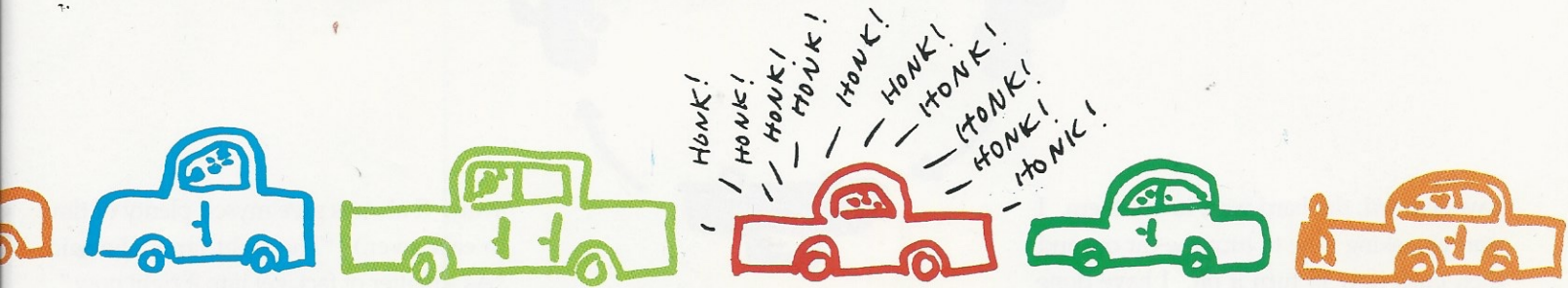


ES

DRIVING

Hell on Wheels



My husband drives like a man possessed—hurling epithets at drivers of all denominations including his own, clicking headlights incessantly to force the car ahead out of the way and changing lanes like someone trying to lose a tail.

Sitting to his right, in what is of course called the suicide seat, I compose my obituary. I wonder if I'll be able to have an open coffin. I worry if anyone will know which dress to bury me in. Then, eventually, I assert myself.

"What's the matter with you?" I scream. "Other people don't get all worked up when they drive. Other people don't make it into an adventure. They just DRIVE!"

"But do they have as much fun?" he retorts. I'm not sure if he's kidding. He grins, then suddenly spots someone moving into his path. He throws his entire upper body across the horn.

"And the HONKING!" I protest. "I have lived on New York City for 20 years. I have never seen anyone use his horn the way you do. People in New York don't honk!"

"Not true," he says, braking for a light. "Benny Melandez! A very big honker. Maury Moscovitz, cab driver for 40 years, he honks a lot." The light changes and he takes off. "Hang on, honey. We haven't made altitude."

This time, I laugh. Sometimes, I stay mad. If I protest really loudly, he jams on

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the brakes, pulls over and offers me the wheel. He knows he'll call my bluff. For no matter what I think of his driving, one thing's for sure. I'm worse. A whole lot worse.

Okay, maybe I'm not the world's worst driver—that might be my friend Vicki Bienfeld's mother, who didn't pass her driving test till the 24th try—but let's put it this way: I am to driving what Nancy Reagan is to barrel racing.

Yet I have the genes for it. My 89-year-old aunt is still driving. At 75, my mother wedges her giant car (the only kind she'll drive) into tight spaces with such ease that I suspect she butters the sides. (It's probably a skill particular to a generation accustomed to squeezing into girdles.) When one of her three cars died of old age, her mechanic tried to sell her a replacement for what he calls "the fleet," but she refused it because it was black. She already had a black car, and she thought it would make for confusion. For the same reason, she never approved of naming anyone Junior. She loves her cars like kids.

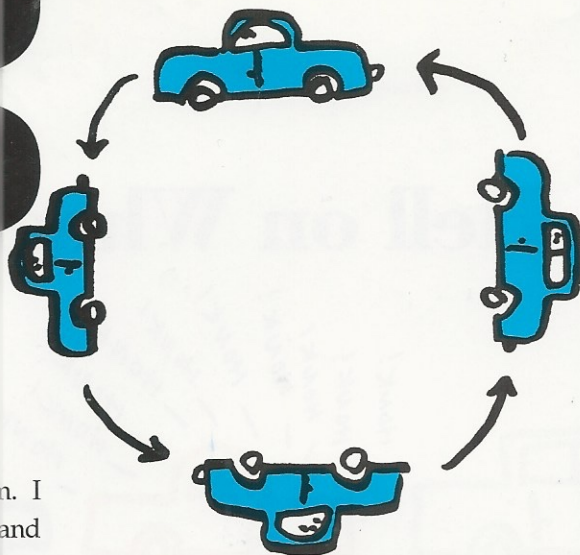
I don't have loving relationships with automobiles. What's more, at the wheel, I don't really feel that I'm in control. For example, let's talk about the "blind spot." In an effort to avoid it, I not only check the rear-view mirror, but look back over both shoulders. I would feel perfectly safe only if I could do a 360-degree swivel, like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*. Merging from an access road makes my heart beat so fast that I regard driving as aerobic exercise.

In addition to everything else, I see a car as a big repair bill waiting to happen. I'm not talking just engine failure, I'm talking about stuck seatbelts, handles that fall off, trunks that snap shut. The potential for disaster seems endless.

I seem to have had an endless stream of minor problems—some not my fault but at least a few that were. For example, I have done awful things to emergency brakes. Mercifully, they put those little red warning lights in to let you know that the brake is on. Before, the smell of burning rubber was my only clue.

I feel that I wear my lack of driving skill like a neon sign on my forehead, so I'm always astonished when the car rental man unhesitatingly hands over the key. (My friend Sybil says that if I bothered to read the fine print in the contract I'd just signed, I'd see why he wasn't worried.)

Certainly you think he'd reconsider when I start asking him my questions. I know they don't instill confidence, but I



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think how convenient it is to be able to rest my chin on my knees. And if I want music, I hum.

It amazes me that none of my friends has the problems I do, since none of them is particularly technically oriented. Only one has figured out how to work the "Record" function on the VCR. And I myself manage to work the pay TV channel in strange hotel rooms. Yet I note that, unlike mine, my friends' hands seem to know just where to go to find the horn. They can all drive up to the McDonald's call box without fear they'll run it over, find the tollbooth change in their pocketbook without losing control of the wheel and tune the car radio without driving onto the shoulder of the road. It's like patting your stomach at the same time as you rub your head. Either you can or you can't.

Because even I don't like knowing that I'm on the road, I willingly relinquish the driver's seat to almost anyone. But there are people who seem happy to let me drive. At least at first. My friend Sybil did figure out that something was up when, as we crossed over the Triborough Bridge, I asked her what lane I'd need to get into when we reached our destination, 97 miles

away. (I always give myself plenty of time to ease over.) "The right lane," she said. "As a matter of fact, get into it right now."

"Why," I asked.

"Because I'm taking over the wheel."

Sybil can even fill the gas tank herself, but of course, that's a skill you pick up in California, where I hear it's part of the school curriculum. I personally think it's a nice gesture to make the gas station attendant feel useful by driving up along the wrong side of the pump (slowly, of course, so as not to broadside it) and waiting for his assistance. I let him figure out where the gas cap is and how to open it.

I did feel I was making some technical progress until the day I found out that some engines aren't even in front, and after that I just threw in the towel completely. I do happen to know that you can repair a fan belt with pantyhose because I once wrote that up as a tip in some article, but the only reason I can tell a fan belt from a garter belt is that I have a really good idea of what a garter belt looks like.

What's awful is feeling so isolated in my dilemma. I once read that more people are afraid of public speaking than of death. In terms of sheer numbers, then, a morbid fear of public speaking is in the range of "normal." There are support groups for people who are afraid of flying in airplanes and even people who are afraid to leave their homes. But you rarely hear of anyone with autophobia and never of a cure.

As a result, I'm a staunch supporter of government-supported mass transit and a frequenter of taxis. And I can tell you one thing: If I come back, it'll be with a chauffeur. **DALE BURG**

have learned, the hard way, to ask them. I start by asking how to turn the car on, and then I ask how to turn it off. I have done this since my horrible experience in Secaucus, New Jersey. I arrived an hour before the discount stores closed but—since I couldn't release the key from the ignition—remained in the car, while other people bought the bargains fate had marked down for me.

And, after having driven blind on a mountain road because the lever that I was certain turned on the headlights turned on the windshield wiper instead, I now know to ask where the lights are. My husband told me also to ask about the emergency blinkers, so I do, but in my heart I know that if I were in a situation that required blinkers, I'd abandon the car in a flash, apply for a job as Salman Rushdie's personal assistant and let Hertz try to find me for the rest of my life.

I dread having a really serious problem. I worry that if I had a flat tire, I wouldn't know about it until I was driving below sea level. And here's the sum total of what I know about emergency driving: When you skid, turn into it. Whatever that means.

I confine myself to what I consider the major issues, though in truth, there are many things about the car that I would love to know. How to decipher the symbols on the heating and cooling controls. How to adjust the seat. How to switch the speakers from the rear to the front. Instead, I accommodate. In case the previous renter enjoyed air conditioning in the winter, I bring extra sweaters. If Herve Villechaize sat in the driver's seat just before me, I