

My Wife, the Registry of Motor Vehicles

by Con Chapman

Twenty years of romance makes a woman look like a ruin; twenty years of marriage makes her look like a public building.

Oscar Wilde



Wilde: How would he know?

My wife has a birthday coming up. I asked her what she wants and she said nothing special—just a nice night out. Of course, being a woman, she doesn't really mean it. Flowers help, as would a David Yurman bracelet or some other gaudy bauble. Is that too much to ask?



Registry of Motor Vehicles: It's actually not bad looking.

Of course not. On the other hand, we've been married for 24.1667 years now and—well—she was starting to remind me of a public building. The Registry of Motor Vehicles, to be precise. There's the surly attitude when my younger son blows off Calculus in favor of another session with his batting coach. There's the officious adherence to trivial rules—don't leave the milk out, even if you're having another bowl of cereal in two minutes. There's the

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interminable wait when I need . . . uh . . . something from her. There's the Dunkin' Donuts on the first floor. All right—things haven't gone that far, but they're headed that way.

“This isn't the line. This is the line to get into the line.”

As with any marriage, we've been through some rough patches. There was that time I got pulled over without my registration and we had to walk home from a Saturday night out. I had to appear before a three-judge panel composed of her and two of her girlfriends—talk about a kangaroo court!—and admit to negligence and gross stupidity. I was put on probation for two months, and I counted myself lucky.



“You have to wear the ankle bracelet when you leave the house.”

But we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. The things that have been the occasion for those arguments that led to long, stony silences over the past two decades—many people call them “children”—are out of our lives now and off to college. We're empty-nesters all of a sudden, and I can feel the tide turning to expose the beaches of our single days, when we'd have the time and the privacy to talk openly to each other. Without that low-tide smell, I hope.

"It's not me you're smelling."

I could almost sense the sea-change that's upon us last night as we sat before the fireplace, savoring the romantic, accelerant-fueled flames of a kiln-dried New England Duraflame log.

"Have you lost weight recently?" I asked my wife. This always puts her in a good mood.

"I went spinning this morning."

"Your face looks thinner—I can tell."

"Thanks," she said. "I'm also trying to streamline things."

"How so?"

"Well, I moved some significant operations—the kids—into satellite offices, so there won't be so much congestion here at headquarters."



"Um-hmm."

" . . . and I'm thinking of hiring a receptionist."

"Really?"

"Yeah, someone who's good at customer relations. I want your first point of contact with the agency to be a pleasant one."

"So when I come home at night . . ."

"You'd know right away what kind of mood I'm in, whether you're on your own for dinner."

"Whether I'm in the doghouse for failure to maintain my license in good standing."

"Exactly. That sort of thing. I'm trying to transform the Registry of Motor Vehicles into a new, user-friendly experience."

I leaned back, took a sip of my wine and stared into the fire.

"That's really great," I said, and I meant it. "I'm looking forward to our new life together, sweetie," I said as I reached over for her hand.

"Not so fast," she said, pulling away.

"What?"

"I need to see some comparable improvements in your department."

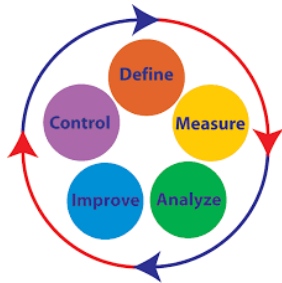
"I . . . didn't know I was underperforming."

She made a little sucking noise into her wine glass that covered up what might have been a snort of contempt.

"You're the Department of Revenue and frankly, I have to compare you unfavorably to other jurisdictions on a number of industry metrics," she said with a cold, hard edge in her voice.

"You failed to meet your performance goals last year."

"I . . . didn't know there was some sort of Six Sigma program for husbands."



"Revenues have been flat for several years, while overhead—red wine, ESPN cable costs, that stupid chromatic harmonica that drives the cats crazy—have risen."

"I just take what the market gives me."

"If this trend continues, we will have to close the department and outsource it to a more qualified vendor."

"You can't privatize me—I'm an essential marriage function!"

"I'm only doing what's best for the family."

I stood up wobbily and nearly tripped over the stupid decorator footstool we'd purchased at *her* insistence, with *my* hard-earned pay. I kicked the thing—hard. I'd never liked it.

"Don't take it personally," she said, as I headed to the fridge.

I glared at her. "We're talking about *me*. How can I *not* take it personally?"

She took an indifferent sip of her wine. "I'm the Registry of Motor Vehicles," she said. "I'm rude to everybody."

