The Yellow Wonder

by Andrea DeAngelis

Whenever I hear Adam Sandler's song, “My Piece of Shit Car”, it brings back memories. Notice I don't say fond memories. It brings me back just like the really bad backwash regurgitation flavor right before you're about to vomit. It makes me remember my first car.

The 1966 Corvair.

Why is this name perhaps familiar to you? It may be due to the fact that Ralph Nader devoted a very significant portion of his famous book, ***Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile,*** to the Chevrolet Corvair. Thus, this is the perfect car for my Dad to purchase for his kids. And hell, it was a bargain at $2,500. And we were lucky to have a car. Yeah, that's probably true and I may be an obnoxious brat for pointing out how much I hated this car. But I fucking hated this car. I mean if he was going to spend $2,500 for a car for my older brother and I were going to drive, why didn't he buy a regular used car? There is no reason to buy a new car for your teenage wrecking machines. I thought all the kids in my private school who had new beamers were total knobs so I understood that philosophy. But any car but this! Let me explain how my formative driving experience in the early nineties has transformed me into the rather be driven, public transportation, yellow-line hopping proud New Yorker I've become.

Unsafe at Any Speed. The Corvair is aptly summed up by Nader. To truly appreciate this fact, you must drive that piece of shit.

First, the non-power steering. Basically, you really get a work-out just by turning the steering wheel. I get a sympathetic ache just from the memory of wrenching that steering wheel. You know, of course, by the prehistoric days of the early nineties, they had something called power steering but that was spoiling the children. Currently, my left shoulder is fucked up, and although I'd like to blame it on the Corvair I can't since I am right-handed.

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Second, something called the fan belt would always slip off and you'd have to put it back on. It looked like big sloppy rubber band. Really restored my faith in how well this car was put together. This is such a common occurrence in these cars that other proud Corvair owners laugh about it. (Well, at least its engine didn't catch fire on a regular basis like my Dad's Lotus Super 7. He actually equipped the car with a fire extinguisher because this happened so often. One time he was only a mile away from home so he just let it burn until he pulled into the driveway).

Lastly, there is the fact that the engine is in the rear of the car so if someone rear-ends you, you're probably dead. Okay, there are some really great cars with their engines in the rear like the VW bugs. I wish we had a VW, even if it was a rusting piece of shit that farted radioactive gas, it would be better than a Corvair. Because folks the main problem was the fact that there was nothing in the front. Nothing to weigh it down when you hit a frightening speed of oh, say 45 miles per hour. But if you live in New Jersey like where I grew up, why would you need to take the highway to get anywhere?

The few times we drove on the highway, the whole car would shake and wobble all over the road. That's where the non-power steering really came into play, you'd have to hold on so tight to keep from going into other folks' lanes. And I was a five foot tall teenage girl so my non-body builder physique didn't help me out much.

Well, maybe my Dad just wanted to keep us off the highways for they can be dangerous. He just wanted us on the backroads because they're safe. Yeah right!

The Corvair had no fucking traction in the snow or rain and you know it does snow in northern New Jersey and rain and slush and whatever shit the big guy throws at us because it's called a temperate climate. Also, where I grew up, it was extremely hilly. The backroads were filled with dangerous curves which you never saw coming since the road builders liked to bank their thruways all the wrong way, just for fun and just for the poor suckers whose houses and backyards happened to be right on the graveyard

curves. There is a reason why everyone in my hometown refer to one of our backroads as Snake Hill instead of its given name Mountain Side. (That may be also because no one knows the proper name since some other bright bulb had the helpful idea of street signs that were thin cement columns less than 4 feet tall with the name of the streets craved in them vertically. To this day, my mother doesn't know most of the names of our town's streets).

Of course, my Dad still insists that the Corvair was a great car in snow because of the rear engine, you could get up any hill. But it didn't mean that you would survive the ascent as your front end is fishtailing all over the place. But then again, this illogic has become my parents' mantra—

“If the weather is that bad, you shouldn't be going out in it.”

“But Dad, we have something called school.”

This was also their reasoning (until very recently) against any car with all-wheel drive or four-wheel drive. And besides —

“All-wheel drive doesn't do shit.”

Yeah, well don't knock it until you've tried it. Instead of driving around in fifteen-year old station wagon. (Which everyone stares at because it's such a cool vehicle, my Dad insists. I couldn't tell him that everyone stared at it because it's such a piece of shit.) If you didn't know my father, you'd think he's just really frugal to a fault. He's not into cars. Well, that isn't the case.

My dad has the first car he ever owned and that is a 1960 Corvette. Corvette, Corvair? What's the difference? Just a few letters right? Are you fucking kidding me? The Corvette is New York City and the Corvair is East Orange. (For those of you who don't know East Orange, let me just sum it up. You know Road Warrior? This city has got to be major inspiration for that film, barrels with fires blazing, car-jacking is the municipal's pastime.) My dad had and still has all these cool cars, a 1968 Stingray, an Avanti, a Pantera, Kaiser Darren, even the little engine that couldn't 1957 Fiat Spider (a dog caught up with us once while we were trying to get up a hill, the dog just stared at us confused, he'd never caught a car before) was a

more practical car than the Corvair. So if he has all these classic cars, why did he buy a lemon for his kids? Well, I'll get to that in a minute.

Did I mention the Corvair was painted yellow? Not a pale yellow, bright banana, geek siren blaring yellow. My lovely friends called it the yellow wonder. Why not yellow, right? Because in high school, you want to do everything to stick out, to be proud and never ever get a date, right? Then add on top of it, an older brother, who had sideburns like Elvis, wore a moose thermal underwear shirt as outerwear and still plays dungeons and dragons at thirty-five and you have yourself a winner! He also treated the yellow wonder as his own personal garbage bin that never needed to be cleaned. Hell, why not? No one was going to ride in it. I wanted to disappear. It was cooler having my mom drop me off at school so I did that. I also did that because my older brother wasn't known as Crash for nothing. I wanted to live!

So why did my Dad put me through this? He has a sick sense of humor. I have very little proof but I think this fairly recent story proves my point.

My younger brother got pulled over by one of my small hometown's cops because of turning without stopping (my younger brother never looks when he turns, he just figures turning on the signal is enough). And when the cop read his name on his license, he asked incredulous, “You're Pete DeAngelis' kid?”

“Yes.”

“And you're driving around in this piece of shit?”

The cop started laughing and my younger brother didn't get the ticket he deserved.

My Dad is a very sick man.

I dream about the yellow wonder sometimes and those dreams are called nightmares.