

Early one morning, just as. . .

The following events took place in October 1989.

I had not slept well, worrying about a second interview with British Airways for a flagship project, to be built on their home turf at Heathrow. As always with BA, the programme was aggressively short and their chosen signature Architect likely to be demanding, prone to changing his design on a whim.

The previous day a terse fax had notified us we had been short-listed, required to go head-to-head against a rival firm of well-known London-based engineering consultants, a firm who had worked for British Airways for decades and were currently on two other large projects for them with the same Architect. In a phone call, our liaison officer, an odious man in BA Purchasing, had delighted in telling me we were only required as a foil, a makeweight, to force our rival to come to heel and reduce his fee.

However, I had an angle and, if successful, this project would enable us to establish our embryo office located near Heathrow and act as a springboard to help us win other projects and build a London profile for our growing Glasgow-based practice.

By five o'clock that fateful morning I was in my Volvo estate, eager to get to my office to put in a couple of hours tweaking my revised proposal before driving out to Glasgow Airport and on to Heathrow for a make-or-break interview. My new schedule of proposed professional services embodied a pick-and-choose package of options to allow me to adjust my fee with the full agreement of the client team. Crucially, I had included an option to provide a full-time presence of an on-site design engineer to answer queries directly as they arose without the delays and friction caused by the usual tedious and time-consuming Query and Answer loop.

00000

It was early, still gloomy and slightly misty. Having breakfasted on a plate of scrambled eggs on toast with two large mugs of strong black coffee, I was fired up, ready for the challenge of the day ahead. I closed the car door quietly, to avoid disturbing my sleeping princess or my duce neighbours. Belted up, I turned the ignition key and eased the auto transmission stick into "R". As I rolled down the driveway with my eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror, the tape-deck came alive booming out Jennifer Rush's original of *The Power of Love*, one of my all-time favourites:

***The whispers in the morning
Of lovers sleeping tight
Are rolling by like thunder now
As I look in your eyes***

Early one morning, just as. . .

The car was throbbing from the bass drumbeats blasting from the stereo-speaker system. As I reached the end of the driveway, I had to stamp on the brake when a milk delivery van drew up and stopped at the far kerb directly opposite me, its warning wipers flashing and its engine spewing a dark, smokey exhaust. A wide, full-height side door slid open and three teenage lads leapt out to make deliveries. In the glow from his courtesy light, I could see the driver reading a newspaper, smoking, his elbow poking out of the fully open window. I was sure he knew his van was blocking my exit and that if he moved forward a few yards I could reverse out with ease. I saw him sneak a glance across at my car and tried to shrug off his sneer of satisfaction. I thought of climbing out to ask for his cooperation but decided not to yield. I was trapped.

The song wound on:

***I hold on to your body
And feel each move you make
Your voice is warm and tender
A love that I could not forsake***

I considered trying to escape by edging backwards out onto the road to make a series of back and forth moves but the likelihood of hitting one of the delivery boys held me back. Resigned, I watched and waited and began to sing along with Jennifer, just under my breath, getting into the tune, struggling for the words until they kicked in from hundreds of similar in-car singalongs.

How much longer could they be, anyway?

***'Cause I am your lady
And you are my man
Whenever you reach for me
I'll do all that I can***

The delivery boys returned, reloaded and left on a second round. The driver flicked his doubt onto the roadway and lit another cigarette. I shifted the stick to "P", leaned back, closed my eyes, now crooning at the very top of my range:

***Even though there may be times
It seems I'm far away***

Early one morning, just as. . .

*But never wonder where I am
'Cause I am always by your side*

*'Cause I am your lady
And you are my man
Whenever you reach for me
I'll do all that I can
We're heading for something
Somewhere I've never been
Sometimes I am frightened
But I'm ready to learn 'bout the power of love*

I was brought back to reality by the driver shouting. In the rear-view mirror I saw a white splodge from a dropped bottle. The driver threw a plastic shopping bag to the boy who hunkered down to pick up the fragments of smashed glass. The driver was still shouting, gesticulating. I edged my window enough to make out snippets: "*wur effin behind skedjahl cos o' yoose lazy bastarts*" and "*Ah'm dockin' yer 'effin wages, so Ah um*".

I closed the window against his tirade, glad we no longer took milk deliveries from this loathsome man.

Still watching, I let Jennifer go it alone:

*The sound of your heart beating
Made it clear suddenly
The feeling that I can't go on
Is light-years away*

Inside the dark interior of the van, hidden from the driver's view, sharing a cigarette and sipping cans of juice, the two other delivery boys were mouthing comments and making very rude gestures in the direction of their employer.

Jennifer sang on, oblivious:

*'Cause I am your lady
And you are my man
Whenever you reach for me
I'm gonna do all that I can*

Early one morning, just as. . .

The unfortunate youth leapt through the open door to join his friends and I shifted from "P" to "R" and began to ease backwards in anticipation. In the rear-view mirror, the boys were seated in the doorway, legs dangling, almost touching the road surface, laughing as the wipers stopped and their van edged forwards to move on to their next drop-off point.

Stationary, with my rear end almost at the pavement edge, my foot was pressing lightly on the brake pedal, itching to move across to the accelerator. Some sixth sense, which I have since read is based on the survival instinct, made me hold back. Microseconds later the blare of a horn sounded long and loud as a *second* milk delivery van shot past, overtaking the first.

Standing almost upright on the brake pedal, my hands shaking, cold sweat on my brow with my heart pumping like a steam train, I remained frozen, paralysed, my eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror at the lonely white stain on the road surface, trying not to think of the carnage which might have been had I been more impetuous.

Oblivious of my lucky escape, Jennifer sang on to her profound conclusion:

***We're heading for something
Somewhere I've never been
Sometimes I am frightened
But I'm ready to learn 'bout the power of love
Ooh, the power of love
The power of love***

00000

Two hours later, following a fifteen-minute delay due to a fractious traffic snarl up at Charing Cross, I eventually reached the on-ramp to the M8. Desperate to ensure I did not miss my flight, I weaved across the Kingston Bridge before powering along the M8 well above the speed limit to complete my dash in record time. Hurtling down the tight, curving off-ramp to the airport, I felt the steering vague and sensed the rear of the Volvo sliding badly. The seat belts tensioned, embracing my chest in a vice-like grip. Panicking, I mashed down on the brake pedal while fighting the steering wheel to jerk the car back on course. This caused it to rock and roll and shake its tail alarmingly. As I skidded to a standstill, the car stalled. After a few stutters, the overheated engine eventually re-started and I hirpled the last few hundred yards along the busy loop road at walking pace, chaperoned by an attentive black taxi blaring continuously at my rear.

Parked up, I checked to find fragments of glass embedded in both rear tyres. This would have to be dealt with as a second priority, on my return. I started jogging towards the check-in desks, hoping the foggy weather would not cause flight delays.

And yes, I am delighted to report that my lucky streak continued. We were appointed to the project with an increased fee and the rest, as they say, is ancient history.