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His mistress is driving me crazy!

What kind of man brings the Other Woman along on a summer road trip with his wife?

by Joanne Latimer



It's road trip season. Every summer, women across Canada plan itineraries and organize the kids. We pack snacks for the car. What do we get for our efforts? The hubby brings his mistress. She sits in the front seat, between us, as he listens to her every word. She is the GPS. And I, for one, hate her. "Shushhhh," says Husband, when she speaks. I am the idiot to her oracle. She has the power to override his inner compass. I cannot say a thing about her without making him defensive. He shoots me a look of contempt when I point out the irrationality of making a U-turn in the Prairies. My printouts from MapQuest are considered traitorous.

Fellow passenger Beatrice Alain feels my pain. She and her husband returned recently from three years in Turin, Italy. “He looooved his GPS, with her Carla Bruni voice. She sounded like she was about to pass out from breathlessness,” recalls Alain, a project manager in Montreal’s non-profit sector. “He would go anywhere she said. We even changed our route to the airport because she knew best. I was convinced she was trying to have me knocked off and take my place, because she was always directing me to the middle of nowhere.” Eventually, Alain changed the GPS’s setting to something less threatening to the relationship: a bossy male voice.

Tuti Do is another member of a seething minority—cuckolded passengers with a grudge against the family’s GPS. “Oh, I hate her,” says Do, a public relations executive in Montreal. “I continually tell my husband to ignore her. My directions should override hers, if he knows what’s good for him! Sometimes he lowers her volume just so he can discreetly have her there with him, but I see her, sitting there on our dashboard with her pretty graphics pointing in all sorts of weird directions. I think he prefers her since she always sounds so pleasant and doesn’t have the rude tone that he claims I have. Me? Rude? Never!”

Marriage therapist Jason Phelps sees the GPS as a new way for people to play out their power struggle. “Driving is still an incredibly gendered issue,” says Phelps, based in Montreal. “Men tend to like to have control of the driving. It’s a standard conflict.”

But does the conflict feel “standard” when you’re driving up a mountainside at night, in the rain, on the say-so of a disembodied bimbo? “He *defends* her to me in these situations, like he’s defending the dumb blond,” says Cynthia Taylor, an Ottawa-based communications consultant. Taylor’s husband is Swiss. On a recent European trip, Taylor was silenced while the GPS Fräulein barked out orders in German. “There’s no question that he likes being told what to do in German. She isn’t even Swiss German. She speaks *High* German,” adds Taylor. “The very behaviour that disqualifies you from being a good wife—the repetition of commands—is somehow welcomed from *her*.”

The Other Woman doesn’t have a pulse, but she’s still a threat. “She’s an interloper, just like the cellphone, an iPod, a BlackBerry, a laptop or anything that interrupts your connection with your partner,” says Marilyn Barnicke Belleghem, a registered marriage and family therapist in Burlington, Ont. “The aggression toward the GPS is really about the loss of intimacy. She’s a projection of all your insecurities.”

Not so for road warriors like Carrie Rentschler. “In our marriage, I am the one who wants to drive,” says Rentschler, an assistant professor in art history and communication studies at McGill. “So my husband sets me up with a female guide to direct me on our way. And he knows that, for whatever reason, I’m more likely to listen to her on the road than him.” Rentschler isn’t the only person who views the GPS as an ally. Graham Cherwaty uses

“her” as a release valve. “I talk to her like I’d *never, ever* talk to someone reading a map,” explains Cherwaty, who owns a print and motion graphics business in London, Ont. “I can *yell* at her!”

Just back from an 1,800-km road trip through the Maritimes, Pat Brandon is making peace with the GPS. “We bought one on our return and I welcome the ‘girlfriend’ on our next trip,” says Brandon, a bookkeeper in Edmonton. “At age 62, with bifocals, it was hell reading maps in a moving vehicle with a less-than-patient husband.” Taylor agrees it may be wise to “encourage the affair” to lessen the stress. Back in Montreal, feisty Tuti Do is taking another approach. She wonders if there’s a way to make her GPS sound like George Clooney. Let us know, Tuti! I’d make a U-turn in the Prairies for him.