

## Driving with the hazard of dukes

I reckon the first exchange would have gone like this: “Are you all right?” “Yes, yes...just a scratch. Bit shaken up. Nothing to worry about.”

“Well, I am worried. What about that man who said he had your blood on his hands.” “Oh...you think he might get it DNA-tested?”

“Perhaps. But I’m more worried about you driving. Surely you can see the sense in giving that up now. After all...”

“Bugger that. Man’s perfectly capable. Sun in my eyes. I’m ordering a replacement today. And if you think I’m going to start wearing a seatbelt after all this time, you’re mistaken. Bloody nonsense...”

If I ever get to 97 I hope I’ll be just as irascible...but not as deluded. The Duke’s arrogant rejection of commonsense is in stark contrast to the sensitive public performances of his grandsons.

Driving is something that would certainly be found in the Duke’s DNA if the man who helped him out of his rolled Land Rover did get the blood tested. I don’t know what indicates it in the double helix, but a lot of us have it. It’s why seven-year-olds order cars on Trade Me and can be expected to drive dad home when he’s too sloshed to manage.

Many of us have been driving legally from the age of 15. If we live as long as the Duke we’ll have spent an extraordinary 82 years in charge of a lethal weapon.

My father-in-law drove until his early 90s. At 91 he took me to Auckland to see the last NZ Beegees concert. The only time I had any doubts was when we crossed Auckland Harbour Bridge and he started to drift out of our lane. I did grab the wheel a bit too obviously.

Duncan’s problem in later years was not so much his age but the age of his car. It had no power steering or backing camera or bumper sensors of the kinds we have now. Three cracked concrete posts in the fence along his driveway bear testament to attempts to back out of the garage.

The thing I observed about Duncan was the resilience of his automatic pilot, the part of the brain that handles the things we do subconsciously. Much driving is on auto pilot, which sees the colour of the traffic lights, looks in the mirror, and watches for approaching menaces like idiot drivers (yet to develop their pilot).

I thought my father’s driving days were over when he was tee-boned at the Mangorei Rd traffic lights in New Plymouth one day. His car was wrecked, but he escaped with scratches (and community service). He kept driving. Sounds familiar.

His pilot had gone AWOL and didn't notice the lights were red and there was an approaching car. Bang. The conversation with Mum would have been much like the second part of the imagined one at the start of this column.

Mum had already conceded her pilot was retired. That was apparent to her the day she drove the length of our long driveway lightly clipping the fence all the way down. Dad spent hours trying to buff marks from the paintwork.

One way to battle pilot loss, I think, is to have everything in the house assigned to its set place, including – especially including – where you put the car keys. This drives Lin to distraction. Her brain works differently to mine (surprise) and she likes to change the house around occasionally.

She watches with interest (and some despair, I suspect) when I use the coffee machine, noting the strict order with which each part of the process must be carried out. Laboriously. Automatically.

I've tried to convince her this is not sinister. It's required because during any routine task my brain HQ is usually thinking about something I'm writing. I concede that living with someone so auto-piloted must be...polite word needed here - "challenging".

The pilot thing is handy, because its efficiency level is an indicator of the pace at which our aging brains are deteriorating. I already see some signs, like putting Lin's teabag (an exotic flavour as opposed to my gumboot) in my green cup instead of her blue one.

My driving seems okay, but who am I to judge? From what I've seen of some people's attempts, the denial gene is more powerful than the reality one.

Men think they can drive forever. I pray I don't kill someone by being as stubborn as the Duke.