining their edge, whether it be satire, horror, or even both, as with my latest fowl movement, *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead*. Although some people may not “get” the movie, there is at least one thing in it that will appeal to a wider audience, such as large amounts of naked people. This appeal allows the film to be at least somewhat entertaining to everyone, and with a little luck, it will make some money over time. This is the model that has always worked for me, but with *Poultrygeist*,³ that model may be like a 1969 Mustang.

. . .AND IN WITH THE WHO?

The films that we see in theatres today are all owned and controlled by five or six megaconglomerates.⁴ These companies own and control not only the movies, but also in many cases the theatres that play them and the television stations, newspapers, and magazines that review and advertise them. With that type of industry consolidation,

³The original title for *Poultrygeist* was *Good Night and Good Cluck*, but George Clooney got there first!

⁴I am referring, in no particular order, to evil corporations such as Sony, Viacom, Time Warner, News Corporation, and Disney. Their mere existence is why we are force-fed so much shit in the entertainment world today! Actually, they have so many marketing dollars that they make us think we need their crap.

even independent theatres are scared to take on a film not supported by a kabillion dollar ad campaign. Even though *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead* is usually the highest-grossing film in each city in which it is allowed to play, we are still turned away by theatres unwilling to take a risk. We have reached a point where unless a film is released through a major distributor or studio, it is economically blacklisted and therefore unable to sell tickets, much less make a profit. Even direct-to-DVD is no longer much of an option, as the mom-and-pop video stores that flourished in the 1980s have been hijacked by corporate chains, which are, oddly enough, owned or controlled by those same five or six megaconglomerates.

So the reality is that *Poultrygeist*—although it was the highest-grossing “screen” in the United States on its opening weekend and received the best reviews in Troma’s 35-year history—will most likely not make one cent.

And that is the end of this book.

THE END

Well, not quite. . .

This change in the industry could be the end, but it doesn’t have to be. After all, not all of that 1969 Mustang is bad. The car is beautiful to look at. The tires don’t leak air and the windshield isn’t cracked. It’s great for picking up young boys at the 7-Eleven, and on a short drive around the block, it drives like an absolute dream. The trick is to take the parts of producing model that work in the current industry and make them work for you. Then maybe someone will someday pay thousands of dollars for the privilege of driving you home from Indiana to present you to his wife and finally get out of a 20-year exile in the doghouse!

FIVE PRODUCING MODELS

1. The No-Budget Model

For the first time in history, filmmaking has been democratized. Sure, I just spent a whole paragraph telling you why your movie might never see the light of day, but that’s a question of distribution. When it comes to actually picking up a camera and making a movie, things have never been so easy! When cars were invented, you had to be a millionaire to own one. In fact, back then, a car

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