

## Radu's Rides: Summer Pitfalls

**Contributing Editor Radu Craiu writes:** If there is a time to let one's hair down and unclench the fists, it must be summer, that singular season when the only issue one must tiptoe around is the hot sand on a sun-drenched beach. But there must be a Law of Conservation of Angst hidden deep inside my head, since I still managed to find reasons to toss and turn at night. And for the sake of this column, I will pluck out those anxieties that are vaguely related to statistical obsessions.

My family shares a lot of things, including a Kindle account where all year long we download books in the hope of reading them in the Summer. I could dwell on the memory-less process that allows us to keep the hope alive year after year, but I have more hopeless things to talk about. Keeping on with the forgetfulness program, we are usually foggy about who purchased what on some blistery February day, when they were dreaming of trading long cold nights for Long Island iced teas. So here I am, finally settled in my long chair, hoping to get into that crime novel that I vaguely remember adding to my list. I patiently absorb the first 5% of the book which talks perfunctorily about teen alienation and conflicts with their parents. As I am about to fall asleep, a disappearance is mentioned in passing, so my tired annoyance is allayed for another 5% of the book while a problematic teenager has a shaky conversation at night with a disturbed, yet good-looking, stranger on some rooftop placed at a large, crime-appropriate, height. While I am trying hard to guess the motives of the murder I am about to read about, another 9% of the book is absorbed by a weary and increasingly worried mind that, eventually, decides to ask around if someone else has bought this book. While the someone else who did wants to remain anonymous, I can confidently say that they mercilessly mocked me for having read 20% of the book before I could figure out that *my* crime novel was in fact *their* teenage romance. The criminal writing and my subsequent embarrassment notwithstanding, it dawned on me how persistent a prior can be. It wasn't even a strong one, since I *sort of* remembered the title being associated with the novel I *wanted* to read. There is inertia built into our thinking that tends to allow mistakes that are not immediately damaging or threatening to us. This brought to mind my early programming days when bugs that produced too-good-to-be-true results took a lot longer to detect than their antithetic ones. Alas, the fallacy of "beneficial errors" is often revealed, since most mistakes end up hurting us in the long run—just ask how long it took me to venture into another vaguely reminisced e-book purchase!

If there is one thing we can say about the world it's that we are increasingly hearing from people with strong priors who are losing patience way before hearing 20% of the opposing argument. Of

course, this is not new since behavioural economists and psychologists have spent hundreds of experimental hours and thousands of Nobel dollars revealing the extent of our gut's prior opinion influence on our decisions. Perhaps we're fighting both biology and history when we say that the romantic idea of a desperate hero who wins over their opponent only with their enthusiasm and conviction, despite not having any training, weapons, or better things to do, doesn't translate well into the realm of ideas.

Moving away from the beach and deflated by my monumental literary failure, I decide to soothe my misery using the well-known remedy of retail therapy. I am momentarily wary of being in a far-flung country where my understanding is produced by strong priors rather than data. However, as you are likely aware, we live in an age where technology rescues us come hell or high water, so emboldened by the zeitgeist I venture on. Shopping is easy, unless you are looking for specific items like, say, shoe insoles or lactose-free milk, which, for whatever reason, have unrecognizable spelling in those languages I know nothing about. So here I am excitedly looking for Bulgarian in my translation app when I realize it's not there. In fact, it exists on some server in California, but a significant download is necessary for me to use it and my phone signal is modest, bordering on not there. As I drive back, my face reddened by the shopping failure (adios, therapy!) and bludgeoning heat, I decide to ask Siri to play some Julio Iglesias, but I am not sure which pronunciation I should use. It turns out it doesn't matter as none of them work. When I stand cluelessly in front of a shelf full of indecipherable milk cartons or shout "Hey Siri" uselessly into the void, I realise that the excitement brought by technology's promises can be surpassed only by the despondency brought by its failures.

All these remind me of my family's 30-year-old Fiat 850 my parents tenaciously held on to, while being thoroughly bamboozled by a car mechanic who ended up working on it almost weekly. Their situation was the result of strong priors about longevity of a car that was once upon a time nice and the blind belief that technological fixes, brought into action by overbearing operators, could improve their lives. Sometimes I wonder if my life is any different.



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