



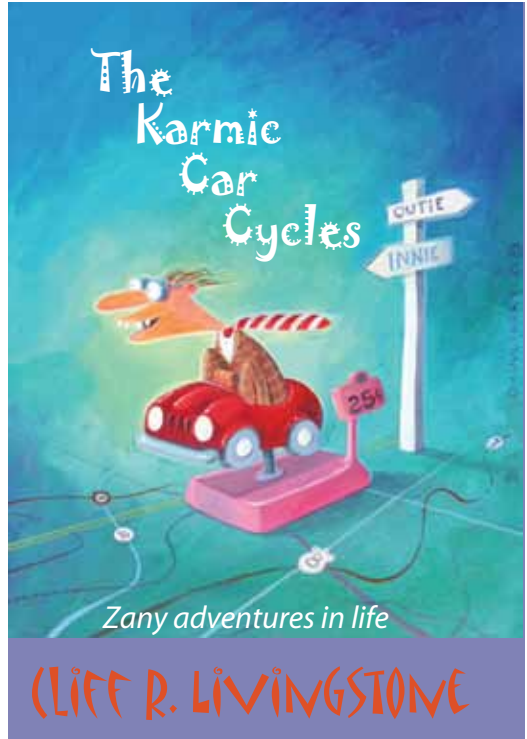
Cliff Livingstone (Rt)

Book 4 chronicles a myriad of wacky and head shaking “bin there, did it, wished I

hadn’t” type Karmic “Innie” and “Outie” misadventures involving machines of the automobile persuasion. See if you relate to these hapless perhaps stories of Karma, cars and cops. No cops and few vehicles were injured in the making of this book.

The Karmic Car Cycles is an unbelievable real-life romp of hilarious car misadventures. Having led one of the wackiest, most unusual, and unlikely lives on the planet, the author tumbles through these Karmic Car adventures at the rate of about ten laughs a minute.

Mr. Livingstone proposes that his car misadventures all occurred because he had a Karmic Car Cycle going on. He then builds his case though a series of uproariously funny “vignettes” that work in their own right over and above the narrative. The Karmic Car Cycles offers universal appeal to anyone who has owned, loved or hated a car.



Bridge over the River High

After my incident with the cop on the bridge between Dartmouth and Halifax and I didn’t have a valid driver’s license, my Karmic Car Cycles remained acquiescent until I returned to Calgary and Edmonton Alberta in the fall of nineteen seventy seven.

Greydie was still up into the North West Territories selling flowers. I had returned west to sell flowers and wholesale leather crafts with my original friends in Alberta. This time I ran into a whole slew of “Innie” “Outie” events quicker than most people eye blink. Mostly ‘Outies’.

It’s proper to believe that the police do their job to the best of their abilities and to the highest standard of fairness. We’re all taught that first thing in kindergarten,

earlier if your dad’s a cop.

Sometimes you get the feeling though that maybe they’ve stacked the deck just a wee bit in their favour. You know how it works, really long on the side of getting the job done and really short on finesse. And how many TV shows and movies have come up with that in the plot. Or watch a Clint Eastwood or Steven Segal movie in full gear, not forgetting that they’re portraying cops.

High River is a small town about thirty miles due south of Calgary. It sits about two miles straight west off the main highway north and south. A secondary back road, also connecting to the highway, leaves straight north out of town and links to the highway about five miles up towards Calgary.

If you leave town on this route, you pass over a small bridge over the River High. The river is standard of the area, a modest stony creek in the fall and a rushing mountain torrent in the spring or whenever it rains. The river passes under the back road link about a block out from the downtown core.

After crossing the bridge, the road runs about a quarter of a mile up to a ninety degree hard right angle turn to the left. The turn has a very large yellow checked warning sign which clearly says, ‘slow to 40’.

After making the turn, the road continues on for about four and a half miles past cow pastures and wheat fields where it finally hooks back up with the main highway north to Calgary.

Now you have to think that anyone who drives into town off the main access south from the highway, and leaves town going out the back road going north, would therefore naturally assume that the speed limit after crossing the bridge over the River High would have to be greater than forty miles an hour wouldn’t you. Otherwise they wouldn’t have checkered up the sign at the hard left turn further ahead to clearly warn you to slow down to forty, would they. And you would be perfectly correct unless it was a set up.

“Not a setup”, insisted the cop who was hiding behind the bushes about half way up towards the checkered sign, who roared out to give me a ticket for speeding on my next trip through town. Quoteth he, “The bylaw clearly states that the speed limit continues from downtown at thirty miles an hour all the way out for two and a half miles”.

It was therefore thirty miles an hour until way out into the pastures and wheat fields half way up to the highway connection north. You have to also understand that the checkered sign at the right turn was the only speed postings until just before the official rev up spot two and a half miles out.

If you had been born and raised in High River, you would probably have known about this little quirk of bylaw bologna early on in your driving career for having had to learn all the local bylaw ins and outs in order to get your driver’s license. Or for having received your first ticket probably on your very first day out trying yourself

out, after going over the bridge after just getting you license.

Well I wasn’t from the ‘River’, hadn’t just got my license, so was a turkey ripe for the shooting in from Calgary. So what did I know.

So I would have to call that one a real live “Outie” for my being a duped in ‘out of towners’ cold cluck gobbled in a cold level turkey shoot as slick as it gets. Well not exactly the slickest.

The record for the slickest goes to Coronation Alberta. Coronation is a very small town sitting in a deep isolation ward way off in south central Alberta. It sits on a North South secondary highway running nearly smack dab up and down the whole middle of the open part of the province.

The highway runs all the way from well past Edmonton in the North to the very bottom of the province in the South. The only other province in Canada even capable of something like that is Saskatchewan, and it scarcely has any highways so none like that.

The main North South highway linking Fort McLeod at the south and Calgary Edmonton to the north, was well to the west along the High River side, sliding up just this side of the mountains.

Coronation was therefore over ninety miles to the south and east from Calgary. Since the town consisted only of a railway station from the twenties, a grain elevator, and an old hotel, very little in the way of excitement ever takes place there. Except for the nightly fleecing of the flock.

I had been leather craft wholesaling for nearly a week throughout the whole bottom west side of the province and planned to start the east side the next morning at Coronation.

I had phoned ahead and booked a room at the local hotel. I left Lethbridge Alberta about nine in the evening and headed straight north on the main north south Alberta route. According to the map, the only road crossing from the main highway and hooking up to the secondary highway near Coronation was about ten miles south of Coronation.

I took the cross connection and turned left onto the secondary trunk road to go up the final ten mile stretch north into Coronation. It was about eleven thirty at night and pitch black out. The sky was overcast so no stars. There were no lights in sight on any horizon, not even a farmer’s porch light in the distance. This was really desolate country to say the least.

Every once in a while I would see flashing red lights up ahead by their reflection off the low hanging clouds overhead.

I had been driving along minding my own business, when suddenly, right beside me about four feet away, a cop’s red lights whacked on out of the dark like an exploding supernova and I almost went off the road.

After I pulled over, the cop came up and told me I was speeding. “Speeding where”, I asked mystified. “I thought every highway in Alberta except the four lane freeway joining Calgary and Edmonton was the same fifty five miles an hour”.

“They are,” said the cop patronizingly, “But the shoulder on this particular stretch of road for twenty miles back is three feet narrower than normal”, he explained getting ready to strike. “Therefore the speed limit is five miles an hour less through here than anywhere else”.

Well, I suppose if I had gotten onto the highway somewhere south of the cross cut, I might possibly have seen a sign or two. But I hadn’t. And the only next speed sign turned out conveniently to be just about a mile before Coronation. Therefore, conveniently, way too late to do any good for anyone like me who had just come in off the one and only cross cut possible above the very bottom of the province. And all done quite deliberately I have to presume because I got a ticket.

When I booked into the hotel, I griped a bit to the night clerk. “Oh him”, said the clerk, with half a smile, “He sits out there every night picking them off like flies, been doing it for years”.

Somebody should write a little red book for travellers about this kind of stuff. You know, like, “If you’re here watch out for that, if you’re there watch out for this”. At any rate, I know for sure that this one was about as “Outie” as it gets, so an “Outie” it is fair and square.

In all the years I wholesaled our leather goods stuff through Alberta and Saskatchewan, I only ventured into BC once. Good thing too. I might have ended up getting barred from driving for life.

The highway from Jasper to McBride at the far east edge of BC had long since been punched through to Prince George in the BC interior. Prince George had already been long since hooked up by highway to the west coast at Prince Rupert.

The highway in fact followed exactly along the main CNR line west to the coast from Edmonton. In the early days the Canadian Pacific Railway had grabbed off the simpler and much more touristy route through Banff, the Rockies, and to the south down the very picturesque Fraser River Canyon into Vancouver. The Canadian National Railway got the leftovers and built their line across the north into Prince Rupert further up the coast.

After McBride, the highway was completely barren except for a number of saw mill camps until Prince George.

My one and only wholesale trip into BC along the highway was a two week affair. I went first straight through to the West Coast following the string of towns along the original CNR line west of Prince George. Then I headed straight back to Prince George and down to the quintessential little gold mining and pulp mill town of Quesnel south of Prince George.

It was not the most efficient routing you could hope for but that was the way the

BC highway system was designed at the time. Not forgetting too of course that I was in heavy mountains of one sort or another all the way.

On the day of the planned trip to Quesnel, I left downtown Prince George via a side thoroughfare which went under the main freeway south out of town. It emptied into a small outdoor plaza just south of town where I had an appointment to see a country western store.

The south end of the plaza went straight up a ramp onto the freeway heading south out of Prince George. When I finished my call, I went straight up the ramp. Then gunned it for all it was worth because I was now supposedly on the divided freeway well south of town, and immediately got pulled over two and a half blocks later and given a ticket for speeding.

Turns out the speed limit was still municipal for at least a couple of more miles down the road from where the ramp had come up and where we were sitting. So no question about it, I had been going too fast.

If I had gone onto the freeway on the normal route from down town, I would have no doubt seen speed signs all the way along. Nobody on the municipal board had thought of putting up a sign to warn the people coming up onto the on ramp from the plaza though. Or had deliberately chosen not to, you pick it this time.

I tried hopelessly to explain my situation to the cop. “Tough”, said the cop as he wrote out the ticket. “Not a very pleasant fellow”, I thought to myself as he roared away in high gear throwing up a huge shower of stones and dust onto my windshield. Or else they just didn’t like Albertans over there.

Maybe I should have simply wondered how come he had been so quick on the draw for picking me up just exactly after I had come up onto the freeway via the unmarked on-ramp from the innocent looking little plaza.

At any rate, it was probably the poorest attitude of any police officer I had ever encountered in my lifetime. Definitely an “Outie”. Two, because he almost cracked my windshield with his stupid shower of rocks when he gunned it out full throttle after giving me the stupid ticket. Like giving me the finger to boot in his no doubt hurry to get back to his spot at the stake out to grab the next hapless prey coming up out of the on-ramp onto the freeway. Or maybe he was just in a hurry to leave the scene of the crime.

On the way back from B.C. I had the ultra good fortune of passing through Jasper National Park on an ultra brilliant clear blue winter day. The scenery was spectacular. One of the reasons why Jasper National Park is among the world leaders for famous natural scenic wonders for land surfers with nothing but sightseeing to do.

The highlight of the tour is Mount Robson, the highest mountain in the Canadian part of the Rockies. Most of the time you can’t see the top because it’s covered in cloud.

On this particular day the fates had decided to play me an overture in C sharp major because the mountain top was as clear as a bell. To add to the glamour, a spray of snow was blowing off the tip of the crown to the east just like you see in Mount Everest photos.

The sight was so spellbindingly riveting that I neglected to stay spellbindingly riveted on the speed signs. On days like this, Mount Robson probably comprises one of the most spectacular mountain views in the world if you are not a mountain climber.

The Mountain is not off in the distance like most kinds of promoted scenic statures. It starts straight up from the road in front of you about two miles in. Then rises straight up to end in a jagged point of crown. No foothills or parts of other mountains are in front to obstruct your view. It’s a perfect stand alone mountain standing in full salute right in front of you like a Hollywood set.

Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa also sits straight up in front of you off the landscape with no foothills in front to mar the view. But it has no mountains on either side, making Mt. Robson the undisputed winner for majestic view. I’m sure the original highway planners probably made a fifty mile jag inwards to just that point at the foot of the mountain just to give passers by a great big well deserved go on the awe button, and probably cash cow revenues from the wallets of tourists coming through from Jasper for the view.

So I did what any self respecting tourist would do in a situation like this and gawked at the mountain instead of the highway. I never saw the cop coming from up ahead and got a ticket for speeding.

It seems that the speed limit in all national parks in Canada is ten miles an hour less than in all non-national parks, i.e., the rest of the country.

If I hadn’t been staring up at the top of the mountain, or it had been raining, I probably would have seen a speed sign. Or at least I might have seen the cop coming down the highway far enough in front to instinctively slow down a little like you always do instinctively the split second you see a cop coming down the road anywhere in front of you.

It wasn’t, I didn’t, and should have. So this one is a small “Innie”, though most annoying. Make no mistake about that because it also went on my driving record.

How could I have missed that sign?

Everyone knows how Karma is supposed to work. What you do unto others is done unto you a thousand fold in the next cycle. In the Karmic Car Cycles you sometimes don’t even have to wait for the next cycle.

In the middle of winter in Edmonton nineteen seventy nine, I had stopped for gas at the start of my flower route one evening. I had been in a big hurry to get going.

Sample chapter from “Can’t Win, Can’t Lose, Can’t Quit” Cliff Livingstone

After paying for the gas I did a backup Uie right out from beside the pump and straight into the side of a car parked way out in the middle of nowhere all by itself in the middle of the service station lot.

You always try and rationalize something done stupidly like that by an even more stupid reason why it wasn't your fault. I went inside to check out who the dumb cluck was that had left the stupid car parked in such an idiotic place.

The attendant said it had been parked like that for days and had no idea who it belonged to. So, because I thought it had been such a stupid place to leave a stupid car, and because in my view it wasn't even that big a dent in the side of the other car anyway, and because I was in a really big hurry to get going and on with my flower route, and mostly because I didn't want to get into Dutch with my partners for dinging someone else's car, I shrugged my shoulders and drove away without leaving my phone number or anyway to get in touch.

Can't do that. No, no, no. Karmic Car Cycles are very specific about that kind of thing. Naughty, naughty, naughty. You desecrate one of their beloveds. That very night the temperatures made a fast dip down into the lowest regions of the mercury in years, almost thirty below zero Fahrenheit.

The overnight temperature had fallen so fast that the next morning, the back driver's side window of the station wagon, the big expensive roundy one, had cooled slower than the metal of the car.

Because of the difference in compression ratios, the window had shattered into a trillion tiny little pieces held together only by the thinnest of layers of safety glass plastic in the middle. Talk about frost on the window.

This was a one hundred percent cash and carry “Innie” payout, which probably cost quite a few times more than what the little ding, well, actually, biggish little ding on the other car would probably have cost out of pocket.

I had an almost identical experience with a car window years later. Only this time it wasn't the car Gods, it was that stupid Murphy guy again. January of 2009 in Ottawa was super cold. It was also of super snow. The thermal forces are changing all over the planet and Ottawa was getting its fair share.

Because the house we were renting was very old it was very poorly insulated. Because it was poorly insulated the snow against the roof was constantly melting. Because it was colder than the high stratosphere above the space station the melt was constantly forming into gigantic icicles hanging down off the roof edge. Because big icicles were constantly hanging down I constantly made sure to park well up the driveway past the icicled part of the roof.

One evening I roared in in a hurry and parked too close to the front end of the driveway. It snowed a couple of inches overnight. The next day I came out, turned on the engine to start warming it up, stepped out planning to sweep off the snow while the engine warmed, shut the car door gently getting out, and heard a subtle whoomph in back of the car. The entire back window was sitting on the back seat

Sample chapter from “Can’t Win, Can’t Lose, Can’t Quit” Cliff Livingstone in about a hundred trillion tiny pieces all covered in snow.

One of the big icicles, after hanging there serenely off the roof for weeks and weeks and weeks, had decided to choose just that particular night of opportunity to let go.

It cost me two hundred bucks to replace the window. The tally is simple. An obvious ‘Outie’ for getting a broken window. An obvious ‘Innie’ for putting the window right under Murphy’s nose. So obviously an even Steven for the whole affair unless your calculator is broken.

One of the nicer things about the Karmic Car Cycles is that the keeper of the books also evidently takes great care in looking after your butt. Both figuratively and literally. Notice I wasn’t in the car at the time the heavy chunk of ice hit. Notice that in all of these episodes so far, I haven’t managed to incur even a tiny scratch, or superimposed one upon anyone else.

One day in the same summer while still back in Alberta, the keeper sort of came to my rescue once again. Not so much in the saving of my life way of grace, that comes later, but there could have been a humongous expense on the car not to mention an even more humongous inconvenience.

I had been coming back from one of my occasional two week leather wholesaling trips throughout central and southern Saskatchewan. It was the last day and I was heading back to Edmonton just inside the Alberta border due west of Lloydminster, Alberta/Saskatchewan.

Lloydminster is kind of interesting. The main street north and south through the centre of town is also the national divide between the Provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Meaning, that because Alberta was a net oil producing province and Saskatchewan wasn’t much at the time, the price of gas was ten cents a litre less on the Alberta side. In some case between two service stations sitting right across the street from each other.

The funny thing was, there was almost the same number of gas stations on either side of the street, and all equally busy. You have to understand that anybody from Saskatchewan could buy from any service station on the Alberta side to save the dime and nobody would have cared the less, except all the service station owners on the Saskatchewan side of the street.

It had to do with prairie loyalty. The stations had been set up long ago before Alberta started pumping the stuff out in any significant quantity and the price differential started appearing. So the Saskatchewan farmers continued buying from their favourite Saskatchewan side gas stations out of loyalty to the cause and the dimes be dammed.

Besides, Saskatchewaners supported Saskatchewaners because nobody else did. Farmer loyalty to the creed is a loyalty you can depend on anywhere on the planet unless it’s a mega corp.

After leaving Lloydminster going west, I had been travelling at a constant sixty miles an hour on cruise control. Suddenly I got a tiny whiff of warm water. Actually

Sample chapter from “Can’t Win, Can’t Lose, Can’t Quit” Cliff Livingstone
it was a lot more like steam.

A few seconds later I smelled it again. Alarm bells suddenly started going off all over the place so I thought I better pull over and check it out. I saw a big overpass just ahead so coasted to the shoulder safely out of harm’s way just before the turnoff .

I got out and checked under the hood. Sure enough, just above the top of the block the upper rad hose had sprung a leak about the size of a lead pencil.

Water was shooting straight out like a mini garden hose. About another minute or two at the speed I was going and the rad would have emptied and the engine gone bonkers.

Now I was out in the middle of nowhere without a rad hose for that particular car and little chance of finding one. Full sized station wagons of the time like the one I was driving, had become pariahs in the wake of the gas price explosion of the mid seventies everywhere in North America.

In the remote rural stretches of north eastern Alberta where pickup trucks were the vehicles of preference, my prospects for the right hose for a big city station wagon favoured only in the old days were even less by about ten to one.

I figured I was going to be facing a major fifty mile tow job or more back to Lloydminster, with a long delay waiting for a hose to come in from parts unknown within the bowls of the US no matter which way I played it.

Fully in the dismal belief that Lloydminster was my best bet, I climbed to the top of the overpass to see if anyone was coming back the other way I could hitch a ride with. When I reached the top of the pass, I saw a very old country service station tucked quietly away about a quarter of a mile into the landscape just on the other side of the overpass.

Most highway places have signs a half a mile high so you can’t miss them. This guy’s sign was a tiny standard snip of a sign sitting quietly away from the main track absolutely in the middle of nowhere off all by itself completely out of the way.

Probably like so many others, he had likely been sitting at one time on the all important intersection of the all important old highway. When the new gang buster freeway had been put in, he had been left high and dry and never bothered reconfiguring his sign.

I walked down and told the old timer in the service bay what had happened. He asked what kind of car I had. I told him, and he said, “You’re in luck son, somebody ordered an upper rad hose for that very same car last year and never came back”. Twenty minutes later the car was up on the rack. Half an hour after that I was back on road like new.

‘What are the odds’, you ask, I haven’t a clue. A lot longer than a country mile from where I was standing at any rate. Don’t forget, the hose could have popped its gasket anywhere along the five hundred miles of thinly populated road I had been driving from Saskatoon to Edmonton, and I could have ended up a lot worse even

Sample chapter from “Can’t Win, Can’t Lose, Can’t Quit” Cliff Livingstone than a Man on Mars without his water condensation bottle.

Likewise, the garage guy was so relieved at finally being able to unload the white elephant rad hose he had been carrying for a year, he didn’t even charge much for the service. Some days you win, some days it’s a lotto. If you’ve ever won a lotto you know the feeling. If you haven’t figured this one out yet as a very big ‘Outie’ by everyone concerned better start over again at page one.

If I ever do get to meet the guy or gal up there who’s calling the shots, I’d like to shake their hand on this one. Either that, or there are simply an awful lot of unused auto parts sitting around on service station shelves all over North America waiting for somebody’s car to blow up in the middle of nowhere like mine did, looking for the lucky break to fix it.

Maybe so, because exactly the same kind of thing happened to me in Ottawa nearly ten years later, only this time involving front brakes. I had spent the better part of the afternoon in downtown Ottawa. I had just picked up two hundred bucks owed and was heading back up to the freeway towards the little town of Almonte where my brother and I were living at the time researching and selling hi fispeakers. Almonte was about thirty five miles South West of Ottawa.

According to the lore, Almonte was where the game of basketball had been invented by James Naismith in the eighteen eighties, who later introduced it to Springfield College in the US in eighteen ninety one where he had gone on staff. Which is why the Springfield Yankees claim themselves to be the original players of basketball. Probably certainly true as far as college basketball is concerned.

Almonte never even knew what they had in their midst until recently. It had now become fair game to claim the title for publicity purposes courtesy of a couple of progressive thinking aldermen looking for innovative ways to attract new business to the old town instead of reduced taxes.

I had been heading up a commercial street in Ottawa just before the freeway. Something shifted and the right front brake suddenly seized tight as a drum as I was stopping for a red light.

I hauled into the nearest service station, which by luck had an empty bay. The guy took one quick look and said, “Yep, caliper’s seized all right, you’ll have to replace it”. It was nearly quarter to six in the evening so now I had a problem.

Any of the auto parts dealers who could deliver the part would be closed by now and the car wasn’t going anywhere until fixed. I was obviously facing a stay in Ottawa overnight, but where and how except for an expensive hotel plus running around by bus.

The mechanic said, “hold ‘er a sec you may be in luck”. He was back in five minutes with a brand new caliper for just exactly that make and year of car. Turned out it was the same as last time. Someone had ordered the part nearly a year before and never came back.

Sample chapter from “Can’t Win, Can’t Lose, Can’t Quit” Cliff Livingstone

The car was eleven years old. And it wasn’t even standard stock off the lot stuff like a Chevettte or Caddie. The Gods of Cars had come through again big time with another timely little non-organic hors d’oeuve served up on a platter.

An hour later and a hundred and sixty bucks lighter, I was back on the road. Whether or not it was actually a nice “Outie” dividend because of the convenience of where the seizure had occurred, or the Karmic keepers just taking care of me, or another “Innie” because of the money it cost is all probably lost to moot.

The point is I was back on the road again, no muss no fuss. As far as the ‘What are the odds’ aspect about it again, you can play with that one any way you want. Weird though, isn’t it. Like cosmically awesome. I mean twice eh, same trip. Go figure.

Yer spark plug is shot

Fortunately for all of us, there are also still honest mechanics around like these two guys in the pinches, who could have charged me an arm and a leg or anything else they had wanted under the circumstances.

The record for helping out though goes to an old white haired gent back in Halifax. Our original personally owned taxi cab in Halifax had developed some rather scary sounding transmission noises one day so I took it in to have it checked.

Four hundred was the prognosis. Not happy with the sound of that, I took it to two other places. About four hundred bucks was again the story, again at both.

Then somebody told me about an old white haired dude who knew what he was doing. “If you’re lucky”, the guy said, “I can have you back on the road for about four dollars and fifty cents”.

The problem turned out to be a plugged transmission filter. I have to believe at least one of the other guys if not all knew that too.

Rip off artists aside, in the latter fifties Dad had come home one day with the spiffy new car of the century. It was an all new Nash Rambler hot off the press. It was a beautiful looking little car, way ahead of the industry standard of the time of big floating sedans with fins for wings and chrome for polishing.

Unfortunately not all the little bugs had been worked out yet and Dad was forever taking it back to the shop for some annoying little gripe. The moral of the story is the same as with computers. Never buy the first year of a brand new product launch. You end up being one of the beta testers. Wait two years and let someone else have all the problems. I ignored my own advice, bought a new style van the first year out and got pestered to death with a problem.

After we had started selling flowers in Halifax for awhile, we bought a new Ford Econo Van in Halifax. It was the first year of the all new Chateau Wagon version which was designed for families as a super big station wagon, instead of for roofers with ladder racks for business. It was also the first year of the now ubiquitous ‘Captains Chair’ type front seats. So Ford was beating the drum about it most enthusiastically.

Sample chapter from “Can’t Win, Can’t Lose, Can’t Quit” Cliff Livingstone

Also, the dealer thought our constant driving around all night to bars would give it good exposure so gave us a bit of a deal on the price. Nothing attracts eyeballs faster than the magnetic pull of a good deal when they see one, so Greydie and I were all for it.

After driving the Chateau it for about a month, somebody told me that you could save gas in a big V8 engine by splitting the exhaust into dual pipes. Also, because of the reasonable possibility that the car would end up back in Alberta as an ideal ‘out of town flower blitzer’ with the partners back there someday, I wanted the noise from the muffler to be as minimal as possible.

When you hit a town on a flower blitz, you want to be as alive and alert as you can. Experience had shown that all day in a noisy car can really take the wind out of your sails. If you’re not buzzing enough when you hit the next town, how you can expect to get the customers buzzing enough to buy your flowers unless they were too buzzed by booze at the bar to even care.

All travelling salesman have known about this little trick of the trade since long before the days of Willie Loman, which is why they all drive big comfortable floating sedans. In the late eighties, a stamp dealer acquaintance in Ottawa was leasing a huge full sized nineteen eighty eight Cadillac.

He was anything but a wealthy man so I asked him why. He needed the room in the trunk for packing his stuff around to the various stamp shows he explained. I always teased him about his fifty thousand dollar trunk, though nothing beats traveling in style when you have to travel.

Same with us, having the right kind of vehicle for the road was more than just a trifling matter. Pulling in more bucks on the road from being on top of your game because of the ride, more than paid up for the difference between a costly new van and a noisy old clunker. Not too many people I’m sure would have suspected that flower selling was such an exacting and well thought out science.

I took the new van into a Halifax muffler shop and explained carefully to the guy exactly what I wanted and why. Some people are into cheeses, some into wines. I’m into food, you know like bread, milk, butter. This guy was so into mufflers that he could barely contain his excitement at the prospect of getting his hands into a hot new comer like the Chateau to work on.

I came back two days later. The guy’s eyes were lit up like roman candles. “Listen to this”, he said almost breathless with excitement as his two pointy fingers stabbed high into the air with inescapable pride. He floored the gas and I heard a colossal, ‘gggrroowWWMMMMRRGGGGrrooommm.

The car sounded like the green flag at the Indy had just dropped. It was the all time dream wish dual exhaust hot rod back rap of every souper upping hot rodder who had ever strung a rig for super exhaust racket since the art of hot rodding mufflers as a craze had first begun.

The guy was drooling right out of his mind right in front of me, eyes bulging out

Sample chapter from “Can’t Win, Can’t Lose, Can’t Quit” Cliff Livingstone of his sockets with pride. He had nailed it, absolutely nailed it. The sound was perfect and was he ever smiling. For every greaser hot rodder trying to be in everyone’s face all the time and never made it, this would have been redemption. You could hear the thing two blocks away.

Unfortunately for me, it wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I had gone in there. I wanted a nice quite peaceful pastoral drive in the country that wouldn’t put me to sleep from exhaustion after listening to it all day. Having to tell him that he’d screwed up royally was almost like having to tell somebody that they had just done a magnificent job painting the wrong house.

The poor guy looked so ‘finally achieved’, that it almost broke my heart to tell him to tear it all out and put in what I’d ordered. So I cancel the “Outie” for bumming me out, by the “Innie” for bumming him out, and call the whole thing a tied score.

Thankfully, obnoxiously thundering exhausts in everybody’s face are now a thing of the distant past. Nowadays, the hands down winner for driving you nuts is the even more obnoxiously thundering traveling rock concerts going by in every direction. If you car isn’t blowing hundreds of watts of woofer in the trunk, you’re just not happening dude. And that’s only the low end Wal-Mart systems.

The ones preferred by coke dealers and anyone else who can afford them are the really big ones producing thousand of watts of booming bass, in the tiny little confines of your car, covering about three square blocks in any direction the car happens to be passing, especially at night.

I have to figure the owners of these noise pollution menaces are so high on coke all the time they need these utterly stultifying booming behemoths just to cut through the fog so they can drive.

Back in the early days of the Chateau however, Texas sized car stereos hadn’t even been invented yet. Nonetheless, in our enthusiasm for our sporty new Chateau van we had forgotten all about Dad’s little experience in the first year out of the newly released Nash Rambler nearly twenty years before.

About four months after we had bought the van, the universal joint just front of the differential went. Warranty replaced it. A couple of months later it went again.

The problem was that it was drying out. Nobody at Ford had any idea what was causing the problem. It was a big problem for Ford too, because the drying out was going on a lot in that year’s releases of the new styled vans and it was driving the Ford service guys nuts.

I stopped into the white haired Dude’s place one day about something or other, and just happened to mention the universal. “Let’s put ‘er up on the hoist and have a look”, he said.

A minute later he said, “Yep, here’s yer problem’s right here, the exhaust pipe’s a’running by the universal and the heat’s a’burning er out”. There’s no mistaking an old Maritimer when they’re seriously explaining about something important.

Sample chapter from “Can’t Win, Can’t Lose, Can’t Quit” Cliff Livingstone

The guy loosened some bolts and moved the pipe over about an inch and a half out of the heat’s way and that was the end of that. We never had to replace another universal. Ford was notified of the solution on the spot and the fix went in for the whole next year’s production. Another little piece of my tiny little brushes with history.

You would think that the engineers who had designed the car would have been able to figure that one out for themselves. The solution wasn’t exactly rocket science. But don’t be too hasty about that.

The old fellow told me once about a guy who had come in with a big deluxe Chrysler in the mid sixties. I’m sure it’s a long worn out story but here it is anyway. The guy had come in because the car was only four years old and running like a clunking truck. He’d taken it everywhere, even had the plugs replaced twice but nothing helped and nobody had a clue.

The old timer told me, “Even without a’looking under the hood, I told the owner exactly what the problem was”. The car had a three hundred and fifty horsepower Hemi Chrysler engine under the hood, Chrysler’s pride and joy powerhouse at the time.

In their urgency to get the engine under the hood at all costs, the engine fit into the engine compartment in such a way that you couldn’t get a wrench onto the eighth spark plug. The car was now running on only seven new spark plugs.

All the other mechanics who had fiddled with the car for the poor owner already knew that. They just hadn’t wanted to deal with the fix because the fix implied the irritating procedure of cutting a hole through the firewall, going in from the passenger compartment just to change the one spark plug, then plugging the hole back up properly afterwards to prevent smelly fumes from the engine knocking everybody out.

And who would willingly pay the cost for all that. After all it was just a simple spark plug. So the sleazy rat mechanics simply avoided the problem altogether by simply staying mum about it. Add this to the questionable safety of the Chevy Monza, whose whole rear engine and tranny were attached to the undercarriage of the car at the back by basically nothing more than a couple of simple U-bolts on the rear axial.

You have to wonder what goes on with these guys who work in the engineering think tanks where these cars are designed. I think it should be mandatory by law that anyone going to start working for somebody as an auto engineer, should have to work for two years minimum in the service bay of an auto repair shop somewhere just to get the lay of the land first before being allowed anywhere near a drafting table.

I mean there’s a practical side and a theoretical side to everything. When it’s my money and/or life on the line, I’ll take the practical side every time.

Maybe the automotive companies should seriously look into the idea of hiring Inuit Canadians for their engineering arm. The Inuit, formerly called Eskimo, are

now informally called Ice dudes. You know how it works. Babies are called ‘diaper dudes’, cashiers are called ‘cash dudes’, and Californians are just plain dude dudes where you are free to substitute in any word you want including he/she.

Ice dudes have a highly evolved grasp of all things physical. Particularly things mechanical. Who have seventeen different names for snow. By comparison I have two different names for dinner.

Ice dudes also have the fabled ability to take say, a four cylinder gas generator completely apart and put it together again bolt perfect every time the very first time they see it.

The talent first started appearing when Americans first started appearing in the Arctic with outboard motors and no service depots for thousands of miles. A wrench on ice saves nice.

Such a remarkable mechanical talent is not without reasonable cause however if you stop to think about it. The Inuit have lived for thousands upon thousands of years in the frozen Canadian North. Their only natural resource for utensils and other things they need desperately to get by on day by day is whale, caribou, and seal bone.

A small piece of bone is more valuable to them than a piece of pure Platinum is to an investment broker. Therefore the piece’s most practical eventual use, combining the greatest amount of utility and smallest amount of waste, would have to be visualized out in advance before starting to cut it up. Same as a diamond cutter. It only takes one mis-tap at the chisel to turn a prized diamond into pile of crystal rubble.

Like a chess player visualizing every possible board move in advance, or a Gedanken engineer designing a whole project complete in their mind first, Ice Dudes can’t afford to waste even the smallest piece of a bone uselessly.

If you don’t know what a Gedanken engineer is, it’s someone who visualizes the whole operation in mind’s eye first before ever committing wrench to nut. Same with Gedanken computer programmers. Same with Gedanken Orientals betting Mahjong.

Over the eons, the Inuit have simply evolved an uncanny ability to visualize and comprehend the interplay between mechanical parts as a whole .A lot better than you or I have at any rate. And what they need they made for themselves. Nowadays of course they just buy what they need from the nearest WalMart.

On the other hand, you have to give the automotive engineers credit for at least trying, given what they’re trying to do and that some of the factors involved are no simple thing. On the other hand yet again, some things just seem to go beyond the realm of physical engineering possibilities no matter what. .

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