

That New Car Smell

By Matthew Dunn

There was no escaping the pungent odor of betrayal filling the cockpit. This was not my first breakup - it would be my sixth - but that didn't mean it be any easier. Do you know what I mean? Practice doesn't make perfect when it comes to saying goodbye, especially when years of intimacy are involved. But when it's broken and you can't fix it, what else can you do? As I slowed to the suddenly yellow traffic light, my guilty thoughts rearranging my rationalization like Scrabble letters, desperately trying to find a combination that would yield safe, consoling phrasing, I remembered the saying we humans tell each other again and again when backed into a corner. Honesty is the best policy.

The truth was I was just not that into her anymore. But should I say that out loud? Wouldn't it better - nicer - to soften the blow with some cushioning bullshit about it being all my fault? That *I* was the one who had changed; the one who had elevated my own selfish priorities to the top of the list; the one who should, without question, shoulder the blame? But it wasn't all me and she knew that as well as I did. We had drifted apart, outgrown each other. She would read my lying eyes like a campaigning politician's book if I laid anything other than the cold hard facts on the table. And it would only hurt more. Wouldn't it? Waiting for the red light to turn green, I thanked god that at least my wife was on my side this time.

"It makes perfect sense to me," she had said, much to my surprise. "Why be tied down to something big and old that no longer serves a purpose? You've been sensible all these years. Now you deserve to have what you really want."

I was shocked. Don't get me wrong, my wife has always been there for me, but she doesn't always "get me." Do you know what I mean? She doesn't always understand what makes my butter melt and I was convinced that this would be one of those times. But then - wham - she lines me up like a bowling pin and knocks me over with one simple word - "OK."

Deep in my subconscious, I think I was hoping she would have tried to talk me out of it. If she had, I wouldn't be making this drive right now; a drive that was beginning to make my heart ache. *Did I really want to say goodbye?*

The blaring horn behind me chased the melancholy away. The light had changed. I pressed the gas pedal, agitated by the impatient tailgaters behind me, but at the same time exhilarated as the G force of my acceleration pushed me back against the seat. "There is nothing like the simple joy of driving an automobile," my father had exuded many years ago during my very first training maneuver, a single lap around our two mile suburban neighborhood. Damn, if he wasn't right.

But there would be little joy in Mudville today, as my once beloved SUV sputtered in the middle of the intersection before stammering and hiccupping to an abrupt stop on the spent-cigarette infested road shoulder.

"Come on, baby," I said soothingly. "Don't be this way. You know it's the best thing for both of us."

I turned the key, formally dousing the already extinguished engine, hoping that a short pause followed by a restart would see us once again on our way.

"One Mississippi, two Mississippi..." I whispered anxiously as a line of disgruntled motorists passed their fallen comrade. But no one stopped to help or inquire about my health. Instead, they hurried on their way to happy hours and soccer practices, leaving behind a soiled trail of incinerated gasoline and hand-signed not-so-pleasantries.

"Let's not make this harder than it has to be," I said as I gingerly turned the ignition.

Either she decided to listen to reason or had finally determined she would be better off to be rid of me, but with a determined roar she sprang to life, eager as ever to resume her place in the procession.

"That's my girl," I said. After checking my rearview mirror I reentered the road.

Several miles of silent reflection passed when there, on the horizon, I spotted the mammoth dealership sign up ahead. A second wave of melancholy struck. We only had a few minutes left together and it was then that I realized how hard this was going to be.

Had it really been three years since I slipped into her bucket seat for the very first time, spooning like lovers? I could still remember taking her, the electric surge in my hands as I gripped her wheel, the exhilarating power thumping under her hood. Beguiled by her soft leather; seduced by her eight-cylinder, 335 horsepower, Hemi V8 engine, I was madly, passionately in lust. And now? *Oh God, what happened to us?*

I pulled into the parking lot feeling as though I needed to turn around. *Can I really go through with this?* A flirtation wink of sunlit silver revived my courage. My new carriage awaited - virginally pristine with her top already down.

"You know we'll always be friends," I said, caressing the headrest of the empty passenger seat reassuringly.

"Perfect afternoon for a convertible owner," Salesman Bob said with a fishy smile as he walked over to greet me by the showroom entrance door. "I hope you brought some suntan lotion."

He then seized my hand like a shark snatching a wary tuna before pulling me into the depths of his plexiglass cubicle where a coral reef of paperwork sat poised for my signature. "This will just take a minute," Bob said as he laughed and closed his make believe door. I emerged an hour later, penniless and carpal-tunneled.

Walking back out into the warm afternoon sun, the keys I'd just purchased with the last of my savings jingling merrily in my hand, I recalled the first car I had coveted as a youth - a bright yellow Corvette Sting Ray, the only real sports car within a ten mile radius. True, the local garbage hauler owned a tricked-out Pinto with mag wheels and a converted Dodge Charger engine, but I don't think that qualifies as a real sports car. Do you know what I mean?

My young friends and I would chase after that Corvette for miles whenever we spotted her tooling down the road. It didn't matter what we were doing at the time - playing whiffleball or hunting crawfish in the creek - we'd jump on our banana bikes and haul ass, pumping our little legs with everything we had until she faded from view. We never could find her home, concluding her owner must have kept her tucked safely away in the garage to keep predators like us from peeping.

And now here I stood in front of my very own Corvette. Lemans Blue with chrome aluminum 5-spoke wheels and a cashmere leather interior that immediately turned my nipples hard.

"Sweet," I said with same veneration I'd expressed the first time I'd seen the yellow princess. And it was. Do you know what I mean?

Cautiously, I opened the door and got in, lowering myself slowly as if I were taking a seat next to Jesus at the Last Supper. I eased my key in her ignition, leaning back to enjoy the moment before turning her on. I fondled the steering wheel with my left hand and stroked the short-throw, six-speed stick shift with my right. My fingers tingled with excitement, along with several other parts of my body.

I turned the key. There was a burst of thunder and then a startling streak of lightening as her bedroom-eyed central instrument cluster flared in arousal. *Yea baby, who's your daddy!*

"How about that new car smell?" Salesman Bob said, interrupting our first kiss. "Nothing like it in the world." Barely taking time to catch his breath, he then went on to explain the nuances of the "Limited Edition" package I'd opted for. Dual zone climate controls, moisture sensor wipers, heated seats with position memory, parking guidance system, Universal Home Remote transmitter, theft deterrent immobilizer, BOSE theater and navigation system covering the entire North American continent, just to name a few. Twenty minutes later I couldn't smell my new love's fragrance anymore, only Salesman Bob's garlic and onion breathe.

Finally, Salesman Bob cut the cord (no doubt he needed a nap to digest the significant bite he'd just taken out of my wallet) and I rolled out onto the open road in MY brand new Corvette wearing a smile as big as the happy in my pants. *Be gentle with me baby, it's my first time.*

The first date with someone you're really gaga over never goes well. Do you know what I mean?

The parade of miscues began when I attempted to program my seat position. Like the opening conversation over dinner – the one where you're trying to look intrigued so your date will feel like she is the focus of an exclusive Barbara Walters interview and not retreat behind a waterfall of wine – the promising evening began smoothly as I probed innocently in search of comfortable rapport. I slid the seat back, stretching my legs freely to the pedals – *Do you enjoy your job?* Confident of my seasoned moves, I adjusted the backrest to relive my shoulders from any undue strain – *How about your boss, tell me about your boss. What is she like?* Knowing I was almost home, I tweaked the stirring column just a pinch to give it that Indy car feel - *What's your favorite song?*

Confident I had chased away our whatever-you-do-don't-make-a-fool-of-yourself jitters, I pressed the button that Salesman Bob assured me would secure the setting into memory. *Bad move.* As if we were back at her front door exchanging awkward greetings, the seat motored forward scrunching my knees up under the dashboard, the backrest hummed back to it's full, upright position (along with my back) and the steering wheel tweaked itself back into it's original un-tweaked position, much to the dismay of my complaining shoulders. *What did I say?*

Undaunted, I repeated my three step drop only to then find myself once again in a twisted fetal position. Oddly, I found it interesting that I was now capable of steering the car with my belly button. *Look mom, no hands!*

"Feisty," I whispered. "I like that in a woman." (I really didn't, but you catch more flies with sugar than with vinegar. Do you know what I mean?)

Offering a treaty of compromise, I once again adjusted the seat to my desired specifications only this time refraining from requesting permanency via Salesman Bob's prescribed dashboard quagmire. After a tense quarter mile, the dreaded silence feared by bachelors around the globe chafing my crotch, I was still stretched out comfortably. It appeared a momentary truce had been signed. I then loaded my brain with songs from *The Eagles* in an attempt to exorcise my unease. *I've got a peaceful, easy feelin', and I know you won't let me down.* Several choruses later, my body finally relaxed.

"No problem," I said. "I'm not ready to go steady yet either." (I really was, in fact, I was ready to walk down the aisle. She had me at hello – her blue-eyed, top down hello.)

With the wind whistling around my leather-clad cocoon, I realized something was missing. Tunes - I needed some tunes. *Rock and roll, baby.* A blizzard gale of hammering drums and wailing guitars. And a driving, thumping bass. *Can't forget the bass.* What kind of nut-sack drives a sweet ride like this down the road without a Fender Stratocaster announcing his arrival? *Not this nut-sack!*

Carefully running my finger along the walnut, burl-trimmed entertainment and navigation pods located snugly between her seats, I wondered what mood *she* was in just before I flicked the stereo to life. Discouragingly, our musical moods were *not* in harmonious orbit.

"Do you believe in life after love?" Cher sang. For a surreal second, she was sitting next to me with her comet-tailed black hair flowing and a tiny version of Sonny perched in her lap eating an ice cream cone. It was really weird, but all I could think was, *don't you dare get any of that chocolate chunk on the seat, kid.*

I must have grimaced upon hearing the feminist-rallying melody – incriminating body language on the first date – because suddenly the mechanized driver's seat began to hum and fizz like Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory and next thing I knew I was once again a muscle-wrenched pretzel.

In a knee-jerk reaction, I began humming *I've Got You Babe* as I delicately tiptoed through the six radio station presets. The forever-young pop culture icon monopolized them all, leaving me to wonder if Salesman Bob – the suspected perpetrator of said atrocity – was not in actuality, Saleswoman Roberta. I turned the stereo off just as my legs began to cramp.

Approaching a busy intersection, I prayed – perhaps for the first time in my driver-licensed life – for a recuperation-consenting red light. I slowed to a crawl, promising the Lord that I would never take his name in vain again if the Goddamn thing would just turn yellow. It did, a full second after the point of no return. (That's the invisible marker one passes – usually a healthy five or six car lengths from the yellowing traffic signal – when slowing and stopping could get you nominated for "Wimp of the Week," on *The Man Show*. Do you know what I mean?) Risking ridicule, I stopped anyway.

I needed to find another *Eagles* song, but before I could a foul stench invaded my airspace. My eyes began to tear and without warning I exploded into a coughing fit.

"Clean the bugs off your windshield, buddy?" a voice offered.

I looked up, struggling to clear my throat, and there, pressing his filth bedazzled being against my brand new, Lemans Blue Corvette was a heavily-bearded man with a three-toothed grin. (I say *being* because I could not tell where his beaver-pelt skin ended and his brownbag clothes began.) He had a spray bottle filled with urine colored water in one hand (at least I hoped it was water,) and a wad of soiled paper towels in the other. *Soiled how? Don't even think about it.*

Had I been able to exit my seat I would have escorted him back to the curb right then, back to what I assumed was his home, a grocery cart filled with bottles, cans, assorted articles of matted clothing and a remarkably unblemished carton of French's classic yellow mustard. *So, the guy was really into mustard?* But I was trapped – a size ten foot stuffed into a size eight shoe – and no matter how I wrestled with the seat position control I couldn't break free.

"I don't need a wash," I snapped as I attempted to wave him away. "It's brand new."

That was a mistake.

"Well then, you deserve my extra strength cleanser," he replied.

At that moment I expected him to unscrew the bottle and empty his bladder into it, but instead he swapped it for an identical container he had hanging from his back pocket. *Just my luck, a professional.*

This is what happens when you buck tradition and beg for a red light instead of green. You get pissed on.

Before I could protest further, he was vigorously misting my previously squeaky clean windshield with his mellow yellow to the point I could no longer see the road ahead. And that's when it happened – the life-altering moment when I almost killed a homeless man.

Just as Mr. Unclean was applying some elbow grease, the wipers kicked on. *I didn't do it, I swear!* The first pass startled him and knocked the "cleanser" from his hand. The return swipe hooked his shirt sleeve. And then, as if excited by my catch, horns began blaring behind me, not-so-kindly alerting me to the traffic signal change. *Green means go, shithead!*

Instinctively, I glanced in the rearview mirror and pressed the gas, anxious to avoid the automotive faux pas. I was clearing the intersection when I noticed my unwanted attendant running along side, his eyes big and white on his dingy face, like two chicken eggs stuck in the mud. I'd hooked him good and it took me a second to decide whether I should pullover and release him or let him drag along side the hull until he worked himself free. The death rattle of the grocery cart hopping wildly

through the potholes behind us persuaded me to choose option one. It was tethered to his midsection by a rotting twist of rope that apparently was much stronger than it looked. Bottles and cans were bubbling over its battered edges and spilling into the road, snarling the now-twice-annoyed traffic that followed. *At least they were littering the road behind me, I thought. With no chance of denting my car. My NEW car.*

"Stop!" the man yelled. "Stop! You crazy mother f'in', wacked-out, yuppie bastard!"

Now, I had no desire to watch this guy disappear under my chassis like a dazed and confused squirrel attempting to transport his nuts across state lines. No doubt that would fuck up my muffler royally, not to mention, inflict some serious damage to my sports radials. But, you see, here's the thing. I realized that if I stopped, that Goddamn shopping cart would go barreling up my ass - my spanking new, LeMans Blue ass, to put a fine point on it. I don't care how sensitive I'm suppose to be to the plight of the less fortunate, I was not about to be sodomized by some homeless man's mobile home. Not totally without compassion, I did slow down, keeping a watchful eye in the rearview mirror in case the cart started to gain on me. (I didn't want any that NASCAR rubbin' going on either.)

My peaceful easy feeling was long gone now, replaced by borderline panic as I feverishly worked the wiper control.

"They're moisture activated," I said to the man as I fiddled. He looked back uncomprehendingly, his haggard face warning me his swordfish-like fight was nearly exhausted. And then, just like that, he was free, standing stunned and gasping for air in my wake. I turned back briefly, suppressing the urge to wave goodbye, but just in time to watch with giggling horror as the grocery cart freight-trained him.

I pulled over, turned off the engine and got out. Why, you ask? After all that? A good question, to which I have no answer. But don't worry, I didn't get very far. By the time I took two steps, old three-tooth was already back on his feet loading his fists with the yellow squeeze bottles that now blanketed the pavement. The ones that seconds later came hurdling toward me. *For an old guy, he had a rocket arm.*

The Corvette boasts zero to sixty in about five seconds. How about three? That's what I did and I didn't slow down until I was safely in my driveway. After several honks and a few hummed bars of *Tequila Sunrise*, my wife came out for the grand tour.

"Pretty sweet," I said proudly as we sat in the cockpit built for two. "And how about that new car smell. Nothing like it in the world."

"I don't know," she said, tilting her head in thought. "It kind of smells like that mustard you're always putting on your hotdog. Do you know what I mean?"

The End