This is a story of how I fell in love with a car.

Like many things these days, it began with an e-mail. "Your Robert Cumberford once penned an article," wrote Mr. Greg Long, of Charlottesville, Virginia, "on the glories of the Citroën DS." Our design editor, it seems, is a huge fan of Citroën's 1950s family car/spaceship, the one with the magic-carpet suspension and the *Thunderbirds Are Go* bodywork. Long had a very rare DS just coming out of a year-and-a-half restoration in Seattle, and he wondered if Cumberford would like to drive it home for him.

Home, of course, being Virginia. Almost 3000 miles away.

Cumberford was off in France and unavailable (irony, that), but executive editor Joe DeMatio said yes anyway. Or at least, he did after I spent an entire afternoon begging him to. I had never driven a Citroën, I pointed out, and surely he didn't want me to die thinking that French cars were little more than arrogance and cheese. He relented, possibly because he is a fan of French cheese.

What transpired over the resultant road trip surprised even me. Journalism professors will tell you that you're never supposed to admit to losing your objectivity, if indeed you lose it at all. To hell with that. Road trips are unpredictable. Affection is uncontrollable. And love—love!—is a *1966 Citroën DS21 Chapron Décapotable.*

Allow me to explain.

Bonjour, Mademoiselle

A FRENCH LOVE STORY IN FIVE PARTS. »»»»»»» BY SAM SMITH

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ANDREW YEADON**

Part One: PREFLIGHT

"The hydraulic spheres are installed hand-tight, even though they contain more than 2000 psi; I've included a spare, but they almost never fail. Watch the fluid level in the reservoir—if it's too low and the suspension is set on high, the pump will suck air and send it straight to the brakes. The clicking and snapping you hear is normal; that's just the regulator cycling on and off. The pump will growl a little as it loads up, but too much clicking is bad, and it could mean that a sphere is going."

Chris M. (he's asked to not have his last name printed) is walking around a red 1966 Citroën DS21 convertible, stopping at each corner to elaborate on one or more of the car's various quirks. He's spent the past eighteen months mechanically restoring this Citroën, so he knows it well. I'm standing next to him with a friend of mine, a bespectacled San Francisco software engineer named Michael Chaffee. The past hour has been a crash course in the French Approach to Everything: hydropneumatics, coachbuilding, brake bias, even industrial design. Chaffee and I exchange cautious glances. We're about to drive the Citroën from Chris's shop, in Seattle, to a place 2889 miles away, and listening to Chris is like being prepped for space flight, or maybe a bungee jump into the sun. The overwhelming vibe is largely, "Know this, because if it breaks and you don't know it, you're probably screwed." And on a DS—a mid-century engineering miracle blessed with a hydraulic suspension and virtually nothing simple or conventional—"this" apparently includes everything but the cigar lighter. And maybe the floor mats.

"Also, you want to be careful about flat tires. If you get a flat, you might not notice. Because the suspension is always working to keep the body horizontal, you can drive along and not know you have a dead corner. It tends to trash the tire, and the spare fits on only two of the wheels."

Chris pauses for a moment, an earnest look on his face. My head is filled with worrisome, cartoonlike images of dancing hydraulic pumps, all of them growling like French poodles. It suddenly occurs to me that America is a very, very big place. Chris smiles.

"But really, I'm sure you won't have any of those problems or need anything."

I breathe a small, tentative sigh of relief. Chaffee chuckles, biting his lip a little. Chris starts the DS, and it slowly rises up off the ground, clicking and snapping away.

Part Two: DEPARTURE

When the Citroën DS19 debuted in the autumn of 1955, entire countries struggled to pick up their jaws from the floor. Citroën's masterstroke was like nothing that had come before—in one fell swoop, two Parisian geniuses (see sidebar) had effectively created the Car of Tomorrow. Even if you ignore the groundbreaking styling, the Citroën's résumé is mind-boggling: Self-leveling, height-adjustable, hydropneumatic independent suspension. Hydraulically assisted steering, braking, and gearshifting. An actively proportioned braking system, including inboard front disc brakes, that adjusts brake bias on the fly based on suspension travel front and rear. Radial tires. Front-wheel drive. A plastic roof. The list goes on. The only thing even remotely normal was the engine: a 1.9-liter, overhead-valve four-cylinder producing just 75 hp. (Power would eventually rise; our DS21 sports a 109-hp, 2.1-liter four.)

If the complexity boggles the mind today, then it must have inspired riots fifty years ago. Some 12,000 orders were placed on the day the DS was launched. The philosopher Roland Barthes wrote that it had obviously "fallen from the sky" and that it marked "a change in the mythology of cars." Looking at the period alternatives, it's difficult to argue. What '50s family Ford or Renault ever mythologized anything? Or fell from anywhere, save a wobbly floor jack?

The Décapotable—our particular version of the DS—is essentially an ordinary DS four-door with its roof cut off, rear doors removed, and front doors lengthened. The sedan's technical weirdness remains, although our four-on-the-tree, three-pedal '66 lacks the available Citromatic automated manual. (Yes, you read that right.) French coachbuilder Henri Chapron built nearly 1400 DS convertibles, almost all of them with the approval of the Citroën factory, between 1960 and 1971. They are now among the most valuable, most desirable Citroëns ever produced.

Starting a DS for the first time is unavoidably odd. Turn the dash-mounted ignition key and push the tiny, unlabeled black button next to it, and the engine lights off. It sounds both subdued and ordinary, like an old Volvo idling under an afghan. A few moments pass, the suspension pressurizes, and the car lifts off the ground, one end at a time, like a camel rising after a nap. You can hear the pump engage and rumble a little under the hood, the regulator clicking every so often. You get the distinct feeling that a lot of complicated, delicate proceedings are going on beneath the surface.

We pack our baggage into the Citroën's surprisingly cavernous trunk and set its alien, single-spoke steering wheel for the Seattle city limits. I tool away from Chris's shop cautiously. Chaffee looks at me expectantly. "How is it?"

"It's weird. Nothing is normal. *Nothing.* I feel like I've never driven a car before."

As the sun sets and we climb into the mountains east of Seattle, a slight chill in the air and the convertible top stowed behind us, I

Lefèbvre and Bertoni: FRENCH REVOLUTION

Automobiles Citroën may owe its existence and its name to founder André Citroën, but the responsibility for the company's groundbreaking vehicles lies elsewhere. Astonishingly, the French firm's most iconic, world-changing cars—the Traction Avant, the 2CV, and the DS—sprung primarily from the fertile minds of two remarkable individuals.

With the exception of Citroën himself,

André Lefèbvre is probably the most important man in the company's eighty-nine-year history. A tall, dark, and elegant former grand prix driver who was trained as an aircraft designer and once worked under aeronautical pioneer Gabriel Voisin, Lefèbvre was Citroën's de facto (yet oddly titleless) chief engineer from 1933 to 1958. He was given carte blanche by both André Citroën and the Michelin family (which owned the company following Citroën's departure), and he was regarded as the final authority on all technical matters. He worshipped novelty and functionality, took a perverse delight in flouting convention, and reportedly drank nothing but water and champagne.

Oddly, the designer responsible for three of the most striking French vehicles ever built remains largely unrecognized.

Flaminio Bertoni was a tailor's son, a former coachbuilder's apprentice, a painter, an award-winning sculptor, and a witty, characteristically Italian workaholic. He was hired by Citroën as a designer in 1925 but quit a few short months later, only to return in 1932. Bertoni worked in anonymity, blanketed by company-wide research and development secrecy and a ban on embellishing the achievements of individuals. When he died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1964, at the age of sixty-one, he had spent thirty-two years of his life at Citroën, but few outside the company's walls knew his name. — SS

BOTTOM LEFT: SAM SMITH; OTHERS: ANDREW YEADON

» » » » » » Clockwise from top: Leaving Seattle; the green globes on each side of the engine bay are the hydraulic spheres for the front suspension; a gutted DS sedan behind Chris M.'s Seattle shop; the Citroën stares at the moon in eastern Washington; the DS's rubber-mushroom brake "pedal" assembly, removed and sectioned for display.

» » » » » » Top: Passing through a Virginia winery. Above, from left: The DS's dash is a hodgepodge of unlabeled switches and beautifully finished stainless steel (note the suspension-height lever in the footwell); the vent controls are almost aeronautical; clutch, brake, throttle. Below: Greg Long in his Charlottesville garage.

realize that, for reasons I can't yet explain, I kind of like it.

Part Three: CLIMB

Make no mistake: On a Citroën DS, the suspension is the main attraction. On paper, it resembles a science experiment, or something you dreamed up in college after one too many nights at the local hookah bar: Four nitrogen-charged steel spheres, one at each wheel, act as springing medium. Pressurized mineral oil is fed into rubber bladders in the bottom half of each sphere, and the suspension's control arms are connected, by way of hydraulic actuators and damper valves, to those bladders. Hit a bump, the bladders have oil forced into them and expand, and the nitrogen compresses, serving as the spring.

The genius is that it all actually works. Several stretches of pockmarked highway in Seattle gave us our first taste, but the real kicker comes on a stretch of I-90 in eastern Washington. We bomb down a hill at 75 mph, crossing a section of torn, curving asphalt just as the road bottoms. I toe the brakes, the back end of the DS squats—squats!—and we feel nothing, hearing only a pattery rumble from underneath the car. A late-'90s GMC van nearby encounters the same stretch of pavement at the same speed and hits its brakes at the same time. The chassis upset pitches it into the next lane.

Chaffee and I look at each other, speechless. "Ha!" he says, throwing his arms skyward. "Ha! This is a *real car!*"

Well, mostly. There are a few quirks to get used to—the brake pedal isn't a pedal, it's a touch-sensitive, pyramid-shaped rubber button where pressure, not pedal travel, equals stopping power; the feedback-free, hydraulic rack-and-pinion steering is as disconnected and consistent as a rheostat, and it feels like that of no other car on the planet—but the sharp-yet-pillowy ride and handling combination is almost supernatural. Nothing in the modern world even comes close. (Prior to this trip, the most supple car I'd ever driven was a 1970s Cadillac stretch limousine. The chuckable, sprightly DS puts it on the trailer—the Citroën could run over the Caddy at full steam and not so much as spill your drink.)

We ditch the interstate once out of Washington, choosing instead to cross most of the northwest on the more scenic U.S. Route 2. We pass through Idaho consumed with a new game: What Can We Drive Over and Not Feel Next? At one point, top down, Chaffee crawls into the back seat at 80 mph and stands up, facing rearward, to take a picture. Five seconds later, when we drop into a three-inch-deep section of shaved highway, the station wagon behind us swerves ten feet to the left. Chaffee turns around, genuinely confused.

"What happened?"

"Oh, nothing," I say. "I think they thought you were going to fall out."

"Why?"

"Didn't you see what we just hit?"

"We hit something?"

Counterintuitive, vaguely nautical sensations abound. The DS's rear, not its front, sinks under braking, only to rise again a moment later. Once the car takes a set in a corner, the outside fenders rise a little. And the thin-rimmed steering wheel doesn't really self-center; you end up blowing corner lines if you don't take care to place the car every last inch of where you want it to go.

At one point, drunk with power, we go out of our way to find speed bumps. Crawling brings a slight lift from the car's nose and tail. A 20-mph pace earns a *whump* and a little pitch up from the hood. Flying across at 45 mph makes the bump disappear.

Yes. *Disappear.*

Chaffee, high on ride comfort, spends most of barely paved Montana and Wyoming cackling at traffic.

Part Four: CRUISE

Much of the DS's charm comes from its speedboat-meets-futurist-on-acid looks, but the details are what really suck you in. We spend most of South Dakota chasing storms across the plains—convertible top up and drum-tight—with Chaffee driving, while I stare into the Décapotable's dashboard. The dash in a '66 DS is an amalgam of strange angles, blocky gauges, and stamped stainless steel. Falling into the embrace of the Décap's well-stuffed, softly sprung front seats is like sitting down at the desk of an early-'60s recording studio, something out of *A Hard Day's Night* or *Mad Men.* Mysterious, unlabeled pulls and switches beg for you to fiddle with them. The vent controls alone are mesmerizing—gumdrops on sticks, they look like the flap levers on a Cessna.

As pieces of art, the DS sedan and convertible stand up to a critical eye. Citroën's triumph is one of the few car designs that have been taken seriously by the modern art community, and a 1999 British design jury named it the "product of the century," ahead of the Apollo moon lander and the first Apple Macintosh. But it's the reaction of the modern man on the street that gets me. Amazingly, even in middle America, most people have a rough idea of what the car is. (At the very least, everyone gets that it's French.) The responses run from the predictable to *say what?*

"What is that, some kinda car from the future?"

"I gotta tell you, it's not the prettiest little thing."

"Well, it's better than a Ree-nalt."

"That's an Alpine, right, not a Porsche? Is the engine in the back?"

The crown jewel and prize-winning answer comes just outside of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, at a gas stop: "A DS convertible! I've never seen one in the United States!"

And for some odd reason, absolutely everyone wants to know how it rides.

Inescapably, the Citroën evokes a feeling. It makes you ache for the comfort of a dark, smoke-filled room, even if you don't smoke. You hover down the highway in a kind of glissade, floating like a Detroit sled of yore but without any of the attendant wallowing, and you think of women in flowing evening dresses. The mood even permeates the act of shifting—the reach from second to third is a distinctly dismissive gesture, as if you are waving the bellboy to take your luggage up to your room at Le Meurice and you are tired of boring people and their boring cars and *mon Dieu,* you want a glass of wine.

We arrive in the Midwest without incident, stop in the Chicago suburbs for the night, and realize that we have spent the entire trip doing almost nothing but discussing the glories of the DS.

"I can think of worse ways to spend a week," says Chaffee.

Part Five: FINAL APPROACH

Virginia arrives with little fanfare and much rain. We meet the state whose motto claims it *Is For Lovers* in the middle of a bellowing thunderstorm, cruising into Charlottesville at high tide. Greg Long, a Citroën freak to his bones (he once made a business out of selling restored 2CVs), is standing on his porch. A massive exhaust leak—bad weld on a reproduction muffler—that reared its head in West Virginia means that he has heard us coming, literally, for miles. He has a grin on his face.

Chaffee and I climb out of the car, look at each other, and laugh. After five days and more than 2800 miles, most of them with the top down, we're both tanned red enough to rival a beet. Chaffee looks at me, cocks his head, and sighs.

"You know, I've been on a lot of road trips. Usually, on the beginning of day three, you get back into the car and think to yourself, 'Oh God, this again.' Here, at the end, I just find myself thinking, 'ahh…' I could get back in and do it all over again."

Standing in Long's driveway, staring into the Citroën's taillights, I find that I'm a little sad. I can't quite put my finger on why, but I have this need to do something nice for his car. Give it an oil change. Buy it flowers. Something. And as Long pulls the DS into his garage, I feel strangely…jealous.

These things are, after all, uncontrollable. You understand. ■

WINERY, STEERING WHEEL, AND PORTRAIT: REGIS LEFEBURE; OTHERS: SAM SMITH