The Drive

Meg Schneider*

*Iowa State University

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Jay climbed into the car, feeling the not trifling amount of trepidation born of experience. Instinctively he reached for the seatbelt, though he knew he wouldn't find it. It would be buried beneath heaps of assorted trash, or, more likely, wasting away in the last throes of decomposition. With a heavy inward sigh, he resigned himself to his fate and muttered his customary riding-as-a-passenger-with-Carl-at-the-wheel prayer under his breath. His feet scrunched and squeaked among the myriad papers, boxes, bags and best-unidentified organic materials, sinking inexorably to what he assumed was the floorboard, though it may just have been an uncommonly strong Quik Trip cup.

Carl hopped in behind the wheel with surprising agility for a man of his height and girth, and the seat gave a tiny groan as he settled his full weight upon it. He turned the key and the engine clicked twice. Carl shouted an imprecation at all things mechanical in general and at the car in particular, and savagely twisted the key again. The engine persisted obstinately in its clicking. Carl leapt from the vehicle, slammed the door which failed to catch and swung back to rap him soundly in the backside, and gave the left front tire a kick which would have sent a lesser car fleeing for cover. But the Granada took this abuse like a true Ford and stayed put.

Jay wondered what possible effect kicking the left front tire could have on the engine, but he judged correctly that this was not the time to ask. Instead, he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, feebly fighting off the dull throb which began at the back of his skull and was slowly creeping its way forward. It was the hallmark of many road trips with Carl; he had learned to accept it as inevitable.

Carl squirmed back into the driver's seat and turned the key again, casting a warning look somewhere in the vicinity of the hood. Jay had no doubt that look penetrated to the very bowels of the poor car's engine. The machine coughed uncertainly a couple of times, but as the warning look on Carl's face deepened into pure threat, it reconsidered its hasty inaction and roared to life, sounding much like the Enola Gay must have sounded as it took off from Wake Island, only with a heavier load.

Carl waved to the half-dozen people standing in the yard and, with a quick twist of the wheel, cheerfully sprayed three pounds of gravel at them. Jay grabbed for the armrest to avoid landing in Carl's lap as the Granada careered around the corner, but he ended up there anyway owing to the fact that there was no armrest to grab onto. Carl shoved him unceremoniously to his proper position and he clutched the sides of the seat, panting heavily. The car wobbled while Carl tried to sort out which side of the road he wanted to drive on, then finally settled into a fairly stable position directly over the double yellow line.
Jay opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and closed it again. Then he thought better of thinking better of it. He opened his mouth again, intending to say that the car really should be on one side or the other, it didn’t really matter which except that most drivers got quite impatient when it appeared you didn’t know which side you wanted to be on and just generally it did everybody no end of good to just be sure where you stood, or, in this case, drove.

All he actually managed to say was, “Hey . . .”

Carl nodded and wrenched the wheel to the right, causing Jay to slam into the armrest-less door.

“Better?”

Jay nodded, then changed his mind as he noticed they were now driving at a 45-degree angle, which is a very odd angle for any car, even a Granada, to be driving at. Jay’s half of the car tore through the tangled brush of the ditch, while Carl’s half churned like a mad dog on the asphalt, valiantly trying to retain its traction.

Carl pulled the steering wheel hard in the opposite direction, and just when it looked like things were going to straighten themselves out after all, the car jumped violently across the median which had suddenly appeared to indicate a short division in the highway, settled itself in entirely the wrong direction and bolted like, well, like a Granada driven by Carl down the gray strip. Carl laid a heavy hand on the horn and waved to the angry drivers who flashed past them. Jay could not read lips, but he blushed nonetheless.

Carl dodged oncoming traffic as though he’d had plenty of practice, which, as a matter of fact, he had, and tried to sort out the best way to get out of this without getting into trouble. Since the median was drawing to a sharp point just a few hundred yards away, he decided for better or for worse to keep on the way he was going, as that would be easier than trying to jump the median a second time. Then he could get back on the right side of the road, Jay would stop gibbering unintelligibly at him and he wouldn’t have to look happy for all these damn fool drivers who had the audacity to be eastbound on the eastbound lane of the highway.

Having decided upon that strategy, Carl set his mind to it and noticed in the process that if he increased his speed just the tiniest bit, he could probably beat the semi that was drawing even with him on the right side of the road, and still have time to avoid the lumbering recreational vehicle which was headed his way. He pushed the gas pedal to the floor and frowned in intense concentration. He wished the wind would blow his hair back dramatically, but the wind was busy getting out of his way and had no time for such foolishness.
Jay was lost in indecision. First he tried to throw his hands in front of his face while clutching the seat. That didn’t seem to work, so he tried crawling under the dash. That, too, was fairly difficult without actually letting go of the seat, so finally he settled back as comfortably as he could, squeezed his eyes shut and tried to think pleasant thoughts about heaven and how nice it would be to actually meet his great-great-great-grandparents.

Nothing happened for a while, except that the recreational vehicle came to a dead stop on the shoulder. Jay, however, having stubbornly kept his eyes closed, missed all that excitement. After a few moments, he became curious as to why the scream of tearing metal had not reached his ears, and he cautiously opened one eye to peek.

The scene was terrifying in its normalcy. He opened his other eye for a different perspective, but the normalcy continued. He opened both eyes at once and blinked. He twisted around in his seat to peer out the back window. A semi just barely avoided shaving the chrome off the rear bumper, and its driver looked as though he wanted to crawl up Carl’s tailpipe, and not gently, but that was all. Jay faced forward again and blinked several times. The road in front was straight and, more to the point, clear of oncoming objects. He drew a long sigh of relief.

"Man has always had to fight for his very existence," Carl was saying, drumming his fingers in a slightly irritating manner on the dash.

"Ah, a real-life analogy," Jay murmured, feeling he was closer to understanding Carl’s unorthodox driving patterns.

"I’ll bet if early man ever did converse, they would stop in their daily routine of eating roots and dodging larger carnivores . . ."

"Or semis," Jay muttered.

". . . just long enough to say ‘Life’s a bitch,’ " Carl continued. He let go of the steering wheel and shrugged. Jay saw the speedometer needle hit the little red line that indicated their speed was some 40 miles per hour over the legal speed limit, but he could see no productive use for that knowledge and decided on his usual course of action in such circumstances, which was to file it away carefully and ignore it.

"And then, of course, there’s death," Carl said, really warming to his subject now. "I mean, if life’s a bitch, what’s death? A mongrel? What is death? Is it just nothing?"

Jay nearly said death was driving westward in the eastbound lane of a two-lane highway. Instead, he observed, "You hit a bird."

"See what I mean?"

Jay didn’t see, but he nodded anyway, shrugged and stared at the double yellow line. Carl droned on. Jay noticed their speed had increased to double the legal speed limit, but it didn’t really surprise him. Carl’s philosophy was that if you’re going to break the law, you might as well do it so fast that you don’t get caught.
"... that's all religion is anyway, the perfect ohmyGOD!" Carl let his foot slip off the accelerator and the Granada's speed dropped drastically, tossing Jay toward the windshield, where Carl was gesturing wildly. "LOOK! LOOK AT THAT!"

Jay did his best to look where Carl was pointing, but it made him dizzy, so he gave up.

"There! Right there!" Carl insisted, jabbing a finger at the glass. "My god, can't you see it? It's a UFO!"

Jay peered into the misty gray sky, but all he could see was a solid blanket of not very cheerful clouds marred only by the unmistakeable trail of an incredibly huge jet.

Carl pushed and pulled at a knob on the dash; the Granada's headlights blinked furiously.

"It's a plane," Jay suggested.

"It's a UFO, I know it is. Look at the blinking lights!"

"The plane's or yours?"

"I'm going after it." Carl hit the gas pedal and sent the car flying wildly off the road. It lurched through the ditch and bounded onto the uneven ground, crashing through a barbed wire fence and tearing fiercely through half-frozen grasses.

Jay thought perhaps quiet reason would do the trick. "Look," he began patiently, failing to ignore the jarring bumps which proved the Granada's shock absorbers weren't doing their job, "we're only about 30 miles from Chicago. Chicago has one of the busiest airports in the world. It's a plane." The car bounced over a particularly nasty hole and caused him to hit his head on the roof, which somewhat detracted from the dignity of his logical proof, but he dogged on.

"It's a plane," he repeated slowly and with an air of utmost calm.

"UFO."

"Plane!"

"UFO!"

"Plane!"

"U-F-O! I know it is," Carl screeched, still flashing his headlights and staring up at the sky with that maniacal expression which had so often caused his friends to wonder whether he had been getting too much sun lately. "It's a bloody UFO!"

"Plane." Jay had recovered his calm voice.

"UFO."

"Plane."

"UFO."

"Cow."

"What?"
But there was no time for further debate because at that moment the Granada plowed into a full-grown heifer who had decided that the best way to greet this strange intrusion into its relatively quiet life was to stare it down.

With a gut-wrenching thunk, the bovine bounced heavily onto the hood, rolled toward the windshield, then twisted itself in a most remarkable manner and vanished off the side. Carl skidded the car to a halt, becoming most probably the first person ever to execute such an impressive donut in that particular field. Carl vaulted from the car and ran a short distance at top speed, then came up short and kicked an unfortunate tuft of grass.

"Shit!"

Jay, who had also climbed out of the car by this time, glanced distastefully down at his shoes and muttered a disgruntled, "Exactly."

The cow, which bore an ugly gash along its foreleg but seemed otherwise unhurt, struggled to its feet and gazed at Jay. Then, with a peculiar twitch it turned and shuffled painfully to a more peaceful part of the field.

"Shit!" Carl repeated, more forcefully. "It got away."

Jay, who was watching the cow, did not immediately understand. Then he looked up at the sky and remembered.

"It was a plane," he said, with the tone of one who knows he isn’t being listened to.

Carl stomped back to the car. He stopped suddenly, staring intently at the car’s grill. He looked at Jay.

"Did we hit something?"

by Meg Schneider