

## **I Drive, Therefore I Am**

by Dennis Vannatta

1.

I mustered out of the Army in Ft. Dix, New Jersey, in May of 1971 after spending thirteen months in what was then known as West Germany. I took a cab along with three other soldiers to the airport in Philadelphia. At a stoplight, the driver beside us revved his engine and when the light turned green peeled rubber for thirty feet. We GI's cheered. We knew we were back in America.

No, it wasn't the wide front lawns, the blue jeans and sneakers, not even the McDonald's and Dairy Queens that told us we were in America, it was the sound of that engine exploding next to us, the tires squealing like a live thing afire that nearly brought tears to our eyes. It was a sound we never heard in Europe.

I don't claim that other countries don't have their car cultures. In racing terms (except for the monotonous left-hand-turn version favored in the U.S.) Americans aren't the best drivers. That would be Europeans and South Americans. We don't make the best cars, either. That would be the Italians. But if we don't have the best drivers and the best cars, we certainly have the most drivers and the most cars. That's because for us having a car is simply a part of existing; not having one—except in certain urban enclaves like Manhattan, if that qualifies as America—is virtually inconceivable. Many of the more liberal-minded of us shake our heads at those “You can take my gun when you pull it from my cold, dead fingers” signs, but change the “gun” to “car,” and we'd enthusiastically agree.

My father-in-law lived into his mid-nineties. In the last years of his life he suffered so from arthritis that he walked bent over at the waist at nearly a ninety-degree angle, yet he still insisted on driving. So too did my mother-in-law, with two bad knees and early-onset Alzheimer's. Only after Hurricane Sandy destroyed their car did their son work up the courage to refuse to buy them a new one or let them drive his. They were outraged, bitter. For years afterward, when my wife called to chat, they'd inevitably rage

at being carless. Even today my mother-in-law, unable to remember that she has grandchildren, does remember that she's not allowed to drive and is still outraged, bitter.

My son has been telling me for years, "Pop, when you stop being safe behind the wheel, I'm taking the keys away." He'll say it jokingly, and I'll laugh. Still, I understand that he's preparing the ground for the inevitable. When that happens, I'll be outraged, bitter. There may be life after driving, but I'm not sure I want any part of it.

One of my earliest memories is of a nightmare involving a car. I must have been three or four. While my parents worked, I was babysat by Mrs. Pierce, a woman in the little town where we lived. In the dream my mother or father has come to pick me up. Our gray car rolls slowly up the gravel driveway toward the house. Just past a huge tree, it suddenly turns over. I run out and peer through the jutting frame stripped of fenders and sides, at my parent, dead.

Decades later, my mother, in her seventies by then, finally retired from her job as a bookkeeper. She was reminiscing about her very first job away from home, as my father's secretary in the school system where he was superintendent. She'd always felt a little guilty, she told me, because she'd stayed home to raise my two older sisters, but when I was little my father talked her into going to work "just long enough to help buy a new car," a 1950 Chevrolet. She never did like that car, a boring gray.

I didn't tell her that she needn't feel guilty, that I'd had my revenge: I'd killed her off in my dream. In fact, though, I'm not certain which parent I killed off because my memory doesn't furnish the identity of the driver lying dead in the car. The only thing I can see clearly in the dream is that brand-new car reduced to ripped upholstery and steel bars and posts jutting this way and that. What a waste of a perfectly good automobile.

With that start I should have hated cars, I suppose, but the opposite was the case. Of actual cars in my early years, I have only good memories.

One was of standing beside my father on the bench-seat as he drove. No car seats then, no seatbelts. Dangerous? You bet. Did I enjoy it? You bet. I can almost feel

my skinny little three-year-old body pressed up against his massive shoulder as he gripped the wheel.

When I was not much older than that, he'd occasionally let me sit in his lap and pretend to steer. Then came steering for real. Dangerous? I didn't worry about it. He was my father. I was immune to all dangers.

My mother drove, too, but most of my childhood car memories involve my father. He wasn't much of an outdoorsman, but once a year or so he'd take me hunting or fishing. Hunting for us was loading the .22 Browning and driving down country roads trying to scare up jackrabbits. When one would come up out of a ditch and run down the road in front of us, I'd lean out of the driver's side window and blaze away with the .22. I never hit one, but who cares? What a thrill. And what a ride!

Fishing with my dad was an even greater joy because we'd "camp out." At the end of a day's fishing, we'd crawl in the car—I in the back seat and he somehow squeezed in around the steering wheel in front, all 6'1" and 230 pounds of him—and sleep the sleep of the just. Well, at least I slept.

Our cars got a real workout because my father had a wanderlust—mostly, I suspect, to escape the stress of his job. It didn't make much difference where we went as long as we went somewhere. It was a rare Sunday that we didn't drive a half hour or more to visit my aunt and uncle in Windsor or my grandmother and aunt in Clinton or two sets of aunts and uncles out in the boondocks down a dirt road so narrow I'd reach out the back window and strip leaves from bushes and low-hanging limbs.

On the rare occasions when there was no one to visit, we'd take drives out into the countryside or down to Springfield for dinner at Grace's or up to Kansas City to eat at The Forum. One Sunday my dad announced, "I've never set my feet on Iowa soil." And off we went. From our home in central Missouri, Iowa would have been at least a three-hour drive. We set out driving north, ate lunch in Chillicothe, got back in the car and drove on until we saw the WELCOME TO IOWA sign. My father drove just far enough past the sign to find a safe place to pull off the road. He shut the engine off; he and I got out and walked around the car once and got back in and headed home. We had set our feet on Iowa soil.

The Iowa trek wasn't anything unusual for us. On the spur of the moment, we'd

jump in the car on a Friday afternoon and drive to Lawton, Oklahoma, to visit my sister or to Chicago to visit my other sister or to Hot Springs, Arkansas, just for the fun of it.

And it was fun. I'd gaze out the window daydreaming of some grand adventure, look at the cars (at night I could identify all makes of cars just by their taillights), and when I got tired, lie down in the back seat and sleep.

Yes, my childhood was spent rollin' down the road.

## 2.

The passage from childhood to something approaching maturity involves many rites, but for a boy of my generation (I wouldn't presume to speak for girls), more important than shaving for the first time or drinking your first beer, more important even than initiation into the sexual mysteries was getting your driver's license.

Like many rites of passage, it could be painful. I don't recall much about actually learning to drive other than my father teaching me, but I do vividly remember taking the driver's test. Unless you were lucky enough to turn sixteen in the summer, you had to check out of school and go down to the courthouse for the written test (a breeze) and then driving portion of the test. The latter was administered by a scowling, teenage-boy-hating, brute of a highway patrolman. My hands were shaking so badly I could hardly grip the steering wheel. I approached the first intersection. The view was unobstructed both ways. No cars were coming. I slowed just slightly and then proceeded on across. The trooper let out a screech like he'd been stabbed in the back with an icepick and seemed to be trying to climb out the window. "Didn't you see that yield sign!?" he bellowed. The only thing that saved me from total annihilation was being smart enough not to defend my miserable self. "Sorry, sir, sorry," I said, hanging my head. The parallel parking portion of the test went equally well. After I failed to park in the allotted space on the first attempt, he said with withering scorn, "Forget it."

When we got back to the starting point, he sat scowling down at his notes and shaking his head. Finally, he handed me my test score: 70, the lowest passing mark. Lowest be damned, I'd passed! All was right with the world. (Failure would have meant something much worse than merely having to take the test again. I would have had to return to school, check back in, walk into class with all eyes on me, my so-called friends desperately hoping I'd failed so they could laugh themselves silly and make my life

miserable from that day forward. I would have had to move to a different state.)

Then came the fun part: driving.

Of course, it helped to have a car. In those days only well-to-do parents bought their children cars, and neither I nor any of my friends were lucky in that regard. We had to make do with borrowing the family car (none of us came from two-car families), and that didn't happen as often as we wanted, not by a hell of a long shot. Consequently, when the keys were (very reluctantly) given to us, driving was a real thrill. Whoever was fortunate enough to get the car would pick the rest of the guys up, and off we'd go. There wasn't much for teenagers to do in my hometown, so unless there happened to be a sporting event at the high school or a movie we really wanted to see, all we'd do was drive around and around and around. "Taking the drag," we called it. I can still drive every block of it in my mind's eye: from our homes on the east side of town, we'd first drive downtown, up and around and back down the main street, on out west to Limit, then generally a stop at Dog 'n Suds for a root beer and fries and some ogling of the girls, then back downtown and around and do it all again. And again. And again. It was our Stations of the Cross, and in its own way sacred.

Ron was the first of my friends to earn enough money at his after-school job to buy a car, a '54 Mercury convertible. In reality it was a piece of junk, but he thought it was great, and in fact so did I. It was in that car that I first "parked" with a girl. If we steamed the windows up, it was less from anything erotic than from the three teenage couples crammed together. Six hormone-stoked teenagers put out a lot of heat. Still, I'd had my arm around a girl. I'd kissed her. That was a very big deal, and it was all thanks to Ron's car.

We friends were scholars and athletes, not Romeo's. Parking with girls was a rare event for us. What we did far more frequently was "birddogging"—driving down country roads at night looking for couples parking so we could flash our lights, honk, and holler helpful instructions as we passed by. Hey hey, we were cool!

Another thing we liked to do was drag race on some lonely stretch of road outside of town or, even more frequently, take off driving faster and faster, see what the

“top end” of our car was—and what the top end of our courage was. My courage wasn’t that great. I wasn’t brave enough to admit that it scared the hell out of me when the speedometer passed 100 on a narrow, dark, curvy blacktop. It was my best friend, Bill, who one night had enough and demanded that the driver pull over and let him out. He’d walk home. Bill always had more sense than the rest of us.

We eventually matured enough to realize that cars weren’t for our amusement only but could be useful in other ways.

My choice of which college to attend was determined by a car. My parents told me they’d pay for the higher tuition, plus room and board, at the University of Missouri, or they’d buy me a new car in which I’d commute to nearby Central Missouri State College. I was a huge Missouri fan (“Bully for old Mizzou, rah rah rah!”), but come on, you kidding me? I became a CMSC Fighting Mule and the proud owner of an emerald green ’64 Volkswagen.

My father died midway through my sophomore year, and after that I paid my way through college working at the local newspaper, driving a pickup and delivering paper bundles to the carriers. On Sunday mornings I’d go to work at 2:30 a.m., deliver bundles and do other odd jobs, and then at 9:00 clock out or, more often, take papers to some carrier in one of the nearby towns who’d gotten short-changed on his normal delivery. By 9:00 o’clock, all I wanted was bed. I’ve never been one of those drivers who can drive all night without worrying about falling asleep at the wheel. If I get sleepy, I fall asleep. I tried various stratagems to stay awake driving. Turning the radio up all the way and singing along wasn’t much help. Rolling the window down and sticking my head out was better, but only for a time. The best method was steering with my knees, the concentration required keeping me awake. Did I slow down while doing it? Nope. That would be cheating. Was I a danger to myself and others on the road? Of course! But I was safer driving with my knees than driving asleep. (I’m still pretty good at it.)

I survived those Sunday morning treks but did have other mishaps. The very first time I parked the pickup in the company garage, I took off the mirror on the right side. Another time, backing down the alley toward the chute out of which the paper bundles came, I knocked down the custodian and made the 6:00 o’clock news. Slow news day,

obviously. The police came looking for me again after I threw free advertising circulars to houses in Warrensburg. The object of this task, from my point of view, was to finish as quickly as possible so that I could put my feet up on some gas station parking lot and drink a Coke and eat a candy bar on the company clock. To this end I'd drive down the middle of the street, steering with my right hand and with my other flinging circulars to houses on the left and over the cab to houses on the right. On this particular day I must have failed to take the wind drift into consideration because half the circulars wound up in the middle of the street. The Warrensburg fuzz were not amused. Neither were my bosses at the newspaper, who paid my fine for littering. My pals thought it was pretty funny, though. In fact, so did I. Still do.

I was drafted in 1969 and spent two years as an MP in the Army, first at West Point (glorified campus cop), then West Germany (tower guard at a weapons depot). Although I was in my early twenties, I consider the military essentially an extension of my youth. Basic training resembled nothing so much as the hell of football two-a-days, and permanent duty was like college in that lots of really boring stuff was involved, but weekends with the guys could be a lot of fun.

I was very popular at West Point because I was one of the few guys there with a car.<sup>1</sup> I was well taken care of. At a really cool place called The Creamery (a dairy barn converted into a nightspot) outside Poughkeepsie, I got memorably drunk and passed out, woke up back at the barracks embracing the porcelain. My friends had taken my keys, laid me gently in the back seat, and chauffeured me home. Alas, they drew the line at cleaning up the puke I spewed all over the back seat of the car. See, just like college.

I did make one huge mistake at West Point. All new personnel of my low rank had to take a test to get a license to drive a truck. I passed with the highest mark of anyone taking it. Was I proud? Nope, I was *stupid*. All it meant was that during my off

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<sup>1</sup> Cadets were forbidden to have cars until the last semester of their senior years. It was a special delight for us MPs to lie in wait for a Cadet driving even one mile an hour over the speed limit, for which transgression we'd ticket the miscreant, and he'd have his driving privileges revoked for the remainder of the year. We also liked to patrol in areas where Cadets were wont to park with their girls. We'd shine flashlights on the couples and bang on the windows, an exercise in nostalgia for me, a "birddogger" from way back.

hours I'd be called upon to drive work details in a deuce-and-a-half, a busload to the theater to watch some asinine training film, what have you.

The same situation arose after I was transferred to Germany. But I'd wised up. This time I didn't even pass the written portion of the test.

Indeed, Germany is significant in my driving life largely in negatives: that is, for thirteen months I was never behind the wheel of a vehicle. The only time I was in a car was when we hitchhiked, which was rarely. Mostly, we traveled by train. Positively un-American.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.

I mustered out of the Army in May, 1971, and the following fall began grad school at the University of Missouri—yes, the school I'd spurned out of high school in favor of CMSC and a new car.

I shared an apartment with Ron, my buddy from the neighborhood, he of the Mercury convertible. He was entering law school. It was the first time either of us had had his own place. I'd lived at home and then had Uncle Sam in loco parentis (and I don't mean that facetiously). Ron had commuted with me to CMSC until a traffic accident his junior year. Coming back at night from an American Legion game, his friend took what was intended to be a shortcut through a construction zone and went off an embankment. The other three in the car had scratches and bruises. Ron, riding shotgun, had a broken back. He's spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. The U. of Missouri at that time was the most completely wheelchair-accessible school in the country, so Ron transferred there and stayed in the dorm for handicapped students—until, that is, we two wild and crazy guys agreed to share an apartment.

Our first official act was, of course, to throw a party. We had the booze, we had plenty of male friends, we did not have the women. Ron's sister, an entering freshman, was browbeaten into inviting girls from her dorm. One, a tall blond from New York City, didn't have a ride. I drove over to pick her up. We walked from her dorm to the parking

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<sup>2</sup> It's interesting to compare the German autobahn and the American interstate highway system. Both were constructed for the purpose of quickly transporting troops in time of war. Today, the autobahn is just one of several ways to get from one place to another. Public transportation (buses and trains) are a convenient and affordable way to travel there and throughout much of Europe. Not so in the U.S. where the interstate system soon metastasized until it effectively killed off public transportation in all but a few, mostly eastern and urban, locales.

lot. "It's the little blue car," I said. She took off toward a dynamite TR-6. "No, it's the Karman Ghia. The one with the dents all over it." For some reason we both thought that was funny. We were married two years later.

I'd never tell Ron that I'm grateful for his car wreck, but the likelihood is that I would never have met my future wife without it. Wife, children, grandchildren. I would have had a life anyway, true, but it would have been a different life, and I wouldn't trade mine for any other.

I've had car-related highlights in this second half of my life, as I think of my maturity: teaching my children to drive; surprising them with their first cars; the unforecast snowstorm that trapped my wife at work, my son and I driving up and down impossibly slick streets to bring her home, the normally twenty-minute trip taking over three hours; The King of All Lemons Chevy Celebrity in the shop twelve times the first year we owned it; on and on. All pretty ho-hum, just part of the normal routine of life.

That's exactly my point, though. Throughout my life, driving has been not just something that I occasionally do but something I am. I'm a driver; I can hardly think of myself as living without it. An old man now, I can understand my mother-and father-in-law, their rage at having their car keys taken away. But I can also understand their son taking them. They had no business behind the wheel of a car.

I can't kid myself. Physically, I'm not as good a driver as I once was. My reflexes aren't as good. I don't see as well at night. I can't park straight in a parking space anymore. What I think is straight I'll see when I get out of the car is absurdly off parallel. What's up with that? A brain tumor or something? I mentioned it to a couple of my old-man friends, and they both confessed that they had the same problem.

I tell myself that my acknowledging my physical deficiencies has made me a better, more careful driver, but I'm not as certain of this as I'd like to be. I am more careful, true, but only when I think about it. One of the things that begins to go as you get older is your powers of concentration.

I'd like to think I've got some good years left behind the wheel.<sup>3</sup> Ten would be

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<sup>3</sup> I've written, revised, and typed this memoir entirely while sitting in my car on a Burger King parking lot. My friends and family think it's funny that I do most of my writing at Burger King or, for a change of pace,

nice. I'd settle for ten. That would put me in my mid-eighties. Everybody runs and hides when they see an eighty-year-old driving—or should.

It's been years since my son told me he was going to take the keys away from me if he saw me becoming a danger to myself or others. But you can bet he's keeping an eye on me.

When my time comes, I hope I can take it graciously. You can't live forever, after all. I'll do my best to go with dignity. I just won't go driving.



**Dennis Vannatta** has published creative nonfiction in *Shadowbox*, *Antioch Review*, *River Oak Review*, and elsewhere and fiction in *Boulevard*, *River Styxx*, *Pushcart XV*, and many other journals and anthologies.

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McDonald's. Buy a Diet Coke and sit there for a couple of hours working away. The noise doesn't bother me; indeed, I think I feed off being "out in the world," so to speak. Best is in the spring or fall when mild temperatures allow me to sit in my car. I enjoy the fresh air. I've been working on this particular piece during the coronavirus pandemic. Burger King is closed except for the drive-through lane. No problem. I bring a bottle of Diet Coke from home and sip and write, do a little reading if the inspiration fails me. It's the most relaxing time of day, here in my car.