

The day Marcel Proust met the Tailgater—and survived.

JEAN SHEPHERD

• Marcel Proust had a soundproof, cork-lined room built so that he could write in absolute concentration. Balzac found it necessary to have heavy curtains hung over the windows and doors of his study. He wrote late at night, by the light of a candle. He said he had to do this to concentrate, to get away from the world.

Dawn was breaking somewhere out over the dark Atlantic when I got to thinking of old Marcel Proust in his cork-lined room and Balzac scratching away with a quill pen with all those curtains hanging around him at two in the morning. I fixed some instant coffee and thought maybe I should build a cork-lined room or hang black curtains over the window. I poured some more lukewarm coffee, and then it hit me:

Of course! I do have the equivalent of a cork-lined, curtain-draped chamber cut off from the rest of the world. My car!

I wonder how many people there are who find that the only times in the whole hectic day when they are away from phone calls, mysterious visitations, constant meetings and endless talks are those few private moments that they spend absolutely alone in their car. A lone driver has no family, no job, no age; he or she is just an individual bit of protoplasm humming through space. The mind sails like some rudderless boat over the murky sea of consciousness. One part of you expertly steers the machine, using some built-in computer to calculate all the changing vectors of speed, light, other traffic and road conditions. All the while, that other part of your mind drifts dreamily, dredging up wild thoughts, long-forgotten memories and fragments of old disappointments. Proust had his cork-lined room; I have my vinyl-lined GT.

Take the other day. I'm battling it out with all the other sweating lonesome travelers on New Jersey's Route 22, which has a surreal landscape that makes Salvador Dali look like Norman Rockwell: everything from a pizza joint that calls itself the Leaning Tower of Pizza and actually *does* lean to a gas station that for some reason has a 40-foot-high plastic woodsman with a face the color of an overripe watermelon swinging a motor-driven axe 24 hours a day, all laced together with an unbelievable spider web of high-tension wires and neon tubing. My mind is just idling away at maybe one-tenth throttle, thinking of nothing, when I glance up and see in my rear-view mirror that one

of Jersey's folk artists has zeroed in on me.

Jersey natives have made a fine art form of Tailgating. I could see in the mirror that I was in the clutches of a real master. I speeded up. He clung to my rear deck like a shadow. I dodged around a bus, figuring I'd scrape him off like a barnacle. No way. I shifted lanes. He moved with me like O.J. Simpson following a blocker. He edged closer and closer to my rear bumper. We were hurtling along Route 22 at the usual cruise speed of 75-plus. I slowed up, figuring that no true Tailgater ever resists an opportunity to pass anything. Your average Tailgater looks upon all traffic as an endless obstacle to be passed, but this one wasn't buying it; he slowed up. I quickly switched lanes and made a feint toward the parking lot of a Carvel, figuring he'd get mouse-trapped into thinking I was stopping by for a quick Banana Boat. He stuck to my trunk lid like a Band-Aid. He was good—one of the best I'd ever seen.

He was so close now that his face filled my entire rearview mirror. I couldn't even



see the grille of his car. I noticed that he had nicked himself while shaving; there was a piece of toilet paper plastered on one of his steel-blue chins. He was also casually eating a Big Mac as we screamed along locked in mortal combat.

Suddenly I became aware that something was blotting out the gray Jersey sky inches from my own grille. I had fallen for the oldest Tailgater trick in the book: He had maneuvered me behind a giant flatbed truck, and there was no escape. I darted tentatively to my left, hoping to pass. The Tailgater hemmed me in. I tried the right. No way. A

Greyhound bus was in that lane. Inches separating us, we four whistled along. My mind, now operating at Proustian speed, flashed visions of shattering glass and screaming metal, and I wondered briefly whether there was anything to this heaven-and-hell business.

The flatbed was now four or five feet ahead of my bumper. Its load towered above me for what looked like three stories as a row of discount shoe stores flashed by us in a blur. I was so close to the flatbed that I began to examine its load. My God, I thought, Proust never came up with a neater bit of irony in his life.

The load consisted of a giant pile of flattened automobiles, stacked 20 deep, each one maybe eight inches thick, crushed like so many sardine cans under a cosmic steam roller. I had a brief image of me and my car joining them and looking exactly like all the rest. The Tailgater was now sucking impassively at what looked like a 64-ounce family-size bottle of Pepsi.

It was then that my mind really took off. Here we were, sealed in our own noisy, smelly projectiles, hurtling over the landscape toward . . . what? I could hear the crushed cars ahead of me creaking and groaning as if in mortal fear of the fiery fate that lay ahead of them in some distant blast furnace. There was a seven-inch-high '57 Mercury, robin's-egg blue. Above it, a '61 Plymouth Fury, thinner than a blueberry pancake at a cut-rate diner. Then came a sad, peeling, forest-green Nash Ambassador of indeterminate year. We howled through an overpass that echoed and boomed to the roar of the traffic. I peered ahead at the crushed cars. Tattered bumper stickers still clung to the hulks, a veritable cross section of ancient causes: LBJ ALL THE WAY, I LIKE IKE, IMPEACH EARL WARREN, BAN THE BOMB, FREE THE PUEBLO.

Lord, I thought, "Free the Pueblo." I could hardly even remember what that was all about, but that smashed Buick Skylark knew. Way up near the top was a twisted, battered bumper from what was left of a Dodge Charger. A torn sticker read DANGER I BRAKE FOR ANIMALS. "Poor bastard," I thought dreamily, "after all that braking for chipmunks and box turtles, somebody didn't brake for him." (My mind thinks like that when I'm locked in my Proustian, vinyl-lined GT, away from the cares and hubbub of everyday life with its phone calls and its feckless excursions and alarms.)

I glanced in my mirror. Blue Jowls, steady as a rock, was dogging me even closer. He was picking his teeth with a Boy Scout knife; I could see the Scout insignia on its black bone handle. I continued reading the sad signs and pennants on the departed cars ahead of me.

Halfway up the pile, a canary-yellow Corvair had crude, dayglo-tape letters on its rusted bumper. I peered into the haze of blue Diesel exhaust that washed over me

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JEAN SHEPHERD (CONTINUED)

from the truck. The letters spelled two names: WALT on the driver's side of the bumper, EMILY on the passenger side. Between them was a jagged, half-obiterated heart pierced by a childish dayglo arrow.

Walt, I thought, poor Walt, where are you today? I felt a deep compassion for Walt, and Emily too. I saw that bright long-awaited day when they stood in the showroom taking the keys to their beautiful new Coronet. My mind conjured Walt up as being rather short, a bit beefy, but with a friendly sort of face. His dark hair was shorn in a bristly crew cut, the height of fashion for the day; his head looked like a furry bowling ball. Emily was thin and wore sagging blue shorts, her hair in a Debbie Reynolds ponytail.

I saw them together, polishing the Dodge on long summer weekends. I had a brief vision of Walt making one of the endless payments on the Coronet at some sort of grilled window. He had lost a little hair and had gotten a little fatter, but you could tell it was still Walt, all right. Through the window of the loan office I caught a glimpse of Emily waiting patiently in the car. There were now two kids jumping up and down on the back seat. The Coronet had lost two hubcaps, the chrome was rusting and there wasn't much left of that canary-yellow paint. . . .

I glanced again in my rearview mirror. My Tailgater was now jogging up and down, his

I had fallen for
the oldest Tailgater
trick in the book:
He had maneuvered me
behind a giant
flatbed truck.

eyes glazed, his mouth hanging slackly in the manner of tailgating rock fiends.

Walt, I thought, where are you today, Walt? Are you and Emily still together? Do you know that your Coronet, after all these years, is still roaring along Route 22? Tonight it will be in the hold of a freighter sailing out of Port Newark, Walt, a ship called the *Funky Maru*, manned by a polyglot crew of cutthroats. Walt, your Coronet may come back to you some day in the form of a 105-millimeter shell.

My mind dreamily moved on. Suddenly my Tailgater whistled off 22 onto the Garden State Parkway exit. He was still sucking at his Pepsi bottle as I watched him fasten himself to the back of a Mustang II. I shifted to the left and passed the flatbed and its load of carcasses. The mind does great things in our vinyl-lined GTs. Proust would have understood. Maybe even Balzac. •