



• "Good God Almighty! What's that nut think he's doing?!" (Head extended out of window, eyeballs bulging, neck purple with rage.) "Ya nut, what the hell y' think yer doin'?"

My Old Man wrestled with the wheel of his beloved Olds as he glared through the windshield at his age-old traditional enemy, the other driver.

"Didja see that fathead! Naturally, another one of them insane Illinois drivers. They oughta ban them guys from the road!"

At the age of five, huddled in the back seat, I was already being soundly indoctrinated into one of the great American myths, specifically the belief held by American drivers that all drivers from neighboring states are crazy and those from a specific neighboring state are lethal. And I mean they *really* believe it. In most places it's not ever a matter of opinion. It is simple incontrovertible fact.

I say this is an "American" thing only because I'm not dead certain about other countries. Do Swiss drivers maintain that putting a Frenchman behind the wheel is like giving an orangutang a loaded .45 to play with? Do Yugoslavians cower when a Bulgarian comes careening over the horizon? I can only suspect it may be true. But I can speak with some authority about American drivers, since I have been one practically from birth.

In the Indiana world where I was spawned, driving is the major if not the only sport of millions. It is no accident that the Indy 500 happens in Indianapolis and not East Brunswick, New Jersey. When you grow up in Indiana you just naturally grow up knowing *drivers*, in the same way that kids in Wyoming tend to know about horses. It's just a fact of geography.

Now all this is just a prelude, a statement of personal qualifications if you will, to some basic observations I just have to make about my fellow American wheelmen. Let's face it, this is one hell of a big country. If we

were any place else in the world, and let's say our continent had been discovered and settled about the time the first cave man started to lose his webbed feet, this vast chunk of real estate would probably be at least seven or eight different nations. Instead, we have this vast land, three thousand miles across and maybe two thousand miles deep, bravely pretending that it is one people. Your average Maine potato farmer has about as much in common with a mosquito-slapping Everglades cracker as he has with Mao Tse Tung. They barely speak the same language. Naturally, this has caused certain inevitable animosities to flower and blossom. If this was a European situation the prejudices and hatreds would take the form of political or racial put-downs. Here we release our animosities by simply slandering others' driving. Which strikes me as a better way. All Englishmen firmly believe that "the Wogs begin at Calais," while your average Frenchman is convinced that the English are bloodless barbarians who were still painting themselves with berry juice at the time when the French had already created twelve hundred varieties of the omelette. Ask a German about a Pole or a Czech and after he stops laughing he may condescend, if he thinks you're not kidding, to explain that the Poles were still planting cabbages with pointed sticks at the time the Germans had already begun Luft-hansa flights to Capetown.

Now I am not just blowing smoke about all this. I have been on the scene and have

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heard these endless lines of self-aggrandizement continually drummed out in the countries in question. Most of them are agreed on one thing, though, with minor variations: that the American is some kind of fearsome force of Nature. Don't think the contemplative, philosophical Far East is any different. Ask a walking-around Tokyo-ite what he thinks of Koreans and he's liable to slap you in the mouth with a bottle of lukewarm *sake*. The Chinese, conversely, have been convinced for centuries that the entire rest of the world is inhabited by an alien species of lower anthropoid. So why should we be any different?

In truth, we aren't. Our putdowns of neighboring infidels are just subtle and rarely take the form of outright gunfire . . . but it has happened. New Jersey once declared war on New York, a curious moment of his-

torical truth when it came out in the open. In state after state across this great republic, the biases and prejudices against the natives of neighboring states have been well established and will never be erased. I have lived as a resident in many parts of the country. My life in Showbiz has made it so. It has also caused me to drive hundreds of thousands of miles across the land from Alaska to Florida, from Maine to New Mexico, from Seattle to Topeka. I have crouched behind the wheel of God knows how many reeking machines and have studied my fellow Americans intently. I now hereby state categorically that no matter what state you live in as you read this, practically everybody else in the state and probably including you, totally believe that the *real* danger on the road comes from those clods from across the border in _____ (you fill in the blank).

The longer you live in one place the more you become convinced of this. You can tell a true New Yorker by his hatred for Jersey drivers. Conversely, there isn't a Jersey driver alive who does not feel that any car bearing a New York plate should be avoided like the plague since it is being driven by a thug and a mugger at the very least. At one point in my career I lived in Toledo. This is northern Ohio, where the natives have been known to hide the children in the basement and to load the 12-gauge double-barrels when one of those "idiotic boobs" from Detroit drives through town. Further down the state in Cincinnati there is no question in the mind of any Cincinnati Reds fan that the absolute nuttiest, totally fatheaded drivers all come from Kentucky. Kentuckians tend to focus their blame on Tennessee. Everywhere you go guys are hollering out of car windows at guys bearing alien plates. My Old Man was as convinced that there was a perverse streak in Illinois drivers that made them lethal as he was that the sun would come up the next morning and that water is wet. He was in a curious state of shock for weeks after I left home, moved to Chicago, and came back on weekends with a set of those cheesy, tinny, crummy Illinois plates on my V-8.

There's another factor that seems to be at work these days. I suppose it could be called growing World Nationalism. Every tinpot country is on the muscle, beating the drums for its own superiority. People all over the world are going around wearing buttons proclaiming that their religion, their race, their color, what-have-you, is beautiful and is the total end product of Mankind's evolutionary upward struggle. Historians and sociologists are practically all agreed now that we are further away from the so-called "One World" ideal in 1973 than we were in 1900. For some inexplicable reason it is necessary for the human being to feel that he, personally, is a charter member of a superior group, whether it be intellectual, racial, ethnic or whatever the hell.

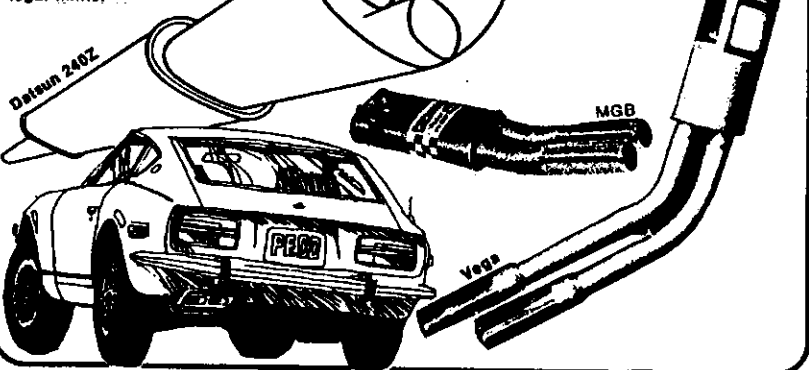
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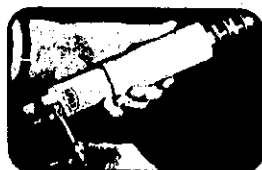
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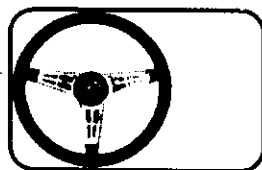
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JEAN SHEPHERD (CONTINUED)

feel vague guilt about putting down people of another race or color or religion publicly, even though we may secretly want to, there is no ethical ban against yelling out of your car window, "Fer Chrissake, you Wisconsin sausage-eater, cut me off like that again and I'll kick you right in your goddamn sauerkraut gut!"

I have never yet heard Eric Sevareid warn us against being unkind and saying bad things about our Jersey friends—in spite of the fact that none of them can drive and all they can make is pizza—but I'm sure the day will come. It has to. But then again it might not, since no doubt Sevareid himself is a driver and has a license plate on his car. I'd guess he probably lives in some posh Virginia suburb just outside of Washington so no doubt he, like the rest of the Arlington crowd, is convinced that all D.C. cars are operated by barely literate MauMaus.

I've given this matter some thought and I think that it is basically a healthy thing to take out your natural human rottenness on drivers bearing infidel plates on their machines. Why? Well, for one thing, license plates are one of the few things we can actually change. If you get tired of being a Jersey Slob you can move to Connecticut and fake it. If your deep sense of inferiority about being from West Virginia becomes overpowering, you can always move to colorful, picturesque Lima, Ohio and start yelling at West Virginia drivers just like a native. The converts are always the worst, after all. There's hardly anything else about you that you can change. If you're five feet two, weigh two hundred and twenty, have bad skin and are 63-years-old there's damn little you can do about it. We are what we are. But by God, today's careening California nut can be tomorrow's elegant stately Oregonian. All it takes is a call to the Allied Van Company and it's done. Try turning into a Swede if you're a Bulgarian.

I have driven in every state of the Union and I have come to the conclusion after long deliberation and unceasing, uncompromising intellectual cross-examination that there are two states, and remember I speak as neither a neighbor nor a resident of either, that unquestionably have the largest resident population of maniacal, lethal, murderous, cut-throat and basically inept drivers I have ever encountered on the nation's roadways. I do not speak from bias nor prejudice, I repeat, only as a driver and a life-long student of my fellow Americans. I say to you, at all cost beware of the drivers from Arkansas and Massachusetts. When you see one approaching from the rear, tighten your belts; grasp the wheel firmly. Almost anything can happen. Why this is so will be the subject of a further essay. Both states come by their maniacs honestly and truly deserve them. It is a combination of religious, sociological, philosophical and meteorological forces which combined create a crazed frenzy in the drivers from those states. Keep your eye out for them.