

## A REAL AMERICAN BOY AT LAST, THANKS TO TOYOTA

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All the world knows about the great American love affair with cars in the boom years after World War II. By the end of the Fifties cars in the USA had grown to the size of boats. They zoomed along, gleaming like tuna fish, thanks to bumpers, grills and outlandish ornaments in shining chrome. They also redefined what nowadays we would call the “parameters” of being young.

American teenage boys in the Fifties were expected to fall in love with cars on the way to falling in love with girls. Sixteen was the magic age. On your sixteenth birthday you took your driver’s test and got your license to drive a car. A driver’s license was a passport to romance in the double sense of cars and girls.

Girls themselves were assumed to be less mechanically inclined. They were supposed to go from playing with dolls to being real live dolls—the only dolls that interested boys. Remember that Broadway musical “Guys And Dolls”?

A Fifties girl would yearn for boys and learn about boys.

A Fifties boy, meantime, would yearn for girls by learning about cars. A boy had to know how to raise the hood and look inside and know what was broken and what was not.

It all sounds so touchingly naive, now that America’s twentieth century has closed on a note of feminist triumph. But of course

history has a way of getting ahead of itself, even as it leaves some of us behind, as it did me in the 1950s. Allow me to explain.

Thanks to America’s postwar love affair with cars, I see myself as having been a real American boy just briefly, and sadly incompletely, in the summer of 1958.

My trouble began at boarding school—all boys, no cars and certainly no girls. It was a severely religious school, so girls were talked about in terms that will not do to talk about at the end of America’s first feminist century. (My feminist friends call it that.)

The aim of this school was to set boys on the way to becoming priests, a practice now abandoned in America and a good thing too. Needless to say, no argument that originates in Heaven can persuade most boys on Earth to be anything but boys. Standards, too, were high, so each year my class just naturally got smaller. It had shrunk from forty-five to eighteen by the time we graduated from high school. Then I, too, was invited to live “in the world” after all.

So there I was that summer of 1958. Eighteen years of age. One of religion’s freak rejects. A boy in name only—one who had been deprived of the formative teenage experience of falling in love with cars and girls.

A boy with real boy potential would have

hurried to catch up.

A family friend did try to help me. We lived in the country so he gave me driving lessons on quiet back roads. He was an elderly man and correspondingly cautious, so we drove slowly, paying exaggerated respect to ditches, trees and any car we passed. Cars invariably slowed to give us a curious look. Once a man stopped his car, got out, and shook his fist at our small cloud of departing dust.

I glimpsed that in the rear-view mirror, alerted by my teacher. He insisted that I learn to look backwards as I was driving forwards. I knew that others did it, but somehow my mind could not resolve the contradiction. One glance at that world rushing away backwards in the mirror made me giddy, so I tended to close my eyes.

The driving exam was given in town where suddenly I had to deal with a dizzying complexity of traffic, streets and signs. I failed the exam three times. My fourth exam ended on a sad note too. I pulled up behind a car ahead and waited patiently for it to proceed.

"What are you waiting for?" the driving examiner said.

"I'm waiting for that car to move."

"There's no one in that car! It's a parked car!"

The examiner was a kind, grand fatherly man. At the end of the test drive he shook his head sadly, sighed and said: "Well son, I'm thinking you won't be driving much if you drive at all. So I'm going to let you pass. But you will be careful, won't you?"

I promised quite sincerely that I would. And I kept that promise only too well. I was so careful I became a nervous wreck. I pressed the wrong pedal causing the car

to speed up, not stop, as I drove into the garage. I scraped my grandfather's car with my father's car, causing both of them to say terrible things about my intelligence. Somehow—I never could figure out how—I drove the car into a stream where it stalled just deep enough for water to run in over my shoes as I sat horrified the longest time.

After that I returned to walking and riding a bicycle and a sleepy old Welsh pony named Sam.

I was an introspective youth, so it did occur to me to open the hood of the car and look inside from time to time. I must have been hoping to fall in love. No such luck. That vision of complex dirty oily parts inspired no lovely feelings in me. I couldn't even rise to the level of basic curiosity. The smell alone was enough to put me off.

Even as a tiny child I had been indifferent to toys. I was drawn to living things and wanted pets of every kind. So there I was, a skinny awkward boy of eighteen, stroking a pet rabbit and staring in horror at the greasy innards of a car. To me, it was just a monster toy, mechanical and dead when standing still. And when it moved—oh! It moved way too fast, according to laws mysterious and boring, not to mention threatening to a driver with reflexes as bad as mine. Because of course I was a dismal failure at every sport.

Why couldn't a car be more like my shaggy, sleepy old pony? He had such a comfortable smell of horse, oats, and hay. Being a pony, Sam wasn't that tall, so I didn't have far to fall when he stumbled in a gopher hole. That summer of my eighteenth year I would ride him out onto the prairie where the sky stretched far

away in every direction. There he would graze head down while I searched the horizon, wondering where on earth I would end up in life and how I could get there without a car.

In the Fifties it was still possible to work your way through college so that's what I did. I couldn't possibly afford a car but that was all right too. Most of my fellow students didn't own a car.

Here let us pause to remind ourselves that American boys and girls still went to college in the Fifties. Now it's men and women, since the powerful medicine administered to the nation by feminism has had the unintended side effect of killing all the girls.

Of course they didn't die. They were just defined away. One could write a very long essay on meanings of "girl" in America at the end of the twentieth century. But that's another story.

Let us return to the Fifties and speak its language too.

College girls existed in a very important way related to America's love affair with the automobile. Girls borrowed the family car from fathers who unwittingly contributed to the feminist revolution by putting their daughters in a position of power: in the driver's seat.

Here we must remember that this century of cinema had given Americans two realities to live with: the Real Reality and the Hollywood Reality.

The Hollywood Reality depiction of American life in the Fifties showed a boy in the driver's seat with a girl snug up against him.

Seat belts and seat belt laws lay some years in the future.

Equally far in the future was any idea that girl=boy in the sense of enjoying equal

status/power/whatever in American society.

In the Real Reality of American life in the Fifties, lots of college boys were driven places by girls who had borrowed the family car. In such a case, of course, the boy sat by the window on the passenger side. He would have looked extremely odd sitting snug up against a girl in the driver's seat.

That would look odd even today, when women are in the driver's seat for real—for really real, I mean, not Hollywood real.

In the Fifties, the two realities clashed in the front seat of many a car as the boy in the Real Reality passenger seat imagined himself in the Hollywood Reality driver's seat.

But that seat was taken—by a girl! What was she doing there?

Boys would attempt to resolve this reality crisis by talking their way into the driver's seat, leaving the girl to hope that her father would never find out.

There was a very real Real Reality reason why daddy must never ever find out. That reason was auto insurance.

Jokes about women drivers were a staple of humor in the Fifties but insurance companies knew the score. Females under twenty-five had far fewer accidents than males in that age category. Insurance rates reflected that difference directly—as they do today in fact. The difference today is that cars have taken control of American life to such an extent that most families are obliged to insure teenage boys as well as girls.

I know feminists who despair of improving the driving of males. They resign themselves to hoping that men will do better in the area of household chores.

But to my story. Since I was a boy to such a limited extent—a licensed driver

reverting to bicycle and sleepy old pony—I failed to develop a sense of Hollywood Reality, even in college. That’s why it never occurred to me to try talking Delia into letting me drive her father’s long pink cadillac.

I don’t think Delia would have let me anyway. Looking back now, I see her as a feminist born before her time, a girl determined to be the equal of any boy alive.

Needless to say, real boys were really afraid of Delia. She had to make do with a boy like me. The first time we met she said: “I like a boyfriend I can boss around. You look like you might do.”

Delia’s self-confidence had something to do with her being twenty-three and still a freshman in college, thanks to a “personal disaster” she frequently alluded to but never explained.

She was also tall for a girl and had bold black eyes that seemed to say to all the world *Don’t mess with me!*

At least that’s the message I got. It never occurred to me to refuse to be Delia’s boyfriend. I had never been any girl’s boyfriend, so I felt in some sense honored, not to mention pathetically grateful. I was also quietly terrified, as boys and men just naturally are when girls and women take charge.

But that’s another story too. So is Delia. Her story could fill a book. My ears are burning, just thinking of it these forty years later.

A feminist friend advises me to say only this: that Delia was a proto-feminist acting on instinct according to a basic rule, namely: *kill minnows before you kill killer whales.*

That first day we met Delia drove me to my job downtown. She was an excel-

lent driver. She drove with one hand on the wheel, holding my hand with the other. When we reached our destination I stammered: “Well, um, thanks for the ride and all.”

She gave my hand a squeeze that froze me in place. “You’re my boyfriend now.” she said. “So where’s my kiss goodbye?”

For some odd reason, hard as I try, I can’t remember the kiss itself, only vague sensations of something wet, of my ears feeling hot. Far more distinct in memory is opening the car door and falling out into the street.

It’s hard to believe that more than forty years have passed since Delia took charge of my youth and innocence and tendency to accidents. But like I said, Delia is a book just waiting to happen, a book I would never dare to write. I haven’t heard from her for almost forty years but this I know for sure: that wherever she is, she is a fully empowered Feminist Century Woman.

No one in 1950s America talked about being empowered. But we’re all empowered now, even types like me. It’s all about choice, we say. We make our choices, sovereign individuals each and every one in a competitive society. We take charge of our own lives. Life has become an act of possession. Even little kids talk about “my life.”

I haven’t been a great success in life so questions of empowerment make me rather nervous. And no wonder. I only became a real American boy in 1988 at the age of forty-eight. That’s when I bought my little Toyota and learned to drive for real.

Not, of course, for Hollywood Real. You don’t learn that reality at an age like forty-eight. You’re stuck with the Real Reality, with driving where you’ve got to go, taking your chances on roads jam packed

with Americans fully aware of being fully empowered.

Even little old ladies feel empowered to criticize my driving, sometimes with shocking words and gestures.

Even so, even I am empowered to a certain extent. I have driven my little Toyota 154,432 miles in eleven years and am alive to marvel at that miracle. Because surely it is a miracle in a country like mine that none of the thousands of drivers I have offended has killed me accidentally with a car or on purpose with a gun.

“Road rage” is a term much discussed in America nowadays. Frustrated drivers “lose it” and do terrible things to drivers like me.

The fact that I’m alive to be telling you all this is, in fact, a tribute to Japanese-American relations never imagined in the 1950s.

In the Fifties the very idea of buying cars made by foreigners was just too shocking, as when the Germans provoked a horrific fuss by selling us their Volkswagen “beetle.” Who would have thought that sensible little Japanese cars would squash that bug on their way to out-selling America’s gas-guzzling dinosaurs?

By 1988, when I was looking to buy a car, everyone I knew said the same thing: “Well if you want a reliable car, buy Japanese.”

Even today, after so many miles, my trusty mechanic says: “Keep this car.” I’m not saying my little Toyota doesn’t have its elderly failings, same as me. Last year,

for example, a thing called a “slave cylinder” had to be replaced. I loved that name too much to mind. In fact, I thought of asking my doctor if a similar defect might be found to account for my persistent unsuccess in life.

Notice I haven’t said that I’m in love with my little Toyota. Maybe that will come in time, once I get used to this real boy thing.

Meantime, I drive the best way I know how, which is apologetically. I know it isn’t done that way in Tokyo, but my love of things Japanese insists. I feel sure that the Japanese would drive apologetically if the stress of modern life would allow it—which of course it doesn’t and maybe never will.

Unless maybe Toyota develops an option I would dearly love to have on my car. This option would empower me to flash messages of apology and clarification to other drivers. Given that, I might have squelched yesterday’s fit of road rage with a personalized apology. That furious little old lady could have read this message flashed in red: *“Yes darling, I am the world’s worst driver. Bear with me please. I have some ways to go, being old for a boy and sorry, oh so sorry. Thank you for understanding. Arigato.”*

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