



## Fifteen Minutes

### An Driving Experience Essay

I ponder the map. The route my friend is describing – the Horse Shoe pass from Llangollen along the A543 and the A5104 – will take no more than fifteen minutes or so to drive. It'd better be a good fifteen minutes, I think to myself, if it means driving all the way to Wales from London. My friend sees doubt falling over my face, and so adds quickly,

“Well, if you're feeling adventurous, you could keep going to Betws-y-Coed and explore the Snowdonia National Park”.

A few weeks earlier I had asked my friend, along with several others, to recommend his favourite road in the U.K.

Now I am here and have a day to spare. It is a brilliant autumn day, and I have nearly twenty driving suggestions at my disposal. Many of these are, as I expected, in the north of Scotland, a few in the south near Winchester, others dotted around the country, and two of them in North Wales. So, where to go driving today?

Scotland is out of the question – too far by half. Winchester? Not enough of an adventure, somehow. That sort of leaves North Wales, but it does beg the question: should I drive all the way to Wales from London for – what? – a road that might, if my friend has good taste, give me fifteen minutes of pleasure? Five to six hours of highway driving, on a Friday for god's sake, for a quarter of an hour on a sinewy road? Now, fifteen minutes of pleasure is quite something when it comes to some activities – or so Dr. Tatiana of Sex Advice to all Creation fame, tells me – but when it comes to driving, I have high expectations. I grew up careening through the Austrian Alps, where the roads are gorgeous and men do go the distance, and in my Alpine Republic no one would get out of bed for fifteen minutes of driving, no matter how sinewy, how sensual, how sexy the road might possibly be.

Alas, I left Austria a long time ago and now I am desperate. The bright sunshine of this lovely autumn day makes the decision for me and I set out northwest on the M40 toward Birmingham. I'm not even an hour on the road when clouds begin to line the distant horizon. Still, the sun is overhead and almost the entire sky a solid blue.

With my advance toward the northwest, however, the cloud cover becomes wider and deeper until only a sliver of luminescent sky, laced with brightly lit cumuli, is visible in my rear view mirror. Looking back, the highway centre light posts with their infinite, tapered bodies and their two heads atop craned necks contrast sharply against the white sky whereas ahead of me they barely feature in the landscape, grey upon grey. I secretly begin to wish that I was going the other way, but then I think about the promise of that fifteen minutes of driving perfection.

Well before reaching Birmingham the curtain of drab clouds closes in and sombreness falls on the land and my mood. There is something very dispiriting about rain setting in slowly because, more often than not, the slower it comes, the longer it lasts. A summer thunderstorm, when the rain



explodes in the sky, is most refreshing. Rain that is an hour in coming, drop for lonely drop, is rather depressing. At first, the drops are so rare, not even the longest interval setting of the wipers makes any sense. I turn on the wipers once and turn them off. I know that rain is coming, but not yet. I keep on driving, filled with heavy thoughts about the folly of my undertaking – three hundred miles for fifteen! – and a scintilla of hope that, against all the odds, the fifteen minutes drive will after all be blessed in sunshine.

But by the time I leave Birmingham behind, the wipers are going at full speed. My spirits are as dull as the sky overhead. I take the M6 north, the M54 toward Telford, then I'm on the A5 toward Shrewsbury. The rain now is not falling, but sweeping across me in near-horizontal sheets chased by low-hanging clouds.

I enter Wales and, bereft of dreams, I contemplate the down-to-earth challenge of pronouncing Welsh words without vowels. (Later in the day I see a place name that takes the cake: "Pllgwyngyll". Thank heavens that's not where I am going because I wouldn't, in my life, be able to ask for directions to it.)

Twenty five miles to Llangollen. The road is covered with, and made slippery by, brown, mushy leaves. At the rate that I am going, the many speed camera signs that I see – Camerau Cyflymder Heddlu – seem pointless. Who could possibly speed? And indeed, there don't seem to be any speed cameras, only these signs, like powerless scarecrows, an empty threat as far as I could tell.

I am now only a few minutes away from Llangollen where the A542 turns off to lead north over the Horse Shoe Pass. The fifteen minutes are about to begin, but it seems less likely than ever that it will be a magical experience.

But miracles do happen. And so, let the fifteen minutes begin. The instant I cross the bridge over the river Dee in Llangollen, the wind picks up and carries away the driving rain, leaving behind only a faint drizzle which, a few breaths later, vanishes altogether. All that remains, for the moment, is the wind and the low scudding clouds. In less than two minutes, I've left Llangollen behind, cranked up Anastacia Not that Kind and started up the Horse Shoe Pass. It begins with a few long-stretching bends and then twists through two serpentine along the left slope of a wide valley from which protrude thin slices of sharp-angled, black-grey slate.

Four minutes. I have reached the top of the pass, all 1,367 feet of it, no more than the height of an Alpine valley. On my right, I am invited to buy Horse Shoe Gifts at the improbably named Ponderosa Café. My heart beat has just revved up. You mean, this is it? Yes, as far as the Horse Shoe is concerned, but no need to take a cold shower just yet.

As I begin the descent into the Northern Wales highlands that stretch away from me for as far as my eyes can see, the cloud cover cracks open to my left and the darting rays of the setting sun burst through, at 3:30 in the afternoon. It is one of those eerie moments when the world appears brighter than it is ever meant to be. The lid of clouds is still near-black and covers the earth from due East all the way across to the peep hole through which the sun unleashes its bursts of light. The contrast is startling. It should be dark, dark almost as at night, but it isn't. The landscape lights up as



if shone upon by a thousand suns. The grass is so green it jumps off the fields and the shadow of anything that stands in the way of the sun is as sharp as the blade of a razor. Everything is so near I can touch it with my eyes and my hands. The horizontal rays of the sun are streaming across the Welsh hills to set them alight.

Eight minutes. I turn left to enter the A5104 and am now driving West, directly into the sun. I am electrified by the landscape and my rushing through it. The black shadows of white sheep. A rainbow with colours as sharp and iridescent as ever I have seen, no more than two to three hundred yards from base to base, stands mightily before me, almost inviting me to drive through it to enter a different world. Occasionally, puddles and cattle grids make my car float for a split second and send a shiver through my spine. Leafless trees, ghosts of summer, fly toward and then through me. A flock of migrating birds flickers low across the road, as if trying to avoid colliding with the ominous cloud ceiling. The road itself is narrow and beautifully winding, not too tight, but certainly also not too straight. The surface is sealed with rough, gripping tarmac for the most part and lined by hedges, some of them high-growing bushes, neatly trimmed, others walls of rocks diligently and carefully stacked one on top of the other. Very British.

Twelve minutes. As I drive into the sun, hip-hopping from turn to turn, I am squinting my eyes. The world glistens because everything is still drenched. The meadows are soaked. The road is streaming and steaming. The birds' feathers are damp. The trees are dripping. The sky, too, is wet. Everything I see sparkles and my eyes are filled with flashes of light, most of them white, some of them red or yellow or orange, cascades of turning leaves gleaming in the light.

I ride my car, spur it on and will it to move. Yet it has its own life and its own rhythms that it presses on me. One moment, I am entirely relaxed and made pliable from doing what I love, not minding in the least being thrown around by an animated object with whom I am wholly entwined and together as one. A moment later, I am nervously excited as every turn, and every shift, makes the car teeter on a slippery edge, giving me all the symptoms of fear while, at once, making me quiver with all the sensations of pleasure.

Fourteen minutes. No, no, this mustn't be. I don't want to see what I am seeing, but there it is. Only a few hundred yards away, the A5104 rejoins the A5. As I come to a halt and look right and then left onto the empty A5, the sun disappears behind a cloud, the spectacle fades with the fall of the curtain. I turn off Anastacia. There is near-darkness, stillness and silence, except for my heart pounding. Fifteen minutes.

