

THE GREAT MISADVENTURE YIN AND YANG

By Charles W. Scheck



PRELUDE

Can you imagine buying an old car on eBay, given that the car was over one thousand miles away from Maryland in San Antonio, Texas?? This a story about my experiences during my February 21 trip to San Antonio to pick up a car I had bought (believe it or not) from eBay. For a long time I longed to get back into my old car ownership mode, but my wife Maria was my priority, especially since she had Alzheimers disease and required constant attention. Now, after Maria's passing, I'm free to do foolish things (**again**). I've owned numerous cars over the years, sometimes jumping forward in vintage and sometimes backward. All of these acquisitions have been ridiculous from a monetary point of view, but they always gave me various degrees of fun and challenge to keep these old machines looking good and running; and, as you will see, sometimes it was a challenge simply to get them home. My latest **fatal attraction** is a **1985 Mercedes 300SD turbo-diesel**. For some dumb reason, I decided to try to drive this more or less unknown machine home from San Antonio by myself?? Go figure!

DOES IT ALWAYS PAY TO BUY CHEAP

I put down a deposit on the car and bought an online airline e-ticket (**not a ticket at all**) to San Antonio. I could not believe the low price, (\$97 w/\$5 discount) through Cheap-O-Air (**apropos**). Not really trusting what I had done online, I went back online to check my "stuff." (Remember the flyer who advised the TSA agent not to touch his stuff?) The web site I went to could not identify me or my flight by the booking number. I began to get p--- d, so I called the 800 number. A man very diplomatically advised that my inquiry was to the wrong site! I was on the **CHEAPAIR** site, **not the CHEAP-O-AIR** site. (Go figure-seems like someone should change their name-NO?). Now squared away, I was able to print out a boarding pass with a sigh of relief.

FLIGHT SUSPENSE, ER—I MEAN SUSPENDERS

Super friend and neighbor Jack Walsh took me to BWI at an ungodly hour. Soon, I was reminded of the stupid TSA process at the airport. Lines and lines of people doing screwy things like taking their shoes off, etc. I had to be separated out and wanded, unbelievably, because I had suspenders on with metal end clips. **Dangerous weapons N0???** Perhaps you could twang someone to death with an elastic suspender??

MANY AIRCRAFT MECHANICS ARE AFRAID TO FLY-SO WHY DO I?

The flight to San Antonio with a stopover in Houston went well. I enjoy good weather air flights. I'm always thrilled by the power it takes to get such a heavy machine off the ground and to rapidly climb to cruising altitude. If you understood even a little about parts count in these astounding flying machines as well as engineering reliability calculations and maintenance by ordinary humans, you would justifiably be very worried about safety and reliability. I happen to know more than one aircraft mechanic who is afraid to fly. One of them said what did it for him was to find a vacuum cleaner left rolling around in a wing fuel tank. It is truly a wonder how big airliners get off the ground and stay aloft. Looking down on the tops of cloud cover from 30,000 feet always seems like a new experience, and the cloud patterns are infinitely varied.

JOE WHO? I WAS DEALING WITH A GUY NAMED DREW

On to San Antonio—I got a call on my cell phone from someone I did not know, NOT the individual I bought the car from! Immediately, I began to smell something fishy, even though I had been advised that the car was titled to a dealership and not to the individual I was dealing with and who I had assumed was the owner. Anyhow, a Joe picked me up in about a half hour in a Porsche. **This was a treat even though he drove it quite normally.** He explained that he was the owner/mechanic of the dealership and he had the full authority to execute the deal and provide me with title transfer, temporary registration docs, and plates—OK!

THE FIRST SIGHTING

My first look at my Mercedes was reasonably pleasant. I had realized previously that the person who took digital images of the car had done a great job and made the car look considerably better than it would in the flesh, but I was prepared for this and all of the finish flaws that are characteristic of a repainted 27-year old car. Before testing the car, I was also keenly reminded of the glowing performance write up on eBay that ‘**Everything Works**’ – a-Ha-Ha. Experience tells one that even if everything works, which is unlikely, there are some things in an old car which are erratic, sometimes they work and sometimes they don’t.

THE FIRST TEST

Knowing that power windows are typically trouble, I test operated them – first only to find that the left rear window was totally inoperative, and the right rear window went down and would not go up. I stopped dead in my tracks and showed the owner/dealer. He went on about buying a car this old you will find things like this and you have to expect them, etc, etc. I allowed that the car was represented to me as having everything working. **He asked if I wanted him to bring me back to the airport. I said no, I wanted him to fix the windows.** He said he did not have a mechanic available. I countered with his earlier statement that he himself was an ASE mechanic. This was a sufficient challenge to him, and he pulled the car in to work on it. Several hours later, the windows were fixed. Mysteriously, wires were cut in the left rear window, and it could never have worked—so much for the eBay write up by the mystery owner Drew that “Everything Works.”

THE SECOND TEST

The car has a sunroof. In older cars, this is almost always unreliable or inoperative. **This was no exception.** The sunroof motor was trying to open the roof, but it was stuck. Since this is an unimportant feature of the car I decided not to push the issue and not to risk opening the sunroof and not being able to close it. I could deal with this feature later (or in reality perhaps never).

CLOSE MY EYES AND TURN THE KEY

The car started and ran, and all other features (lights, horn, wipers, power locks, a/c, etc) worked. The transmission shifted roughly, but properly. The mechanic allowed that the car had not been run for a long time and that it would perform better the more I ran it. This was believable, especially for a car of this age and mileage (235K); and, clearly, it had not been in use for some long time.

OFF AND RUNNING, BUT NO STOPPING

With documents in hand and temporary license plate in place, I gritted my teeth and was off and running on I-10 with a target of Mobile, Alabama, where I would pick up I-65. The car was running better all the time on the highway, and the diesel engine was meeting all my expectations. In the Beaumont, Texas, area, I pulled into a motel for an overnight stay. **Surprise, surprise!** My trusty diesel engine **would not stop** when the key was turned to off!! This sounds bad, but with a diesel it is a non-problem since simply by opening the hood and running the throttle linkage to stop cuts off the fuel.

FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH A LOCAL MECHANIC

I drove the car to a repair shop. Here the mechanic knew enough about Mercedes diesel that he immediately realized that the vacuum operated fuel shutoff valve was not working. So, he applied vacuum to the valve directly using a hand vacuum tester, and the engine dutifully shut down. At this point, he said the entire ignition switch had to be replaced since the valve portion of the switch controlling the vacuum was not working. He said he’d need several days to get the part and fix the car. I said I wanted to keep moving so he said to go over to Tony’s Mercedes a few miles away because Tony may have the switch in stock.

TONY TO THE RESCUE

Tony took one look at the car, walked away in thought and returned with a small tool like a reamer. He took the vacuum hose apart near the power brake unit and reamed out some junk out of the hose. (He knew, by experience, exactly where the junk was.) So, Tony saved me several hundred dollars, and the car could again be shut off via the key switch (nothing wrong with the switch/valve). **(In other words, had I stayed with the first mechanic, I would have spent several hundred dollars, and it would not have fixed the problem.)** Since I

quickly assessed that I had a true experienced Mercedes expert on hand, I asked him to drive the car because of noises reflective of loose parts underneath in the rear. He went no more than one hundred feet and determined that there were some worn out links in the rear suspension. So, up on the lift we went. For sure, worn out links AND he had the parts in stock, so we replaced them. While the car was on the lift, I got a good look at the entire rear suspension condition which I must say was superb, and it is a type of independent suspension that I prefer. Also, we popped the wheels off and inspected the brakes and found the pads in need of replacement AND he had these in stock. The brake rotors were excellent in the rear and in the front as well and the front did not need pads. Tony and I got along well, and he gave me a generous discount on his work.

OFF AND RUNNING AGAIN WITH ROCK AND ROLL

The old car was running strong, and the transmission was, in fact, smoothing out. Somewhere around New Orleans a truck in front of me threw up a rock which put a disgusting large star flaw in the windshield--with a sickening thud. Thank goodness the flaw was down low and not in the driver's line of sight. I had to really try hard to roll with this punch which seemed unlucky and downright unfair. However, I was not p---ed enough to ignore it, so I stopped at the nearest dealership (Toyota) that had a glass repair capability. They worked on the glass flaw to avoid having to replace the windshield. I also wanted them to replace the windshield wipers, but they could not find anything to fit, so I had to let that go.

OFF AND RUNNING AGAIN – SMOKIN' DOWN THE ROAD

The car was running better all along, and I was playing with the cruise control. I felt comfortable continually increasing my cruising speed to a steady 75 mph. I began to think everything could possibly go alright from here on. Near London, Kentucky, (somewhat south of Lexington) I saw smoke coming out from under the hood near the windshield. This was doubling down on unlucky and unfair as the smoke began to infiltrate the passenger compartment, and I lost the power brake booster. Fortunately I was able to coast the car off on the London exit and coast to a stop in a parking slot in a Shell Station. I opened the hood, and flames were licking up around the intermediate firewall. I ran into the station and borrowed a fire extinguisher to put out the flames. This is the point in time when I asked myself how the hell I ever let myself get into this whole situation. I dealt rather easily (with some help) with all the previous problems, but this one was truly catastrophic – melted wires and insulation and all.

FOLKS FELT SORRY FOR ME

I called a tow truck guy the next day and told him about my problem with the idea of getting him to tow the car to a repair shop. He thought about this for a while and said he'd call back. When he called back he gave me the number of Don Emery who he said used to service exclusively Mercedes cars. I called Don and he was kind enough to come look at the car. He shook his head after seeing the damage and it was clear that he did not want the repair job. After I told him some of my previous experiences, I sensed he felt sorry for me, and he finally agreed to try to fix it. He said he would tow it to his shop, but it would likely take weeks to fix. **However, I still had to get home!** With kindness again, Don took me to Enterprise Rent-a-Car. Their first response to my inquiry was that **they did not rent one way**. As good luck would have it, there was a supervisor in the back room who overheard our conversation and gave her underlings an order to rent to me one way since she had very recently been given authority to do so. I personally went into the back room to thank her.

SHELL SHOCKED – BUT OFF AND RUNNING AGAIN

I was finally on the way home to Maryland, but I lost sight of the fact that I was still on route I-65 and not on I-85, but I drove on and on and on in sort of a trance until I began to see signs for Cincinnati. Instead of slanting off to the east I had driven NORTH. It wasn't until I got on an eastbound interstate that I was back on track toward home. I did make it home and with the help of Jack Walsh returned the rental car the next day.

BLANKED OUT

To mentally insulate myself from this fatal attraction misadventure, I put the whole episode out of my mind and purposely did not even follow up on the status of the Mercedes. What will be, will be, even if I have to sacrifice the car? The repair, if it was to happen, was out of my control albeit in the hand of an experienced Mercedes mechanic.

BAD NEWS!

Sometime after I got home, I got an email from the American Modern Insurance Company that they had cancelled my insurance policy because the car, although old enough, was not classic enough for their specialty car insurance. I found this especially annoying since I had gone all out to be sure the insurance was in place, and it was, prior to picking up the car and was, in fact, in force for the duration of my trip. I imposed on a nice young girl named Gina Mizzell at the brokerage (Voyager) to help me get appropriate insurance from another company. She went to bat for me, and I got old car insurance in place again from a Company named Hagerty (Essentia).

GOOD NEWS??

On Wednesday, March 21, I got my first call from the Mercedes mechanic in Kentucky. He had the engine running, but had not driven the car. The alternator was not charging the battery, and he had not yet replaced a burned vacuum hose to the brake booster. He intended to fix these things in a week or so. His goal, which I fully understand, was only to make the car safe enough to drive back to Maryland-not to get everything working properly. So, when I got his call that he was finished as far as he was willing to go, I had to figure out how I was going to get down there and drive it back. I figured out that I could fly into the Lexington airport and then to the small airport in London itself.

MORAL(S) TO THIS STORY (SO FAR)

Don't buy a car from eBay (especially a very old one) without test driving it or having it inspected by a local inspector. I knew this, but I was ready, willing, and able to gamble.

Don't bet on the seller's description being accurate, especially when it comes to "Everything Works."

Don't always trust that the advertiser of the car is the actual owner.

Don't bet on an old car's being able to travel long distances without problems (especially one that has not been driven for some long time). Actually, I could have finished this trip were it not for the fire.

Don't travel long distances (in any car) without a good fire extinguisher on board and a first aid kit as well.

Don't travel long distances without a compass in the car (so you don't drive north instead of east in a trance).

I know all of the above, of course, but for some reason I wanted an adventure. Well, I got it in the form of the "Great Misadventure."

THE CALL FROM KENTUCKY

The Horn Blows

Don Emery called. He installed lots of new wires to replace burned out ones, and the car began to come alive. However, the alternator was not charging the battery. In troubleshooting that circuit, when he put test voltage on a circuit which was supposed to be dedicated to the alternator, the horn blew. Oh-Oh, crossed/burned wires in some unknown location, probably buried within a wiring harness. At this point, Don Emery legitimately gave up. He is a one man shop, he's basically retired and has other customers to serve. So, we agreed that I should recover the car or cut my losses and run and tow the car to the salvage yard. I had to think this over. My stubbornness came to the fore. **"If man made this thing, man can fix it." Not always true; but, with older cars, it is often a truism.**

COFFEE SHOP RESCUE

Rick Coulby, of Commerce Street Creamery, heard my story. Perhaps he too felt sorry for me so he unbelievably offered that he and I would take his beautiful Ford F-250 super duty truck to Kentucky and tow the car home to Maryland on a U-Haul tow dolly. The plan was to leave Sunday, April 29, 2012, and tow the car back April 30 – May 1. On Friday, I called to check on the tow dolly. **The lady I spoke to was unsure if it would be available when I needed it – Bah!!** She gave me an 800 number for U-Haul central traffic. I thought this strange and not good customer service, but I did it anyhow. The lady there was more accommodating and assured me a tow dolly would be available. The ride to Kentucky went very smoothly, and we had a very nice overnight stay in the Hyatt Place in Lexington and a decent Italian meal in Carrabas. In the Lexington Hyatt Place hotel, I pulled a minor "prank," since some time for levity was long overdue. One day, while surfing the web, I came across an ad for bed bug "Devices." Never heard of these before, but I opened the packages and put one under my bed and one under Rick's bed. When I showed him the device (looks like an ant trap), we had a much needed and long laugh. If it worked we would never know. However, you will have to admit that I really know how to take care of my friends.

The next day, as we approached London, Kentucky, we had a brainstorm and became uncomfortable towing the car with two old tires on the roadway at 75 miles per hour versus using a full car (transporter) trailer with all four wheels off the roadway. So I called U-Haul central and found a transporter 10 miles south of London. I paid the extra freight for peace of mind, and it paid off big time. Rick was an expert in rigging the trailer, and we hit the road again. The only time we knew we were pulling 5,000 pounds behind us was when we were climbing hills; but even then, with an automatic transmission and automatic downshift, the truck proved its mettle many times over—and there were lots of **big** hills through the constantly variable grades in the mountains of West Virginia. The beautiful scenery and rock cuts through the mountains made the long trip more interesting and renewed our appreciation for our freedom and the grandeur of our country. Also, it provided plenty of time for discussions of a myriad of other subjects.

DEWEY'S DIAGNOSIS

Rick Coulby dropped me home on Sunday and dropped off the car per previous arrangement to Dewey at Mid-Shore Imports in Easton, MD. Dewey was recommended as a Mercedes expert by my good friend Michael Wood who has had his Mercedes diesels repaired there. An interesting juxtaposition was that Rick Coulby went to the same high school as Dewey. So, my confidence in Dewey was bolstered. Dewey called me a day or two later and advised me of his findings after doing necessary disassembly. He indicated that he could fix most and maybe all of the problems caused by the fire. An interesting insight was that an electrical short probably did not cause the fire. It was most likely caused by a metallic resistor associated with the air conditioning getting cherry red hot due to leaves that we packed in under the power brake unit where this resistor lives. The hot resistor lit off the leaves which in turn cooked the wires. This resistor is installed in a poorly unventilated place and should probably be relocated where it can get some cooling.

Knowing full well that expert mechanics do not like anyone looking over their shoulder, I exercised great restraint to totally avoid telephone contact with the shop and to avoid the temptation to visit. This psychology paid off big time as evidenced by everything being repaired. I doubt seriously if there is an auto repair shop on the Eastern Shore of Maryland that would have taken on the job, no less completed it. My hat is off to Mid-Shore Imports.

THE INSURANCE MAN

On May 24, Dewey advised me that an insurance man had been around to his shop and had gone over the nature and scope of the work. I view this as a good sign that the American Modern Insurance Company that covered the car during its maiden voyage is considering some coverage of the repairs. I did not expect this, at least not at this point, and I can only keep my fingers crossed.

THE FINALE

(OF THIS GREAT MISADVENTURE-STAY TUNED)

At this finale, I ask the reader to review the paragraph entitled “Morals of the Story-So Far.” There are no new morals, just accolades. If you had the patience to read this whole story, you no doubt have sensed how every bad thing that happened was countered by a good thing or some sort of assistance. In ancient Chinese lore, the yin and the yang always remain in balance. It is astounding to realize that the USA is still full of Tonys, Dons, Ricks, and Deweys who are so ready, willing, and able to help whenever they sense help is needed. My faith in my fellow man has been elevated to a new high.

Oh, maybe there is a one moral to add and it comes from my father. It is simply that persistence wins. Never give up, never give up, never (Winston Churchill) during the second World War. Soon, I will drive my Mercedes, without fanfare (except internal), to the Commerce Street Creamery for breakfast.

WHOOPS! . . . I THOUGHT THIS STORY WAS FINISHED

Early in June, I got an email from the Hagerty Insurance Company with the subject line reading “Hagerty’s 2nd Annual Search for America’s Sweetest Lemon”. Entry into this contest only required 250 words or less to explain why your car is “America’s Sweetest Lemon,” together with a photo of myself with the car. Why not enter? – especially since my nephew Gregory Iacono is a prolific short story writer. Our submission went out in July, and there is supposed to be a public voting of the top ten on Hagerty.com. The really neat thing about this contest is that the winner and the winner’s car are flown to California where the winner will be the Grand Marshall for

Hagerty's "Tour of Lemons" – only in California. I told my nephew that, if we win, I'll buy him a plane ticket to California, and we'll drive back across county together.

NO LEMONADE

My Mercedes did not make the cut for the top ten Sweetest Lemons. It was disappointing in a way even though I know did not fit the mold of a truly antique car which is truly a lemon. Actually, my car had no intrinsic problematic defects characteristic of a lemon, but rather an unusual and unexpected circumstance involving some leaves which accumulated in exactly the wrong place and eventually caught fire. Actually, the vehicles that made the top ten tended to be funny little cars which by their appearance alone might be judged lemons.