

Rules of the Road

by Su Friedrich

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Please note: The text is regularly interrupted by songs, the lyrics of which play a part in the overall text, but these aren't written out in the following script. I've just listed the titles of the songs where they appear in the film. If you do a translation with text (rather than as a voiceover), these titles should not be shown. Thanks.

-- "I Found Lovin'" by The Fatback Band --

She earned her living working in the trades, and every time a new job came up she had to transport her equipment and supplies to the location. It was hard to manage without a car, but even more difficult to afford one. Her older brother had often helped her out when she was in a tight corner, and this time was no exception. As soon as she explained the problem to him, he offered to get her a car the next time she came for a visit.

For many years, she'd gone down to celebrate Thanksgiving with her brother and his girlfriend. It was a trip she always took alone, partly because she thought he'd be uncomfortable if she brought along her own girlfriend. When November came around I tried as usual to be invited, but once again she headed south by herself while I made plans to be with my friends in town. She called one night and told me they'd spent most of their time checking out used car dealers and private owners and had finally found a model that she liked and he could afford.

When she drove up to our building a few days later, it was hard for me not to laugh. There she sat beaming with pleasure behind the wheel of a big old beige station wagon with a luggage rack on top and fake wood paneling along the sides. It was a 1983 Oldsmobile Cutlass Cruiser: a sensible, family car.

-- "Don't Look Any Further" by Dennis Edwards --

She was proud of her new possession, but worried about how she was going to pay for the insurance and maintenance. Since I wanted to help her out and was anxious to use the car myself, we decided to share all the basic expenses. But we still didn't share ownership, so if both of us needed to use it at the same time, the car was hers.

Although I sometimes complained about this arrangement it was a pretty good one, given the fact that she drove so little when she was at home and often went out of town to work. I was never happy to see her go away but I liked being able to use the car at will. Moreover, we'd recently moved into Brooklyn, and I'd already spent fifteen years getting around Manhattan on the subway or a bicycle, so it didn't take me long to get hooked on the luxury of a car.

-- "I Want You" by Bob Dylan --

It wasn't the car I'd been dreaming about, but it compensated for its old age and lack of style by having automatic transmission, power steering, a good radio, and a V8 engine. I never understood what a V8 engine was, but it gave the car great pickup, as she proudly demonstrated to me during our first drive. I only realized later how much she disapproved of speeding, and I would try to restrain myself whenever she was in the car. But when I was alone I liked to peel out as soon as the light turned green, especially if the driver in the next lane was a restless young man gunning his engine. I knew he wouldn't expect competition from a sleepy-looking car like hers.

In fact no one would expect much if they only judged that car by its appearance. From a distance, the trim looked almost real, but up close you could see that it was made of scratched and faded contact paper. The conservative beige and wood exterior was complemented by an interior the color of bittersweet chocolate. The seats were upholstered in a slightly fuzzy, synthetic fabric in a matching shade of brown. But those ugly seats were surprisingly soft and comfortable, and they didn't stick to your legs on hot summer days.

-- "Superfreak" by Rick James --

I wasn't used to having a car around all the time because our family only had one for a few years while I was growing up. It was also a station wagon, a bright turquoise Chevrolet with grey vinyl seats. On long summer drives, my sister and I would climb into the back and lie down with our bare feet sticking out the window. Then we'd look up at the sky and play word games while the wind whipped around our sunburnt toes.

We'd also try not to listen to our parents when they started to argue about whether or not we were lost. My father considered it a point of honor never to ask directions, so we would often drive in circles for hours while he tried to second-guess the route and my mother tried to convince him to stop at the nearest gas station.

-- "Solid" by Ashford and Simpson --

Even though my parents approved of our occasional weekend drives, they both considered it self indulgent to use a car on a daily basis. Instead, they took great pride in walking and biking and using public transportation, and while I admired the hedonism of my friends' one- or even two-car families, I also inherited some my parents' Puritanism. When I got old enough to think about getting a car of my own, I lusted after Jaguars and BMWs, then told myself I'd be better off with something cheap and practical, and finally decided that I didn't really need a car after all.

But when I did imagine something cheap and practical, it was never a station wagon. I'd had some good experiences in our turquoise Chevy, but not enough to make me covet other ones. Now I discovered how wrong I'd been.

Meanwhile, I let the car make me so lazy that I even started driving to the laundromat two blocks from my house. I knew I should feel ashamed about causing more pollution, but I was too

giddy with relief at leaving behind my parents' Spartan ways.

-- "Freeway of Love" by Aretha Franklin --

I appreciated the car for serving my practical needs, but that affection turned into love the first time we used it to get away from the city. Both of us liked doing things on the spur of the moment, and now we could just get up and go whenever the urge struck. We visited friends for a weekend in the country, took day trips to the beach, or just drove into Manhattan when the prospect of riding the subway would have kept us at home.

I always liked the scramble to get ready before leaving town. One of us would run off to the store for mayonnaise and a can of tuna while the other rummaged through the closet for sleeping bags or the missing badminton racket. When everything was together, we'd have a cup of coffee, figure out which route to take, throw our bags in the back and then head out to anywhere but here, if only for a short while.

When I was doing the driving, I felt as though I was carrying her in my arms--away from the relentless, claustrophobic city towards an unpredictable and generous expanse of forest or ocean. I wanted to give her that and I wanted to be with her when she got there.

When she was driving, I liked to flip through the road atlas searching for all the towns with peculiar names, or play deejay with the worn out tape deck, or just curl up with my feet on the dash and my hand resting lightly on the back of her neck.

The fact is we didn't go away that often, but the car always held out the promise of future trips and the memory of past ones.

-- (traffic noise) --

But recalling our past trips also means remembering the long and bitter arguments we often had as the trees and buildings flew past. Some of those fights were just the result of a weekend filled with too much visiting and talking, but some were the stuff of deep division, a continuation of the fights that raged at home.

However, it was different to fight in the car because of the danger posed by a desperate and angry driver. If I was behind the wheel, I simply drove faster and faster, barely conscious of the road or the route, and hoped I could stay in control long enough to get us home safely. Sometimes when we were racing to get away from each other we'd hit a traffic jam and then be stuck together, sullen and fuming, for an extra hour. Sometimes it got so scary that we'd have to pull into a rest stop to try and reach a truce before moving on. We'd sit there in the parking lot with the windows rolled up for privacy and the sun baking down. As I watched other people get out of their cars and walk slowly towards the bathroom I wondered if they fought like we did and I wondered how they survived it.

As time went on, the car seemed to collect and hold on to the spirit of those fights in much the same way that the brown cloth seats eventually became suffused with the ugly smell of smoke

from all the cigarettes we consumed.

-- "Don't Play That Song" by Aretha Franklin --

When we finally broke up, or rather when we broke up for the final time, she offered to continue sharing the car with me. I had a partial claim to it because of the money I'd invested, but maybe there was also some hope that by sharing the car we'd continue to share some part of our lives together. After all, we'd have to call each other up to make arrangements, and that could lead to further conversation. I don't know if she wanted that, but I guess I did. Beyond what we might talk about, I loved her voice, and I couldn't bear to think I would never hear it again.

For several months, we did our best. She would often go out of town on a job, and I would keep the car during her absence. Right before she came back, I'd park it near her house and leave a message about where it was. As soon as she had plans to go away again, she'd call to make new arrangements. During all of this, we both made an effort to be considerate and discreet.

But whenever I got the car from her, I couldn't stop wondering where it might have been. She had a tendency to leave the radio on, and when I started the engine I was often greeted by a burst of music. I would listen for a while to the station she'd chosen and imagine her alone in the afternoon running a few errands, or late at night with a woman beside her as she drove home over the bridge, steering with one hand while she lit a cigarette with the other.

In fact there was never a trace left of her besides an empty coffee cup, a stub from a parking lot, or the random radio station. In turn I never left anything of myself behind except for a few last, unspoken words on an old subject. Three months before we broke up, after 19 years of smoking at least one pack a day, I went cold turkey. She had also tried to stop once a few years earlier, but then decided she didn't want to quit. Despite our separation I still worried a lot about her health, so whenever I got the car from her I would empty the ashtray and then drive--even in the coldest weather--with the windows wide open. By the time she got it back the car smelled sweet and clean again. I hoped this might have a magical effect on her, but as far as I know my scheme was a complete failure.

I still needed the car and still yearned for some contact with her, but finally I had to admit that it was too painful. I left town on a three week business trip and used that break as the excuse not to call her when I got back. I don't know how she interpreted my silence, but she also withdrew. Many months have now passed since the last time I returned the car to her, since the last time I heard her voice

-- "Breakaway" by Irma Thomas --

When I first laid eyes on the car I was disappointed by its homeliness but consoled by the thought that it was unique. At least no one I knew--besides her--had ever owned, or wanted to own, such a car. Consequently, I was surprised to find that there are many thousands of them on the streets of New York. Almost overnight I went from barely noticing their existence to realizing that I lived in a world swarming with station wagons. By becoming an owner of one

she seemed to have been initiated into a special clan, and by sharing the car with her I felt I had become an honorary member of that same family.

The streets are still full of them, and one of them is hers. I never know when it will happen that she'll drive past me. Maybe she'll be heading to the beach with her new girlfriend, maybe she'll be slogging home from a hard day's work, maybe she'll just be going to the store for the paper and some milk. And then again maybe we'll be stuck beside each other for half an hour, she in her car and I in the one I sometimes borrow from my cousin, as we crawl slowly over the bridge in the morning traffic jam. If that happens, I'll pretend I haven't seen her. If that happens, I'll start crying uncontrollably. If that happens, I'll keep glancing over to see as much of her as I can. If that happens, I'll wave, and smile politely, and then curse her out from behind closed windows.

-- "Why D'ya Do It?" by Marianne Faithfull --

So I try not to look for them, those 1983 Oldsmobile wagons, but they're everywhere. When I see one driving towards me, or just parked down the block, I'm like an animal frozen in its tracks by a sudden noise or a bright light, and I stay that way until I've figured out whether it's a false alarm or the real thing.

Sometimes, as one approaches, the sun is in my eyes and I can't tell what color or model it is. My heart constricts, my skin starts to crawl and then as the car passes by I discover that it's pale blue or mustard yellow or a dull green.

But there are still a lot of beige ones ready to surprise me at every turn. If it's close enough I look immediately at the license plate, since that's not as scary as looking at the driver.

-- "Another Night" by Aretha Franklin --

I used to think that owning a car was too expensive, too risky, too aggravating, and unecological. Now I'm seriously considering buying one for myself. I've grown resentful of the long trips home on the subway and prefer speeding over the bridge late at night, when the lights of the city are all that define the shape of the dark river below.

If I do get one I'll probably treat it more carefully than I would have before sharing hers. I still don't know much about car maintenance, but at least she knew enough to insist that I check the oil and water every time I stopped for gas. I promised her I would do it and I tried my best to remember, but it took a long time before I got into the habit.

However, despite my negligence and its relative old age, the car ran like a dream and seemed destined for a long and happy life. I liked to imagine myself driving it many years from now, when it had become one of the old and familiar things in my life, a part of my small and precious universe of close friends, favorite objects, and her.

-- "If You Don't Know Me By Now" by Patti Labelle --

I won't be driving that car anymore, but surely there are others to be had. Lately I've been trying to acquaint myself with the territory, and I'm finding it difficult to figure out what makes one car loveable and another one a heartache.

I began by looking through the classified ads in the local paper. The selection was overwhelming, but one item immediately caught my eye. It was a yellow station wagon, a 1980 Plymouth Fury. When I called the owner, she said it was in mint condition and offered me a better price than the one listed. I made a plan to go and see it, but the next day I called back and cancelled the appointment.

Now I circle the ads for little red sedans or dark blue jeeps or big green convertibles instead. Sometimes I contemplate getting a motorcycle, and I've even developed a fondness for a bright pink vespa that's parked on my block.

I hope I'll stop myself from getting a vespa--they look like fun but they're so silly. What I need is something big enough so I can take a few friends on trips to the beach or the country, but small enough so I don't feel like the rest of the family is missing when I'm in it alone.

-- "If I Was Your Girlfriend" by Prince --

-- "Hard Rock Bottom Of Your Heart" by Randy Travis --

(End)