



Love on the Open Road

An Experience Essay

“Are you sure you want to keep on driving? Don’t you want to get some rest?” It was on day five of an unforgettable driving holiday through the magnificent Tibetan landscape of South-Western China when our driving companions asked me this question. It was a reasonable question: wouldn’t I want to get some rest after fifty hours of driving in five days? When I replied, “Of course I want to keep on driving!”, our friends looked puzzled, but my wife smiled knowingly and lovingly. Today she knows, but it wasn’t always like this. When she tilted back her head and closed her eyes on a full-moon night to allow me to kiss her for the first time, she had no idea that she was in for one hell of a ride.

What my wife didn’t know in the early days was that throughout my life, the question “Are you sure you want to continue driving?” has never really been a question. This is because driving is like breathing to me. It fills me with life. Being in motion on four wheels energizes me forever. Put me behind a wheel – any wheel! – and I will instantly feel free and in the mood for adventure.

When I was four years old I rode my tricycle on two wheels around turns. When I was ten I wanted nothing more than to become a truck driver. When I was eighteen, I began racing cars and kept on racing for four more years. Eventually I got myself a real job, in I.T. and telecoms, but I never lost my passion for driving.

On days when I go driving for pleasure, I am up and dressed in no time, have put on my soft running shoes, all the better to work the pedals, and I rush out to my car. This much has not changed, and I don’t think ever will.

My passion for driving has also had an interesting side-effect: I knew exactly what kind of woman I would one day want to marry, namely one who, at 175mph, could scream “Faster!”. My now-wife could not have been more different. If her vision of an ideal husband excluded one thing, it was a petrol head with grease under his finger nails. And men who had a passion for driving came dangerously close to this no-go zone. Let us just say that the stars were not aligned when we first met.

We’re both right, most of the time...

Our relationship did eventually take off in Milan. We met there on a lovely September day where the chemistry, at last, was right. Standing quietly and reverently in front of the picturesque cathedral, holding hands, with white doves circling around us (thinking back, the white doves must have been drab sparrows, but who cares when you’re in love), it was a most touching beginning to a beautiful courtship. And in the afternoon we planned to drive from Milan to Salzburg and stay there a few days. Could it get any more romantic?

“Darling, can you please park straight,” she suggested.

“Park straight? What do you mean? I am parked straight!” I replied.



“No, I don’t think so. Just have a look.” She tried to convince me.

“I am looking, dear one, I am. And I am parked straight,” I insisted.

It was our first argument, and it continued for a while until we discovered that we were both right. She had based her claim about my crooked parking on the orientation of the car parked next to us. I, on the other hand, was referring to my car’s alignment with the markings on the ground. Same situation, different points of view. We were both right! More often than not, when we have disagreements, it’s just that we’re coming from different perspectives. This profound revelation made me wonder: could it just be that driving together for hours on end, day after day, is a sure-fire relationship compatibility test?

How many times had I thought that at last “this is it”, only to see the relationship unravel again, sooner or later. Early on I thought that so long as the fundamentals are right – such as whether we both believed in god or whether children are cheaper by the dozen – it would be alright. But I discovered that it was the small things that brought down my various relationships. For example, I wanted to cuddle in the morning when she was dead to the world. Or, more ominously, she thought nothing of running around barefoot in the depth of winter while I kept my socks on at the height of summer. Two people with feet that are never at the same temperature, that can spell disaster.

To the problems arising from the tiniest of differences had to be added the amount of seemingly futile but somehow highly effective deception that is employed during the early stages of dating. My parting dropping more and more to one side in a vain attempt to make-believe that I had more hair than I really did. Or her wearing Styrofoam-lined bra cups that screamed out loud, “Tiny boobs ahead!”

As it turned out, there was indeed no better test than my wife-to-be and I driving thousands of miles together before tying the knot. I was soon able to determine whether she was the back-seat-driver-controlling type that I was hoping to avoid. (She is not.) And she, in turn, assessed whether I was the sensitive-and-considerate type she was yearning to marry. (I wasn’t at first, but got better, I think.) Being flexible, setting expectations, giving choices – these are just some of the many things that we learned about while driving together.

A new low point in our relationship...

The day of our engagement was both the best and the worst. The evening before we had arrived in Austria from Hong Kong, where we both live. Being jet-lagged, she was wide awake by 6am which made it easy to drag her out of bed to go for an early morning drive. What she didn’t know was that I had a plan, namely to take her to Birnau, a beautifully restored baroque church overlooking the northern, German shores of Lake Constance. Leaving mass, in the lovely May sun and among the vines of the convent’s vineyard, I proposed.

After lunch, we took off on our engagement driving holiday. Our destination was Lake Annecy, in France, just south of Geneva. We drove along the foothills of the Alps, marvelling at the beauty of Switzerland’s picturesque landscape, dotted as it is with chalet-like houses whose balconies and



window sills overflowed with blooming potted plants, just as they do every spring and every summer. The highway drive was bliss for my new fiancée. I enjoyed it as well, but was secretly thirsting for the last seventy five miles of enticingly winding roads in the approach to Annecy. I drooled in anticipation of every turn. My wife-to-be became increasingly silent until about seven miles before Annecy when she suddenly cried in alarm, “Aiya! Pull over!” Which I duly did. As soon as I came to a stop, she threw open the door and threw up. We had obviously reached a new low-point in our relationship.

We also clearly had a lot more to learn about each other. I, for one, needed to become a lot more considerate: for example, I now tell her about any speedy manoeuvres well in advance both to give her a choice – either to say, “Not now, please” – or to prepare for the roller coaster. And she, on her part, needed to find ways to prevent her motion sickness: she now either pops pills or – a cheaper option – focuses on the road and leans into turns the way I do. One by one we ironed out the kinks and in doing so learnt more and more about each other.

Keeping life in harmony...

Ever since, driving has been such an integral part of our lives that it often helps us turn an adverse situation into something beautiful.

Just the other day was a great example. We had been spending two beautiful weeks driving through Spain: gorgeous roads, blue skies, dark-green olive trees, white houses, red roofs. On our second-to-last day, we were negotiating our way to our centre-of-town hotel in Barcelona. Beautiful memories of Barcelona from a one-day visit five years earlier meant that we were filled with anticipation about returning to this colourful city. But, as we pulled up to our boutique hotel and breathed a sigh of relief about having made it, my wife’s handbag was snatched from the car while we were still in it. The good news was that this was all the thieves got away with. The bad news was that her handbag contained everything that made up her identity: credit cards, passport, driving license, mobile phone, airplane tickets. And her USB stick. To put it mildly, my wife was distraught. How could life continue without USB stick? We spent the next twenty four hours either at the police station or on the phone to embassies, banks and phone companies. By 6pm the following day, it had become clear that the quickest and most reliable way for my wife to get an emergency passport (and to replace her favourite USB stick) was to drive to Paris, just over 1,000km north of Barcelona. If we arrived at the Australian embassy in Paris before noon the following day, we were told she should be able to get an emergency passport just in time for her to catch her flight back home to Hong Kong.

We decided right there and then to go for it, despite torrential rains and the falling of night. Within the hour, we had packed, checked-out, loaded our car and set out on the road again. After passing over the Pyrenees the rain stopped and the roads dried and cleared up. With this, we gained speed. By 11pm, a few sparkling stars had become visible behind a fine cloth of clouds and my wife was leaning with me into the tight and tighter highway turns to avoid falling sick because the pills that protected her against mal de voyage had been in the stolen handbag. Finding our hotel in Clermont-Ferrond was easy – the near-full moon had appeared to shine a guiding light on the roads of the sleeping city.



By 6am we were up and on our way to Paris, finally arriving at the embassy by 11am. After a brief interview, my wife was told that she could pick up her passport by 3pm that same day. We could now begin to relax and take advantage of a sunny autumn day in Paris and an hour later we were lunching with our friend Wuimin in a sushu bar at La Defense. Before returning to the embassy, we detoured into a music store to buy Buddha Bar VI & VII which we had been looking for, not only to complete our collection, but also as driving music for our onward journey to Zürich that same day.

Proudly clutching her regained identity, my loved-one beamed, she was ready to depart from Paris. It was 5pm. We drove eastward as the sun fell behind us and lit up the sky. Before long, day became night. In Strasbourg, we bought our dinner – grapes, a pie of camembert packaged into neat, bite-sized triangles, and a bottle of l'eau minérale avec gaz – and headed deeper into the night. After savouring our on-board French dinner, we crossed the border into Germany and cranked up the volume to wrap ourselves in nothing but music and motion. With the noise of the engine and the tires fading away, we picked up speed and left behind the memories of being robbed in Barcelona. All that remained were the throbbing rhythms of Buddha Bar VII, Sarangi, the bright white street markings on the pitch-black tarmac rushing toward us and our love thriving in the night.