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It's My Birthday—Laugh, I Thought I Would Cry

I can easily say that I just had probably the worst birthday of my life.

And that is a hard thing to say when you have had as many birthday's as I have had over the years. Maybe under the "no fun" category, since this was so recent, it was just easier to remember. However, I can fondly recall one when my mother dressed me up for my 11th birthday party in a bright orange clown outfit with big black fluffy buttons and a large cone shape orange hat that had white dots. My friends were stunned by my party attire, since they seemed to have missed the message that it was a Halloween costume party and to dress up. Even the array of foods my mother had prepared could not diminish the shock. I do recall later it was the subject of several sessions with my analyst.

This birthday had no clown hats given COVID-19 restrictions, no large gathering of friends, who I know would have been amused had I shown up looking like a large orange clown.

My wife, Lucia and I were spending some time in Sonoma visiting some friends trying some wineries, having takeout dinners, and generally catching up. On my birthday, the Tuesday, we decided to drive down towards Bodega Bay as both friends were working from home for the day.

It was an incredibly beautiful with blue skies and temperatures slated to be in the low 80's. We wanted to drive and see the ocean something that is not that visible in Salt Lake City, but we do have seagulls (somehow lost their compass and seem so out of place paddling around in parking lots). Our plans included stopping close to water for lunch-- just the two of us with some fresh fish for lunch---what a birthday treat.

We were off in the morning looking forward to our day as the next morning we had to be up early to make the 11hr drive back to Utah.

Winding through the beautiful already harvested vineyards, the morning was blissful. Suddenly off a flatbed truck in front of us flew an object that took one bounce in the road and came full force into the grill of the car. From its shape in the instant, I had before it hit, I thought it look like a log of wood. But from the resulting loud crash as it hit, I knew it was more than that, it was a huge chunk of metal. Had it bounced another foot or two

higher in the road, it could easily have crashed into windshield and perhaps could have killed my wife.

I pulled over to the side of the road and opened the hood, and this piece of solid steel was now embedded into the engine and just hanging there. And this nice souvenir from the truck ahead easily weighed about 25/30 lbs. Of course, the truck went on merrily ahead oblivious to the fact that they just had taken out about most of the front end of my car. And the most irritating part of this joyful experience also happened to be that my car had only 9,000 miles on it.

We got the car back to a collision repair shop and they extracted the piece from the engine, but the car could not be driven due to damage and the hood would not even close. The repair people reported back in solemn fashion that the initial estimate was it could take up to a month to repair. So goodbye driving back to Utah the next morning in the car.

Next up for the birthday boy was to go to a car rental agency about a 1/2-mile walk away and get a rental car to drive until my car was repaired. Hours of paperwork later with the rental agency and the insurance company, we were the proud drivers of a Chrysler minivan. I can say in all my years of driving, I have never driven one, so this could be a real adventure winging our way across the nothingness of Nevada.

We then drove back to Healdsburg from Santa Rosa (about 35 min in a minivan) and stopped for lunch. "Look" my wife said in her usual way of looking for positive signs in life in contrast to my usual rants about anything crossing negatively my path, "nothing happened to us, the car will be fixed, and the problem has been dealt with so let's have a nice lunch and celebrate—everything bad that could have happened." I should have been worried about her certainty.

We came out of lunch and to our awaiting chariot that was going to get us, luggage, and a few cases of wine back to Utah. There it sat in the parking lot with a flat tire—flat as a pancake. Thinking that the cruel birthday jokes would not stop, I began to wonder who had it out for me that day. We made it across the parking lot to a garage and to my delight found that the tire for some reason would not fill up with air. It would only accept about 1/2 the amount of air to make it full, so I had to drive the 35 minutes back to Santa Rosa on the side of the road with flashers on doing 20 mph and an annoying flopping sound. Cars passing doing 70 mph were first aggravated at our speed, then joyous in seeing the minivan labor along with a partially flat tire.

We got back to the rental car agency and they were totally embarrassed as to what had happened and apologized profusely that this should not happen on my birthday (in my mind it should not happen any day) and so to compensate, they pulled up a bloody huge new white BMW X7. The manager remembered I had said something about boxes and luggage to take back, so they lowered the two or the three rows of seats to lay flat. He had electronically pushed the back seat up so close; the drivers and passengers' side seats were now forward practically into the dash—you could not sit straight up and that would

have been grand driving the 11 hours back to Salt Lake like a hunchback. Literally I was looking up at the steering wheel and dashboard under this current configuration.

After a while of endlessly fiddling, the rental car manager and his assistant trying to move the second row of seats back, we all concluded that it was a hopeless exercise, and it was permanently stuck. Since they have given me their prized chariot to compensate for the minivan, there were no other options left other than I think a pre-war 2 door Yugo probably with some Yugoslav still in the trunk.

I seem to have remembered seeing in the haven of car dealerships we were in, a BMW dealership nearby. My wife and I got into our forward prone luxury car and drove the ½ to the BMW dealership at about 10mph for fear that I could not see anything including oncoming cars. Two smiling service staff greeted us thinking us wealthy clients having an awfully expensive car and not realizing this was a rental upgrade from a minivan.

As they continued to play with the seat buttons and nothing was happening once again, comments that I had heard before, “gee, I can’t think why this is happening on this expensive a car,” kept coming. With no success they resorted to bringing out Dieter, the head mechanic who seemed to have just come in from Stuttgart. He and another mechanic came and within another painful 30 minutes, the backseat seat was amazingly functioning—actually I asked him never to move it forward as long I was present. Now we could sit straight while driving, how novel.

That morning we left the house at 8:30am and got back at 5pm after the drive, accident, spending time at Toyota collision, on the phone to the insurance company, my joyous time at the rental car agency and of course, the ever-helpful Dieter. No fish, no birthday cake, not orange clown outfit, just a bloody awful day in the wine country. Side note, to add to my wonderful story.

The BMW, a beautiful car which is so complicated one needed a degree in engineering from the University of Heidelberg just to figure out all the dials and gadgets, required that my wife spend an inordinate amount of time reading the owner’s manual just so I could figure out the turn signals. Thank God it was not printed in German.

Anyway, we were in the middle of God-Knows-Where Nevada and the screen on the BMW dash (there are two making you feel you are flying a 737) started flashing a warning saying “pull over immediately” as there was no oil in the engine. Fortunately, nothing to do with the back seat. I found a small gas station not far off the interstate and pulled in and asked if I could buy some oil, “sure we sell oil, by the gallon.” I replied that I was not driving a semi and just needed a quart to which I got the pleasantly helpful reply, “we only sell gallons and that is it.” Back into the car and driving ahead with both screen flashing red and me thinking the engine is suddenly going to freeze up on the expensive car and I was going to have to buy a new engine for the BMW that I hated. Fortunately, another gas station was not that far ahead, and I raced in with my wife and the owner’s manual in tow so we could purchase the exactly right oil with the right viscosity as described in the manual, or I would be in trouble with BMW.

We made it home that night and the next day, I immediately returned the complex German chariot which I was to have for another month and asked the car rental agency, "do you have something more appropriate that is dumb downed for less sophisticated drivers?" I got a Toyota and was incredibly happy as I knew how to use the turn signals and did not need the owner's manual to figure out.

My little birthday trip ended up costing \$9,100 in repairs/rental fees and took a month to complete. Now who was wearing the orange clown suit?