



## Essay – Remember the Sicilians

### An Experience Essay on China and Driving

I am in dire straits. I've been working on this harebrained idea of driving a Lotus Seven look-like car through China. Why? To write a book about the people of China. And then? Collect signatures of the people I meet on the car's body. Auction it off. Donate to charity. I've even got a sponsor, a big one, to finance the whole thing. It's almost two years since I first had the idea. The car's called a Caterham Super Seven. You've never heard of it, for sure. I chose it for one reason only: it makes people smile and attracts them. A friend put it best: "I've never owned a dog, nor had a child, but a Seven can outcute either." But I am now stuck with it in China. I know next to nothing about this car, except that it has just failed an emissions test badly. There is no dealer of Sevens in China. How to make it pass the test and realise my dream?

I call on all friends and acquaintances. Among them is a Andrew Walker who heads the U.K.'s Lotus Seven Club. I explain my predicament. He sympathises and gives me two names. They're stars, he says. "You can contact them on Blatchat, the club's discussion forum. Say hello to them for me," he suggests.

I don't know the word 'blat'. I look it up: 'to utter (as an opinion) loudly and often foolishly or unthinkingly'. Thank you very much. Still, I fire off two messages. To my astonishment, I have two answers within less than an hour. The latter, by a Peter Carmichael, says:

Give me a call on +44 7973 731710. If you can give me the exact details of the emissions failure we should be able to work out what's going on...The standard issues are:

- The MBE ECU isn't necessarily setup for closed loop feedback on the Lambda reading (this can need ECU mapping changes, which is a pain if you have the standard pass code locked map, but I might know a man who knows the code).....

Peter's email continues with similar mumbo-jumbo for a while and then signs off with "Cheers, Peter".

Is this the meaning of blat, I wonder. Say I did dial the number, would I understand anything at all this piston head would blat? But I recall my mother's advice, "Leave no stone unturned," and so I let Skype do the dialling.

Peter Carmichael answers in a low, booming voice. His speech, from the get-go, is precise: each word is carefully chosen and grammatically placed in each hand-crafted sentence. Not much blat in that.

I first explain my wild idea. Then we delve into the problem. We speak for an hour. I conclude the conversation by saying,



“Thank you very much. I’m sorry I know so little about my car. I feel terrible for having used so much of your time, not to mention your goodwill.”

To which Peter responds, “There’s a lot more of that.”

That makes me smile.

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A month and many email and Skype conversations later, it occurs to me to ask Peter:

Hello Peter,

I hope you don't mind my asking, but I was wondering what you do for a living that makes you so knowledgeable about engines and Caterhams? Is this a hobby or is it a job?

Cheers, Peter

He replies saying it is a hobby. Way back, in the mists of time, he acquired a degree in engineering science, Meng (Oxon), he says. He’s always had a pre-disposition to seek understanding of machinery and devices in order to use them to their optimum, he adds. He briefly worked on oil exploration rigs in the North Sea, then moved on to discover a rich and rewarding line of work in I.T. This specialisation led to a ten-year spell in management consultancy, and from there into operations management.

I was intrigued, then stunned by disbelief when I got to the end of his reply message:

I resigned my last role a month ago in order to look for a new direction. If there are cheap tickets, I'll fly over and look at this car of yours.

This man isn’t saying that he’ll come from the U.K. all the way to Beijing, on his own purse, to help me out, or is he? To make a stranger’s dream come true? Is he Mother Theresa?

In my reply I have only one question: “But why?” Peter’s reply is plain and enigmatic in equal proportions: “Because it is so easy to say ‘no’; life is more interesting, though, when you say ‘yes’.”

Over the next two months, Peter and I are in touch frequently as we select a day for his arrival in Beijing and make preparations for his journey. I am fascinated by his approach to problem solving: it is analytical, logical and methodical. Emotions are treated with disdain; all that counts is facts. Conjectures are entertained, but quickly rejected if they can’t bear scrutiny.

He relishes email conversations that are straight to the point – no “dears” or “hellos” or anything that distracts from the flow of ideas. His email exchanges are dense and practically impenetrable to the layman. He forwards me exchanges with his friends as if I was actually part of the conversation:

“[From his friend Bob] .... Almost any Rover cheese wedge shaped ECU should be EU3 certified apart from the "Trophy 1" version (LVTA) and even then it would probably pass the tests as they were



based on the 143BHP EU3 VVC ECU. It's a shame Jez C isn't still about, when Al Wain and I built ours (probably the first Memos 3 style VVCs), the factory were only too happy to take our standard Rover looms and get them modified to suit, cost me £100. The engine loom easily fits in a jiffy envelope so you could post it back here quite cheaply...."

"[From Peter in reply] Thanks Bob. *That's all brilliant information.* [emphasis added] My thinking is that if it is already running closed loop and getting these NOx readings either there is air leakage at the collector or the lambda sitting on #4 primary is giving a reading slightly off the mark for the other cylinders. I can re-site the lambda down to the cat. Plan would be to get a cat modified with two bosses welded in for before and after so the time in China would be spent on wiring and proving all the existing wiring (loom faults have been known).

Not only does he relish these esoteric exchanges, but he works with great intensity and all hours of the day. No sooner do I receive an email from him at 2:30am U.K. time, I get another at 5:45am. Does the man ever sleep? Is he machine himself?

Apparently not because on Christmas eve I get this SMS:

"Peter, I've managed to source a catalytic converter that I think is appropriate. I'll be following up in the New Year."

Even though the text doesn't say "Merry Christmas!", it might just as well have. There is a soul in this machine, after all.

In the run-up to Peter's trip to Beijing, I learn that he's working his club connections to get spare parts on loan – "Those we don't need, we can give back after my trip" – and that he plans to test each of them out on a friend's car that's identical to mine – "Just to make sure. Would be too bad if I find out after arriving in Beijing that the spare parts don't work." Peter's work is meticulous; every plan has a version A, B and C. In meeting Peter, I've struck gold.

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It is mid-afternoon. I am standing near the Starbucks opposite the glass doors from which the international travellers are disgorged into the Beijing Airport arrival hall. I have a vague idea what Peter looks like from his picture on Skype. At last he emerges from the crowd and heads straight toward me.

"Hello, I am Peter."

"So am I," I reply. No point wasting words with a man of few words.

He is a large man, larger than I had imagined. His squarish head is set upon a sizeable frame. His hair is blond and cut short. His eyes bluish. He shaves closely; sometimes too closely as I discover over the next ten days – the occasional shaving cut bespeaks a sleepy man labouring quickly in the darkness of wintry Beijing.



Peter smiles when he shakes my hand. His smile is squarish too. There is reservation, even aloofness in his gait and expression. If his countless actions in the preceding three months had not already thoroughly convinced me of his kind intentions, I'd have said he's cold.

Right from the first evening, I discover that he views coming to Beijing as an adventure. He wants me to order food at restaurants. "I'll try anything," he assures me. And so I do with the consequence that on the morning after the first night he says he didn't sleep well. "Jet lag?" I venture. "No, too much garlic." Aside from that, he takes to Chinese food with gusto.

Over breakfasts, lunches, drinks and dinners I find out that Peter is addicted to skiing. Since he doesn't do things by halves, he ran a ski resort in the French Alps. He competed in bicycle races; worked in Australia; loves cars – driving, fixing and improving them, installing, as a matter of course, a telematics system in his race-going Caterham Super Seven to analyse his and his car's performance after each run.

Besides nerdy stuff, he seems to enjoy the good life, good food, wine and all that. When I offer him a cigar after one dinner, he says, "Only when I'm in the mood." "How often is that?" "About once a year."

Every day, from 8:30am to 5:30pm we work in the garage on my Seven. Every day, his first task is to jump into his blue mechanics overall. It is an incongruous picture for Peter has the air of a management consultant. His consultant's demeanour and self-confidence don't seem to fit into the overall, but he wears it with ease, even with relish.

And for the garage's mechanics, too, Peter's an unusual sight because the Westerners that stand out in Beijing come in two predictable shapes. On the one hand, there are the hip folks – jobless or entrepreneurial, depending on your point of view. They've come to China with exuberant ideas about how to reshape themselves or the country. They tend to wear torn or dirty clothes that say, "Hey, I'm just like you". True, many poor locals wear dirty and torn clothes too. But there's a big difference – for the Chinese it's a necessity that they'd rather do without; they'd give anything to wear clean and new clothes. For the hippies, on the other hand, it's a choice, so it's not solidarity that they display, but a generous dose of insensitivity.

On the other hand, there are the business types that stand out. They come dressed in sharply pressed suits, starched shirts, colourful ties and leather loafers, suitable for the streets of the City, perhaps, but not the streets of Beijing.

Peter, on the other hand, almost blends in. When he dons his smudged overall, Liu Zizhou and Wu Qing, Peter's two tireless helpers in the garage, almost feel he's becoming a colleague, albeit one who's a good foot taller than them. Not only does he blend in of sorts, he does the work for the most part himself; no bossing anyone around. When Peter needs to get under the Caterham's dashboard he does what all repairers of Caterham dashboards do – he crawls into the car upside down. His shoulders rest on the seat bottom. His legs stretch upward into the air. He wraps his knee cavities in an acrobat's feat around the car's roll bar – in other words, he suspends himself so as not to slip down. And his red, blood-filled head cranes up under the dashboard, neck muscles



straining. When they see all this, Liu Zizhou's and Wu Qing's willingness to support Peter turns into admiration and soon, because he is unfailingly courteous – the simple things, you know, when he says “thank you” and “please” – admiration turns into deep respect.

The most time-consuming task is the re-wiring of a substantial part of my car's wiring loom. He works with great care and uses the crimping tool for attaching connectors expertly. It is a joy to watch. One habit, though, makes me cringe: he peels off the insulating plastic of wires with his bare teeth. Each time there is a snapping sound. I tell him I've got no insurance for lost teeth on the job. He merrily keeps on making the snapping sound.

Day four brings with it tension. We are in the final stretch of making all the required changes to the car. In order to pass the functional completeness test, my car needs a Malfunction Indication Light (MIL) on the dashboard. It should come on when the onboard diagnostics system detects that the car's emissions are out of whack. The MIL is supposed to be connected to pin 69 of the onboard computer. “Two independent sources have verified this fact,” Peter assures me. Yet, the MIL stays permanently on. We've already spent twenty four hours on this problem. We're getting desperate.

Peter and I had agreed at the outset that I would just watch, but that I am permitted to ask questions – stupid questions – if I didn't understand what he was doing.

It was time to ask a stupid question.

“Are you sure, Peter, that you've wired the MIL to the right pin? To pin 69?”

“What are you suggesting?” Peter shoots back.

“Well, you've been working fast and furious. Isn't it possible that you got the wrong pin?”

“I don't think so.”

A few hours later, I brave wrath and raise the question again.

“Look, Peter, I'm not saying you're not doing a great job. On the contrary, I think you're god. But checking that you've got the right pin takes, what?, less than five minutes. Lets just eliminate this possibility, alright?”

“Ok, ok.”

And so Peter begins to dismantle the 100-pin connector. After laying the wires bare, he compares the connector's pin layout to the wiring diagram. At first he holds them side by side and frowns. Then I see a flash of an insight ripple across his forehead. He turns the connector upside down, almost instantaneously breaks into a broad smile, and delightedly declares, “I made a mistake!” The man of few words cannot help but repeat himself. “I made a mistake!” He is positively jubilant about the discovery of his mistake.



When he first wired up the MIL, he compared the diagram with the connector, but had failed to take into account that he needed to look at one of them upside-down in order to avoid looking at a mirror image. The mistake is fixed in a few minutes and the MIL starts behaving as it should. From Peter, not a trace of awkwardness. He did make mistake. That's that. Thank you, he says to me, for persisting. Self-confident he is, but not to the point of being unable to admit mistakes. I like this kind.

Throughout his work, Peter displays an unflinching desire to achieve perfection and an annoyance at anything that stands in the way. On the day before the official inspection, we are scheduled to go to a pre-inspection test. Minutes before our departure to this test, he reminds me again, "Look, drive as if you're responsible for carrying a thousand eggs. Your car has to last until the real test tomorrow." He's paranoid, rightly, that something might shake loose or disturb the work of engineering art he has put together in the run-up to the inspection.

When we pass the pre-test that day, I am joyous and can't resist a few spurts of acceleration. The 0-100kmh in 4.1seconds kind, if you get my drift. Peter, on the other hand, is more concerned with me not damaging the engine. He noticed in the morning that the oil pressure gauge gave a suspiciously low reading. This makes him worry that my antics might ruin the engine before we'll ever get to the official inspection. While I do my spurts, he first sends me two SMSs from the accompanying car. Of course, I don't notice them at all. When I slow down to get ready for another spurt, he commandeers the accompanying car to pull next to mine and yells, in desperation, at the top of his lungs, "Don't do this shit again. You'll ruin it all. Slow the hell down." At first I am taken aback, but then smile at this man who couldn't care less about causing offence in the interest of doing his job.

When, at the end of his stay and after we've passed the official test, I ask him how he feels, he has but a regret, "I still kick myself for having gotten the mounting positions for the oxygen sensors on the catalyst wrong." True, the sensors point in the wrong direction, but that has squat-all effect on the emissions, and can easily be fixed now that we have passed the test. To him, however, it is a grave disappointment in himself. It just isn't perfect. I conclude that he does have masochistic tendencies.

Over the free weekend, I planned to take Peter to the Great Wall. He loves photography, he tells me. Being a bit of a photography buff myself, I say, well, in that case, the best time to go is just before sun rise. On the Saturday morning, we get up well before dawn and arrive at a lovely section of the Great Wall by seven thirty. The temperature is minus twelve degrees. He rushes up the Wall only to complain the next morning of sore muscles. I follow him and arrive at the top ten minutes later. While he busies himself with taking pictures, I enjoy the utter silence and calm of the Wall. There isn't a sound. Even the birds decide to sleep in. When I pass Peter on my way further up, there is one sound: it's the click-click-click of the bracketed shots of his digital SLR. "I always bracket my shots, then let Photoshop create a composite photo. Delivers optimal results," he explains. "Uh-Hmmm," I reply. Soon the clickety-click fades, and I hear nothing except my own heavy breathing. And then the sun rises through the mist. An hour later, the whir of the cable-car signals the arrival of the first tourists. We are happy to leave.



In the afternoon, Peter goes to the Forbidden City. The following day, the Summer Palace. When, two days later, we pass the official test, I ask, "Don't you want to stay and see a bit more of the city?" Peter replies, "Not really. I'm not a good tourist."

On the day we pass the test, he says to me: "You know, I told you about my friend's charity ski event in France. It was postponed last week because of too much snow fall. It'll take place tomorrow. If it's ok with you, I'll go stand-by back to London tonight and on to France tomorrow. With luck, I can get there on time to support my friend."

On the way to the airport that evening, Peter casually remarks,

"I just totalled up all the money I've spent on this project, and it occurs to me that I'm a really trusting guy."

"What project?" I quip.

"Have I told you about my business associates in Sicily?" he replies.

"Have you met *my* Yakusa friends?" I continue our banter.

Within fifteen minutes of him disappearing through the security check at the Beijing airport, Peter sends me an SMS,

"Am clear through to Dubai. To London, who knows?!"

"Thank you so much for all your help. You've been a blessing. Cheque's in the mail," I reply.

"Remember the Sicilians. May your journey be safe and your project progress with reasonable haste. Peter"

A few days later, I send him an email. "Happy Birthday!" I write. "Noted," comes the reply.