3-1-1995

Automobile Amnesia

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol3/iss2/31

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Traffic—the final frontier. Some people seek out new experiences; others have experience thrust upon them. All people need new experiences; no one enjoys raw culture shock. The latter has been my continuing experience in city traffic. Case in point is my recent safari into the jungle, the jungle of Portland traffic, a reminder to those who forget what it’s like to be lost. We, that is, I, forget what it’s like not to know. We suffer from a kind of amnesia, an ailment quickly cured by a voyage around the Rose City.

Now don’t get me wrong. I normally enjoy driving. Driving has, until recently, been akin to a grad school field trip: seeing the old familiar sights, rolling down the window and hearing the same birds sing their unchanging songs—yes, the good life in traffic—at least in Idaho traffic. Idaho, the Gem State, the sunny, slower traffic state—MY state. Towns with light, romantic, French names like “Coeur d’Alene,” and “Boise,” harmonious, melodic names.

I could tolerate the English-sounding names in Oregon—I’m part English. But I’m from Idaho and the names here are stanger than a trip to Oz. My ears are not tuned to “Port-land” (now that’s inventive), “Salem” (sorry, its been used), “Eugene” (no personal names, please). Although some do sound rather whimsical, in fact (“Tigard,” “Hillsdale”), what name can be used to describe a town which hides its schools? Gresham. Grey-Sham. Sounds rather dark and deceitful, doesn’t it? At least to my Idaho ears.

The reader may wonder at my hostility toward this suburb to Portland-proper (Is there a Portland “improper”? ). Regardless, I have my reasons. I spent a week there one afternoon, trying to locate a school which existed in theory—but not to my senses. I have said that I enjoy driving. I do. When one drives in eastern Washington or northern Idaho, it’s a breeze. You just get on one of the two-lane highways (or an abandoned cow-tail) and head for Moscow, that Russian-sounding town with the Nordic university team—the “Vandals.” Ah, yes, hub of the world, this land of farmers, this state of tree-fallers and fish-catchers, this home of Hemingway, this Idaho!

But Oregon is not Idaho, and Portland is not Boise. Would that it were.

But I digress. Traffic. Portland traffic. Portland noon traffic. If Dante forgot a level of Purgatory, this is it. As Dante began his underworld journey with Virgil his guide, so I sought some directions from friends. It’s a bright Monday morning at the campus where I am studying to be an educator. It’s a beautiful day, so I decide to drop over to my friends in the administration building. I begin with the obvious first stop, my friends in the mailroom.

"Say, Kris, I’m going to be doing some field experience for my teaching certification. Can you tell me how to get to Portland Lutheran High School? What’s the easiest way to get there?"

I realize my question comes just as Kris is turning to work on a special project. But, hey, what are friends for?

“Oh, that’s easy,” Kris replies. “you just take 205 to 84 and go right under the tunnel and just keep going—I think it’s 181st—Yeah, 181st. Then you go right to—about a block—it’s right there by—I think it’s Stark, or maybe Glisan. Jan, is Lu’ High on Stark or Glisan?”

“Jan knows,” Kris says aside to me.

“Stark,” says Jan as she rushes out the door. She’s understandably busy.

Kris is busy, too, but not too busy to pull a map from her desk. I glance at the map as a phone call comes in for Kris who takes the call and puts the map away. But, hey, who needs a map?

As she darts to the phone I ask, “Does the information office have any more maps like that?”

“No, but you won’t have any problem. It’s only about a half block off the main road.”

Famous last words.

“Thanks.”

I have by this time sketched on some scratch paper what seems to be a rough reproduction of Kris’s map, as best I remember it. I tuck the paper into my shirt pocket and confidently head out of the mailroom. No problem, that’s what Kris said, right?

“Problem” is an understatement for what happens the following day. Leaving Concordia College with plenty of time to spare—an hour and a half—I decide to cruise over...
to Super Cuts for a trim. From there I drop past my place, have a quick bite of lunch. After lunch I still have half an hour of travel time—no problem.

I drive over to the 60th Avenue entrance to I–84. Oh boy—Ly’ High here we come! Up ahead is the sign for the Dalles and east on 84. So far, so good. A garbage bag flies across the freeway. I miss it but it lodges under the Winnebago next to me and begins making a roaring, flapping sound.

No problem. Just ignore the bag and the noise. There’s the 181 exit. Just turn here and—wait—there’s a stop light after the exit. Left or right? Which is it? I’ll try right—yeah, right sounds right—I think. Okey, up the hill. Wait, what’s that sign say? San Ra . . . something—it doesn’t matter. It’s Stark I’m looking for, right?

The cars around me speed past, which doesn’t help me feel any calmer. Don’t look at me, buddy—I know where I’m going; I’m, well, same to you, you jerk! He was goin’ too fast, anyway. Just a couple of blocks and—yeah, yeah, I see you on my bumper. You’ll like it when I hit my brakes and you’re filling out papers ‘til kingdom come. It’s thirty-five miles-per-hour; that’s three-five, ”you mental midget; now back off!

Two blocks and no school. Ah, man, I hate this! Ten minutes. I can still make it in ten minutes.

I whip the car around and begin driving west on Stark, then east, then west again. I’m looking for any symbol or sign of any school. A red sports car with ghetto-blaster—head-banging “music” pounds up behind me, inches from my bumper. Yeah, that’s right; that’s real smart, you lowlife!

A sign whips past. What—huh? 220 Avenue? 230? Oh, man, now I’m late! Gotta stay cool; gotta take care. Gotta turn around. But that jerk back there—well, then, go around, you jerk! Gotta find somebody to tell me where—but not a restaurant too slow—or insurance agency—too many questions—not that—wait—a BP Service Station! I whip the Chevy Citation into BP. Two attendants see me. The older one eyes me like I’m Clyde Barrow. Thanks buddy, like I’ve got this Marine haircut just so I could look good for the holdup. Like I’m gonna roll this gas station.

The other attendant can see I’m the kind of guy who would get lost in his own house. I focus my question on him.

“’m trying to find Portland Lutheran High School. Do you know how to get there?”

The older guy glances at my yellow legal pad to make sure I’m not packing a pistol. Jerk. The younger guy looks at me like He’s just heard a rendition of Amazing Grace. He decides to help a wretch like me.

“It might be on Glisan or Burnside. I’ve heard of it.”

I try not to grovel.

“Okay, I’ll try that. Thanks.” And tell your partner the jerk that I’m not Clyde Barrow.

I race to 181st, hang a right onto Burnside. Yes, just follow the Yellow Brick Road—but I’m not Dorothy and this doesn’t look a bit like Kansas, or Idaho. No school. Back to Glisan.

No luck. Desperate. Maybe if I back-track—this is like being lost in the hills of Idaho—right, back down 181st.

I get within a quarter of a mile of the 84 exit. Back to square one. Man! Then I spot my last, best hope: Burger King!

The friendly cashier approaches to take my order. Sure, you can help me—I’m trying to find Portland Luther—well, no, I’m not ordering a burger. Would you happen to know the way—the smile leaves her face as she realizes I won’t be the billionth burger sale of the day. She passes the buck to her underlings in Burgerology 101:

“Any ya guys know where—what?”

“Portland Lutheran High School.”

“Yeah, right, where Portland Lutheran School is?”

“Nope”

“Uh, nope, sorry.”

After the Queen of Burger City has failed to rally the Goofy wanna be’s, one lone soldier remains in F-troop. He’s younger than the rest—they all look like they’ve cut class flip burgers—and he has the sense to pull out a phone directory.

“It’s in the public school section, right.”

“Okay, actually, it’s a Lutheran school. Maybe it’s in the Yellow Pages.”

“Here,” says the scowling Burger Queen, grabbing it away from the kid, “you can look for it.”

“Thanks.” And may God have mercy on your soul.

I fly out of Burger Kingdom leaving the burger royalty frustrated that all the extra attention did not result in a single sale of fries. Maybe next time.

At this point I’m reaching beyond the lords and ladies of Fryville. I’m even beyond pleading with the Lord. I have reached that final stage in the twelve-step program in automobile amnesia: Beyond denial, beyond anger, beyond bargaining, I am at the stage of resignation. I resign myself to a higher power, to Divine Will. Like an alcoholic at an A.A. meeting, I have spent my energies. Now I open up for mercy. They will be done, lost or found.

Just then (seriously, just then!) I spot a Century 21 real estate agency. Those huys are paid to know, I’m thinking. Maybe they’re even paid to be nice. I’ll try.

I pull up to the building in my dented 81’ Chevy. Right, like I’m gonna purchase a house.
"I'm looking for Portland Lutheran High School. Could you direct me?"

It's like the clouds open up and we hear Handel's Messiah Chorus.

"Cerainly," says the agent with a friendly, toothy grin, "Come back here; we have a map."

And what a map! A map with those nifty keen arrows which point and say things like, "You are here."

Oh, Totto, we're home!

We're right here. Portland Lutheran is over here on 182nd. You probably missed 182nd because they have blocked off the road. You just go back to Stark and turn right. You'll see a Plaid Pantry, a Sea First Bank, a . . ."

But I'm already chanting to myself, "There's no place like home—there's no place like home."

When I arrive at the school, everyone at the front office acts like I'm on time. That's right, I said I would arrive between 1:00 and 2:30. It's 1:50. I'm still safe. Oh, Auntie Em!

I mentally click my heels together and proceed down the hallway to the classroom of the cooperating teacher. I'm not sure which character from Oz to expect. I know who plays the part of the Cowrdly Lion. My emotions are repeating the script: "I do believe in ghosts, I do, I do, I do!"

I poke my head into the classroom where my mentor should be. No teacher. Just Munchkens—students. Is your teacher here? Not for a while? Okay.

Coming down the hallway is the school's chaplain and religion teacher. No, he hasn't seen her. Did you check here in the teacher's lounge?

My cooperating teacher also acts like I'm on time. I feel bold enough to relate, if by inference, some of the difficulty of finding the school.

"Your school is kind of hidden from the main road."

The simplicity and matter-of-factness of the sentence hides the gut-wrenching humiliation of only a few minutes before.

My cooperating teacher just smiles. She's heard others say the same thing. Finding one's way in the world can be challenging. She knows. She has seen frightened new students, and fearful student-teachers, before.

She has not forgotten what it's like to be lost.