

Reckless on the Zvimba Road



A sobering reminder of the tenuous moorings of 'sensus communis.'

I have a checkered driving record. I never had a license until the age of forty-one but since then have driven tens of thousands of kilometers. I've had speeding tickets, fender benders and a couple of bigger crashes—neither, mercifully, involving any bodily injury. I've had far too many close calls. Yet the most hair-raising one occurred years before I had a license. That was in Zimbabwe, in February 1986...

Up to that time— even had I been able to afford one— a car seemed much more a burden than a convenience. From my teens, I'd hitch-hiked, taken buses or depended on others for lifts. In Africa during my twenties to early thirties, I lived on the same school compounds where I taught. I was never more than a walk or a bus ride away from a market.

It wasn't until after marriage and the birth of our first child that the isolation of a rural school became a problem. At that time, we were living at Kutama Mission, about 85 kms. west of Harare. More than half that distance was along rutted dirt roads.

On our first trip back from Harare with our infant daughter, the rural bus that stopped at seemingly every cow path in route dropped us at the hamlet of Zvimba, 3 kms. from the mission. Before we started walking, I tried waving a \$10 bill at a passing pickup truck hoping to entice the driver to give us a lift. As he disappeared in the dust, my wife, T., with baby MT wrapped on her back, said sarcastically:

“Do you think you can lay that money down on the ground and ride it along?”

I knew then it was time to get our own transportation...

My wife told the mission priest, Father Fuge, that she needed a car for travelling to Harare for her education studies which she was soon to resume. Within a few days, he introduced her a visiting Marist brother. That French brother was friends with a garage owner who sold used cars of fellow Rhoddies “taking the gap.” Charmed by T. (and baby MT), the brother said he could ask his friend about procuring a good car at a fair price for a devote parishioner. In a month or so, we got our first wheels: an 8-year-old blue Datsun 120 Y station wagon.

The suspension was bouncy but there was no evidence of collision damage. The engine and transmission were sound. The tires were bald but we managed to buy a couple of retreads in Harare. The rusted-out holes in the frame I caulked with plumber's putty. Given the local

scarcity of anything drivable, we got an amazing deal. We were even able to buy it entirely in Zimbabwe dollars, some of which had been exchanged (unconfessed) on the black market.

The plan was for T. to get her driver's license as soon as possible. In the meantime, a German fellow teacher without a car was happy to drive us into Harare for his shopping and appointments along with ours.

Although our Datsun had standard transmission, the left side gear shift was convenient for me. In my teens, I had learned to operate a standard transmission one-handedly— even with the inconvenient right-hand gear shift. A few times I took the wheel of friends too drunk to drive. Of course, I had no illusions that a driver's test could ever be passed by someone who could not firmly hold the steering wheel with one hand while shifting gears with the other.

Before T. got her learner's permit, I began driving outside the mission gate. There was little traffic on the dirt roads connecting the farms and African hamlets in the surrounding communal areas. On one of first forays, I got caught in a blinding rainstorm without headlights or windshield wipers. With a bit of tinfoil, I managed to close the gap in a burned-out fuse before limping home.

After a couple of months, I felt ready for a solo trip to Norton, the town mid-way between Kutama and Harare. In the center of Norton was a mini-shopping center which in by-gone days had served the white farmers of outlying areas. Its general store and post office were the closest such facilities to the mission. Unlike driving on the country roads, the drive to Norton involved road signs, roundabouts and some faster traffic.

Just before I left, T. asked if I could take along little C. She was T.'s 3½ -year-old niece whom we had brought from T.'s family farm the previous Christmas to stay with us for a few months. We wanted her to learn English before starting school. She was still a bit shy with me, but when T. told her in Shona she would be getting a treat, she eagerly jumped in the back. With little C. belted in, I set off along the dusty road...



Going by the notes I took on the following morning, the 45 km. drive into the town was uneventful. I do recall that I drew some attention in parking in front of the general store. On the first try, I got too close to another parked car. A couple of locals gawked when I walked up the outside steps holding little C.'s hand.

Inside the near-empty store (that smelled of curry powder), I quickly collected the few items on T.'s list. For little C., I bought gumdrops. While I was loading the bag of groceries in the car, a policeman rode up on his bicycle. Little C. and I walked past him up to the door of the post office.

When I came out from buying stamps, the same cop was standing in front of his bike near the outside steps. He watched as I belted little C. back in her seat and put a few candies in her hand. Before I climbed into the driver's seat, he certainly noticed the empty right sleeve. Backing out

with a jerking shift of gears, I pulled away... Only at that moment, did it strike just what a risk I was taking driving without a license. If caught, I would face at the very least impoundment of the car and a stiff fine.

I was suddenly edgy to get out of town— out of range of the cops. Jittery, I failed to yield at the ‘give-way’ sign on the roundabout on the outskirts of town. Fortunately, there was no oncoming traffic.

Further along on the left was the district police barracks... I slowed to below the rated 60 KPH. When I passed the two civilians reading newspapers on the corner, they were staring. Was something conspicuous, I wondered in alarm.

At the railway crossing a few kilometers on, the signal lights were flashing. Down the tracks to the right, a locomotive was idling. The driver motioned me forward. In hesitating, I barely avoiding a gear-change stall.

After the tracks, the Final Inn bar indicated the passing of the outlying town. Several men were standing outside the bar, drinking ‘*chibuku*’. More heads turned as I passed. Thinking I was driving too slow, I accelerated to nearly 90 KPH. Meanwhile, the tension was slightly easing as the town passed further behind...

At the turn off to John O’Groat's Road, leading to white farms, I slowed to 70 KPH. Near the tobacco drying sheds, a trio of farm labourers were walking along the curb. In passing, they gave me hostile looks. It was baffling until I remembered hearing of the nasty reputation of the local Rhoddie farmers during the war years...

Glancing round, I confirmed that little C. was content. She was looking out the window and licking the sugar coating off her gumdrops. I turned back to see a cyclist approaching on the wrong side of the road. I veered round him then checked in the rearview mirror. He was stopped and glaring round at me. *What the hell is wrong with him?* I wondered.

On a a straight stretch on smooth asphalt, I speeded back up to 90 KPH. At the end of the long curve that followed, a blue ‘*combi*’ van was halted on the roadside blinking its lights. I recalled the comment of the German teacher, Mr. S.: ‘*You got to be defensive, driving in this country. You need to be prepared for every kind of crazy maneuvers!*’

A minute later, I had to brake for another car with headlights flashing. Approaching in my lane, it swung away at the last moment. The driver was signaling that something was wrong. I certainly hadn’t been weaving like a drunk driver. I was keeping to my side of the white line. Did I have a flat tire? Yet there was no bumping or pulling to one side. I shuddered in imagining a high-speed blow out.

Almost as frightening, was the thought of encountering the military vehicles known to ply the Kutama road. The ancestral home of Comrade Mugabe’s was adjacent to the mission. His siren-screaming convoys were rumoured to plough through anything in their way... Still, hitting the ditch to make way for the presidential limo was not as worrisome as getting hijacked by dissidents on some remote roads in Matebeleland.

Finally in relief, I bumped onto the dirt road. I expected the final 20 kms. to be almost traffic-free. But almost like a mirage, a vehicle with a rotating brush was bearing down amid a cloud of dust. A road sweeper? I slowed and veered around it. Seconds later, there was an oncoming lorry. As I slowed in approach, it pulled over hard to the curb. 'National Railways' was stenciled on the driver's door. As I squeezed by, three men in blue overalls jumped from the truck bed. One had both hands raised in a halt gesture. In bewilderment, I braked.

All three ran up to the car.

From the open window I craned round with an anxious smile. The first man to reach the window was livid.

"What's wrong, sir?" I asked in a jolt of fear.

"What in hell's is the matter with you?" he shouted in English.

"What? Is there something wrong?"

"You bloody fool. You were driving on the wrong side of the road!"

"Omigod, you are right," I gasped.

It struck like a forehead whack by a two-by-four. I must have got mixed-up coming out of the roundabout on the outskirts of town. It was a bloody miracle I hadn't caused a head on collision!

"It's a bloody foolish thing, you were doing!"

The bearded man behind the older one leaning the window looked ready grab the door handle and pull me out by the collar. The skinny one in the rear lurched menacingly towards the window.

"Were you trying to kill us?" he shouted.

"*Hurombo*, [sorry] *baba*," I beseeched. "It was a foolish mistake. Very foolish. The last thing I would ever do is hurt anyone. I've got a child with me. My wife's niece."

The older worker glanced into the back seat where little C. looked up curiously.

"I just got mixed up when I got onto the dirt road. I'm from Canada. We drive on the right side there."

"Canada, Oohhh!" The stance of the older one slightly relaxed.

"Yes, sir. I teach secondary school at at Kutama mission. With the Marist brothers."

"You know Brother Morel?" he asked.

"Yes, *baba*. I see him every day."

Presumably the crew boss, he turned and spoke rapidly in Shona to his workmates. The skinny man used the word *'mapurisa'* [police] a couple of times. The younger one shrugged.

The boss glanced again in the back seat. Little C. was beginning to nod off.

“We drive on the left side here in Zimbabwe. The left only. You don’t forget that.”

“*Tatenda, tatenda, baba,*” I said fawningly. “Believe me, sir. I am shocked by my stupidity. This is a lesson I will never, ever forget.

I extended my hand in suppliance. He loosely took it. His workmates were already running back towards the truck.

“You just be careful,” he wagged a finger before turning. “This is not Canada!”

Only in driving away (hand in vise-grip on the wheel) did the monstrosity of my folly sink in:

I must have seemed like some drunk or crazy *mrungu* playing suicidal chicken. If all those oncoming drivers hadn’t taken proper evasive action— there would have been twisted metal and crushed bodies on the road behind— with my blind stupidity solely to blame. Even if I’d survived the accident, my life would have been utterly ruined: imprisonment with an unendurable conscience for whatever miserable time remained...

Yet the risking of my own skinny neck was the least of my folly. I glanced round at little C. She was already asleep— utterly innocent of any danger. I realized it was probably only her presence that stayed the maintenance crew from punching me out... Yet it seemed that justice would have better served had I been dragged out the car and beaten senseless. That was probably the ‘lesson’ I deserved.

It was a contrite fool, indeed, who drove the final 20 kms. back to the mission...



Upon return, I dared not tell T. of the close call. That was much more due to shame than avoidance of her reprimand. As for our little niece, she ran in the door excitedly showing *Amai* T. her half bag of candies...

I went immediately into the bedroom to kiss the forehead of our sleeping 5-month-old. Yet even in the depths of gratitude for coming home to her, I knew that had I not returned from Norton, baby MT could not have sensed anything amiss. The permanent absence of the cooing funny face would go unnoticed.

Perhaps the only daddy she would remember would be the man who came into her widowed mother’s life after the ‘accident’ in which her biological father was killed... Perhaps in her teen years, she might be curious to know more about that Canadian to whom her mother had been

first married. How would she feel in discovering that the unknown father had killed or injured others along with himself? How would she feel in finding out that among his victims was a 3½-year-old cousin? She would be lucky to be spared the shame of that paternal legacy...

I also imagined the likely reaction of locals in my native village in Canada when the news of my demise in Africa, leaked back. I could see the grim nods: *'Too bad for his poor family'*, some natives would mutter. Meanwhile, they would think: *'He always had his head shoved up his ass!'*

All that was by a whisker missed. In a shudder, I gently squeezed baby MT's hand. So what burnt offerings were owed?



I never got a driver's license until 1993, back in British Columbia. I probably would have continued relying on the bus until retirement had it not been for a split shift...

Contrary to a likely assumption— none of my screw ups behind the wheel over the last thirty-plus years were due to limitations of one-handed driving. As my wife, C., has scolded (not only in reference to my driving) I am chronically impatient and often careless when annoyed...

The incident on the rural road in Africa in February 1986 ought to remain at the back of the mind every time I belt into the driver's seat. I should ask myself: did I really learn the 'lesson' from that shit-lucky escape? Have I really applied that lesson both on and off the roadways?

Perhaps driving on the wrong side of road has been a metaphor for all my lapses of common sense. Perhaps like the squint-eyed old cartoon character, Mr. Magoo— I continue to move blindly through swinging wrecking balls and dropped anvils crashing at my heels...

Still, when that fast-approaching moment comes for me to hand over the car keys permanently— there will be no need to wrest them away from this gnarly grip... My stubbornness is of a different nature than old coots of that ilk. I will gladly go back to taking the bus. Yet I will still avoid the priority seating and always shuffle towards the back— legs permitting.

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