

Life in the other

LANE

I refuse to get depressed by the little mechanical setbacks that seem to be haunting us this season. I've even worked it out in my mind that MASS resuscitation is a big improvement over MASS reincarnation! Right?

So, in the interim, while the new engine and turbo are being assembled by my TH, et al., I have time for headier pursuits. For example, the status of my vegetable and flower gardens and the defiant refusal of the back yard at Chateau Walrich to grow grass; creating a utopian society; communicating at a reasonable level (something above all fours) with our cats; plotting revenge. Problem is, I'm not entirely sure the general or immediate populace (human or feline) is ready for my attention to these matters at the level of intensity required. Perhaps I should just confine myself to my annual treatise (read tirade) on the state of our highway systems and be done with it.

Motorized land transportation has assumed the level of demigod in our society — a birthright, if you will. It is right up there with public education, voting, drinking, lying to a grand jury, ownership of land and home, flaunting the first amendment and bearing arms. The car (or truck or motorcycle) is the 20th century symbol of freedom. We are free to go from point A to point B, across town or across country, whenever we dare to; free to spend as much or as little as we desire sprucing up our ride; free to wreak havoc on public thoroughfares and just as free to pay the consequences for our irresponsible behavior. We are also free to be mad as hell over the deplorable condition of the highway infrastructures that connect burg to megalopolis as well as the multi-billion dollar industry that has materialized to "repair" that network.

I spend A LOT of time in a car, both in and out of competition. On those rare occasions that I'm not cruising about the state pursuing my "career," I join the hoards of suburbanites who shun mass transit in favor of the vehicular commute. This requires engaging in a bizarre ritual each time I leave the house after 7 a.m. It starts with monitoring three different radio traffic reports, proceeds by planning an escape route and culminates with getting stuck in a traffic jam anyway. Commuting has become a complicated process requiring guile, cat-like moves and an intimate knowledge of side streets. Having achieved the ripe age of two score plus I am almost embarrassed to admit a propensity to still be in the wrong lane at the wrong time.

The traffic jam usually occurs for one of four

reasons. First, VOLUME, a condition created when there are more cars than road surface. While we joke about the LIE being the world's largest parking lot, the sad fact of the matter is that the day it opened it was declared obsolete. Making it longer just stretched out the problem. Second reason, an ACCIDENT. This includes anything from a simple tap on the bumper that must be investigated lest the inevitable whiplash suit be rendered bogus, to a real metal cruncher to a jack knifed tractor trailer that carelessly spills propane all over the suburbs. What makes an accident so bad is that everyone else heading in either direction ABSOLUTELY MUST slow down to peek at the gore. Any report that used the term "rubbernecking" prompts me to design an alternate route. The third reason is ANY BEND IN THE ROAD. For some obtuse reason commuters feels compelled to slow down for the slightest curvature in the highway. Why they do this is beyond my comprehension but I can cite the precise location brake lights will begin to flash on the Grand Central Parkway when the average speed approaches the double nickel.

The fourth reason, and the one I will dwell on interminably this month, are those jams created by omnipresent road repair crews. Now, don't get me wrong, repairing roads is a necessary evil and it would be crass of me not to admit that sometimes its even done well. I just wish there was some logic attached to the process. You see, I'm absolutely convinced that the DOT has in its employ a malevolent person who has this map of Long Island shaped like a voodoo doll. The diabolic task at hand is the gleeful sticking of pins here and there to indicate which stretch of highway is going to get goafed up next or again. I shall offer a microcosmic example to illustrate my point.

A couple of months ago my TH and I were enjoying a rare Sunday morning at home, he plowing through the ads in *Newsday* attempting to find real news and I making frequent erasures on the Sunday *Times* crossword puzzle trying to conjure up a seven letter word for "bitter vetch." Suddenly he announced, "You're not gonna believe this!" and proceeded to read an innocuous little item reporting that a \$4 million contract has just been awarded to "improve" the section of Meadowbrook Parkway that meets with the Northern State

Parkway, about a quarter mile stretch all told. The item went on to say that work was scheduled to begin "in the Spring." I looked up from the puzzle and inquired, "What was all that work they just finished supposed to be about?" I got that "look" in return.

It was immediately clear to me that the seven letter "bitter vetch" would have to wait. With a petulance I usually reserve for the produce man who charges \$1.49 for a puny head of iceberg, I tossed aside the puzzle and grabbed an old calculator out of the drawer of the coffee table. After some number crunching it told me that a quarter mile was precisely 1320 feet. IF the proposed work came in a budget, that meant it was going to cost us \$3030.303 a FOOT to "improve" a stretch of road they just finished "improving."

Knowing just about how many MASS improvements could be made with that much money, I developed what I considered a fool proof plan. All I had to do was find 1319 other people each willing to write a check for \$3030.303 to get the county off the hook. We could then tell the contractor to take his orange pylons and coffee klatching, break taking, shovel leaning crews someplace else (preferably Pluto) to screw up traffic. Confident with my strategy, I announced it to my TH.

I got that "look" again.

So, I spent the remainder of the day being depressed and playing out avoidance strategies in my mind. These would be operationalized as soon as I saw one guy with a can of orange spray point making odd markings on an otherwise inoffensive stretch of road. Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't New York State recently pass a law prohibiting the sale of spray paint to potentially irresponsible people?

Avoidance strategies, I should explain, are those diversionary tactics employed to outwit road repair crews. Fortunately, Chateau Walrich is located reasonably close to a number of alternative routes that, with perseverance, eventually lead one in the right direction. I mentally listed the obvious ones first. There is the Eisenhower Park short circuit that neatly avoids a total of four traffic lights. The Wantagh to Southern State to Cross Island Parkway strategy is viable only before 6:30 a.m. The Merrick Road to Old Country Road to Glen Cove Road to Grand Central just misses the work zone but requires careful timing for the twenty one lights and three arrows, none of which are synchronized. When all else fails, and if radio reports dictate, my last choice is the Newbridge to Route 106 to the World's Largest Parking Lot. This route requires me to go east to go north to go west and adds and irritating 14 miles to the commute. You see how upsetting all this road "improvement" business can be? Well, being a veteran of these transit wars I can assure

you that none of these plans is worth a wit. You see, my three million counterparts who make the same journey every day have developed identical strategies.

Tiring of the fruitless game plan, it struck me how enslaved we have become by our freedom to move about. We are not stifled by miles of orange pylons inhibiting our progress. We have "improved" our roads to the point of total disrepair and if that person with the voodoo doll map has his way, there is no end in sight.

So, I patiently wait for that inevitable day when the lead story on the six o'clock news reports that due to a demonic overzealousness, every major artery into and out of the Big Apple has just been closed for repairs. Unfortunately, no one will see it because they'll be sitting in an overheated car behind a row of orange pylons.

I'll be among them, still working on a seven letter work for "bitter vetch."