

Rubberneckers

At the exact same second that Phil swerved right to join the lane headed to the Parkway, his smartphone shuddered to signal the arrival of an email.

This happened at ten minutes to seven in the morning, dawn waking to a surly Windex blue, so someone was up early, or communicating from a different time zone. Phil tended to pride himself on his peripheral vision and just as he involuntarily glanced down at the phone, he saw out of that same periphery that the cinnamon red pickup in front of him was slowing down. He slammed on the brakes, in time to avoid a collision but also vaulting his half-unwrapped bagel in the unfortunate direction of the air bag hatch. The bagel tumbled into the unhygienic Gehenna of the passenger side floormat, but the phone was safe, nestled in the most advanced car Smartphone caddy available. Phil's employer had treated Phil to this Smartphone caddy, which struck Phil as vaguely litigable in the sense that they were encouraging phone use while driving. But it wasn't going to be him who started the suit. In defense, his company could always claim providing the caddies was to help their employees navigate.

Phil hadn't gone anywhere for two weeks that required directions. Get on the Parkway, steep in traffic, get off the Parkway. Reverse in the evening. He did become lost on the Thursday of the previous week when a detour was placed immediately after his exit, and the local force, as is the custom in that part of New Jersey, rerouted the traffic onto a narrow, pitted side road with gauntlets of dinged midsizes on both sides, terminating in a stop sign before a left onto a major thoroughfare. Attempts to avoid the chosen detour were not met with time savings.

After Phil's bagel checked out of the world of edibility, the premature slowdown before the Parkway entrance slugged forward like a guttering candle. He now had plenty of time to illegally look at the emails that had contributed to his lurching stop, because there were two, one from Glenn concerning the meeting at eight, and one from his most recent girlfriend, and he got as far in that message as when she wrote "Flip, I hope you're not reading this in the car." She was the only one who still called him Flip and he had been Philip since he hit six figures. Then he read Glenn's email and used voice control to send his supervisor a response, afterward communicating with Glenn's assistant to alert them that he had encountered traffic.

The day of the lost bagel was the sixth consecutive work day that Phil had reset his departure for an earlier time, trying to find some middle ground between the leaden pace of the syrupy spine of New Jersey roadways and Glenn's recent tendency to schedule meetings further and further before the traditional start of work. The eight AM meeting that was in some jeopardy was not with Glenn and Glenn wouldn't be there. It had been called by a guy Glenn didn't even like, and it was a pre-meeting for a meeting scheduled for the next day on a topic that Glenn didn't care about. Phil was the sacrificial lamb for this meeting because Glenn needed the other guy to send a representative for a working group Glenn was assembling for something that actually was his priority (though still utterly unimportant with someone still in contact with the outside world).

Slowly the cars lapped past the green overpass markers that Phil had come to notice for the purpose of breaking up the journey. The Conrail overpass, Wood Avenue South, Middlesex Essex Turnpike, Rte 27, and Oak Tree Road trudged by on his right like calendar pages between scenes in an old movie. Then,

just after Westfield Avenue, the pace abruptly quickened. First the Honda in the rightmost lane slowed to almost terminal velocity, and then sped into the unexpected clear space ahead as if its driver was now satisfied at something just witnessed. Then the brown Chevy with the Lyft sign did the same from the second-to-the-right lane. Phil made a mental note to check out what they had all been looking at, but he forgot when the panel truck ahead of him accelerated. He arrived at ten of eight, too soon to legitimately miss the meeting but too late for much to be accomplished beforehand. Lydia and Ramon were in the coffee room as he picked out a to-go cup and a pod for coffee suitable for the meeting.

“Do you take the Parkway?” Lydia asked him, her features a weird combination of curiosity and superiority. When Phil gave his affirmative, she asked if he had seen the collision. “I heard on the news that it was awful.”

“Cost me an hour,” Ramon related triumphantly. His shift started early, at least on non-accident days.

“Must have been just cleared up as I passed,” said Phil as he moved on to the meeting.

However grimly and numbly prosaic, this pattern, of the slowdown that mysteriously and suddenly cleared with no visible cause, recurred twice that week.

On Thursday morning, Phil never heard, read, or got wind of any possible explanation. But on Friday, the entrance to the Parkway was once again backed up onto Rte 1, and as he oozed under the Parkway overpass, he wondered idly if he should be counting that one on his overpass list or if he had been right to number the overpasses only once he was on the Parkway. He had plenty of time to think about this, as the road he needed slipped slushily under itself, a snake swallowing its tail.

This condition persisted until around Inman Avenue, when a Morse code of blinkers symbolized that the traffic was moving out of the center lane, and then the two center lanes, and then the three center lanes, choked to just the single leftmost and rightmost. And once the cars were reaching the throttle, a cop in a raincoat was waving them furiously through. Phil was in the leftmost and craned his neck to see what was taking place in the center lanes but he saw nothing but road, and then it was time to take his turn in the clear.

The walk to his office from his parking space took Phil past three different people who informed him, with different timbres of gloat or sympathy, that Glenn was looking for him. So Phil off-loaded his briefcase, found a steno pad, and proceeded to Glenn’s office.

Glenn’s desk boasted three monitors of different sizes and orientations that seemed to display the same desktop. Glenn was typing something and squinting at the middle display. His typing slowed down sufficiently for Phil to hear him asking, “I heard from Arthur about his meeting last week” – Arthur being the guy Glenn didn’t like and his meeting being the meeting on the first day Phil had not seen an accident on the Parkway that everyone else knew about.

Phil’s memory was that his behavior at Arthur’s meeting had been exemplary. “I don’t think I said ten words at that meeting. What was Arthur’s problem?”

“He told me he sent you a request before the meeting for a pre-call, and you ignored him.”

He racked his brain. “If I saw that request, I saw it an hour after the meeting since I went straight from there to your staff meeting. I barely got here on Monday and never saw his request beforehand.”

“So, why didn’t you contact him afterward to find out what he wanted?”

Phil had a bout of disorientation, which seemed to be a common occurrence at his place of business. “Because I saw him for an hour at the 8 AM meeting. That was his chance to tell me what he wanted. Why didn’t he say something then?”

Glenn answered the question with a question. “There was an accident Monday, and today? Both?”

“There was definitely a weird slowdown. Another day this week, too. I never saw the accident but I heard the Monday one was bad.”

When Phil was dismissed, pondering whether this was the most asinine reason ever that he had been felt the mushy glare of supervisor disapproval, he went on-line and found a news story on nj.com describing a four-car chain reaction – the driver of the second car and a passenger in the third car were in critical condition. He thought of sending the link to Glenn but ultimately decided he had not yet sunk that low. The photo was easily recognizable as the point on the Parkway when traffic was winnowed down to the extreme two lanes and the trooper was waving people through. The photo showed wreckage and debris and stretchers and emergency equipment. Then he noticed the caption, which reported that the time the photograph had been taken, which was ten minutes after he had passed.

“Is this an unusual number of Parkway accidents?” was the question he posed to Ramon and Lydia later that morning at the coffee maker.

Lydia shrugged. “The high side of normal, maybe.”

“You see them when you are looking for them,” Ramon speculated. “But in reality they are happening all the time.”

“Yeah, but I’m not seeing them somehow.”

Lydia said this was because his head was too full of work.

“Glenn seems to think I am making these accidents up as an excuse for being late.”

On the way home, Phil’s eyes lit on the Kenilworth Inn, a motel he had noticed a thousand times before, and wondered about staying overnight there or somewhere similar if Glenn scheduled another early meeting or call. It seemed to him that part of the untold story of Glenn’s scheduling habits was a between-the-lines message that anyone who lived far away from the company was essentially cheating the company of off-hours time that could be dedicated to the cause. But paying for a room to impress Glenn with timeliness seemed to fall in the same category as a depth to which he shouldn’t sink.

He did it anyway when Glenn scheduled a 7:15 meeting which was going to have a call-in from someone from Brussels. It was an interesting change of routine to be spared most of his commute and to arrive at work not only in time for the absurdly early meeting, but to have time to settle into the day beforehand. An additional satisfaction was that there was a chair at the table for him at Glenn’s meeting. For unexplained reasons, Phil’s company never seemed to get the match right between meeting rooms and the number of attendees, and a few times Phil was the last to arrive and felt everyone staring as he scrounged a chair from elsewhere and jammed between two colleagues who were already present. This morning, it was a guy named Hank from IT who endured the ritual of foraging for a seat.

Phil did have a lot of trouble sleeping in the motel, so the potential increase in sleep was not actualized. But when driving home that day, after what felt like a single day lasting 48 hours, Phil was pretty pleased with his strategy.

When he checked his emails after dinner, he saw that Glenn had scheduled a follow-up meeting for the same time the next day.

Phil left his house so early the next morning that deer were watching him on the onramp to Rte 1, unblinking and disapproving, resenting his intrusion on their denim pre-dawn. He thought about their cynical animal expressions as he sped through North Brunswick and New Brunswick and Edison, through intersections that would ordinarily be slow. He was making such good time that he was unfazed when the gate was down for a freight train at Plainfield Avenue. When the train had passed, raucous and businesslike, he was still twenty minutes ahead of his usual pace. Then by Oak Tree Road on the Parkway, the taillights came on and traffic was stopped.

That day's accident was apparently no more than five or six miles north, and it took traffic forty-five minutes to inch by that accident. The first exit that offered Phil any kind of a practical alternative was about parallel with the blockage, so he got a good look at the scene while he hugged the right lane, impatiently waiting for enough of the shoulder to emerge that he could take the exit for Kenilworth Boulevard. What he saw to his left, though, was a pumper truck in the center lane, imbedded in a needlepoint of other emergency vehicles, pouring water on something in the center right lane. There was even some kind of photography truck pulled over and taking pictures, which struck Phil as illegal.

The something that was being doused by the firetruck was giving off a storm of black smoke and steam and there was plenty of flame left. Seeing the amount of fire that was still active, Phil couldn't believe that the firefighters had left the outermost lanes proceed. But, even with the time to stare with concentration at the source of the steam and the sink of the hoses, he saw only air. The water was pouring onto air and the water that didn't become steam was pooling on the blistering roadway, but no vehicle was visible. And the vehicle wasn't covered by the smoke unless it was a vehicle suspended three feet off the ground.

Once he was on the feeder to Kenilworth Boulevard, Phil had to remind himself of the route to get back on track and also whether there was a place to pull over where he could call in and alert Glenn that he was going to be late for the ridiculous 7:15 meeting. He finally made the call as he swerved onto Burke Parkway to intersect with Morris Ave. Tearing up Burke Parkway, his car suddenly lurched upward as if he had run over a thick branch or a dog. But nothing could be seen in the rear-view mirror.

He was late to the meeting and unprepared, except he was prepared emotionally for Glenn's passive aggressive skepticism that Phil had been held up by yet another accident. It was only after that meeting that Phil looked for news about the accident. He was still determined not to stoop to documenting his delays, but he wanted to at least know what was available. What was available was a full story and pictures, perhaps taken by the possibly illegal photographer. It showed a pickup truck, fully engulfed in flames, with a pumper pouring water on the fire. The story said that the driver and passenger were killed in the accident.

Also included in the picture was a good shot of a uniform delivery van that had been two in front of Phil when he had to merge into the right lane before the exit for Kenilworth Boulevard. So this picture had been taken around the time Phil passed.

When he returned to his car, he took a look at the wheels, since he'd had no time for that when arriving late for Glenn's meeting. The left rear tire was scraped, and it looked like there was something dark under the rear bumper. He saw no hair or wood or other souvenirs of whatever had made him bump on Burke Parkway. But to be on the safe side, when he got home, he went online again just to be sure that there was no report of a hit-and-run or beloved family pet on Burke Parkway. He found nothing.

The next day, he made an appointment with an optometrist.

He was able to get this appointment the next evening, because the girl taking calls assumed he was considering glasses and he did not correct this misunderstanding. The part of the office where actual tests took place was tucked in an appendix to a big showroom of designer frames where salespeople sauntered and lit on customers as though on commission. The optometrist assigned to Phil had a slight Russian accent and a beard that stuck out uniformly from his lower jaw like a brush. His lab coat was much too small as if it belonged to one of the petite receptionists and he had forgotten his. The eye guy ran some routine tests and checked for glaucoma before really speaking to Phil about the purpose of his visit.

"So you're seeing things?" he asked, which is not what Phil had said when checking in at the desk.

"It's more that I am not seeing things," said Phil. "I learn that there are things that everyone else has seen, which I don't see when I look straight at them." He described two of the incidents.

The Russian-ish specialist shrugged. "Nothing showed up on your tests. All normal."

"But would those tests catch a problem like I am having? Cataracts wouldn't cover up a flaming car."

They proceeded to more heavy-duty tests. Throughout, Phil had that horrible anything-can-happen sensation that you get when you take your car to the garage for, say, a burnt rubber smell, and you know they could come back with a thousand-dollar repair bill or even say your car is undriveable, and what are you going to say?

But in the end, he passed all of the eye tests, and the optometrist did not charge him extra. "A psychiatrist is next. No stigma to that."

"It's not in my head, doctor."

"Hmmm. Well, your eyes are in your head, right? We agree on that? But I also think it is not in your eyes. Look at this test." And he proudly guided Phil around a chart that apparently showed the blood vessels in his eyeball, a chaotic red flowchart to nowhere. Phil found it disturbing and could hardly look but the optometrist was very proud of its normality, as if Phil had been seeing him for years and the doctor could take credit for his retina. "So, conclusion, something beyond the eye. Could be processing centers rather than the eye itself, but I don't think so. Hemineglect tests would have caught that. Still there's a chance, but much more of a chance that a psychiatrist can help you. There's even one in the mall, though she is very busy."

Phil did not anticipate that this would be any use or if he would have the time to even experiment. He had received three actionable emails while he was getting his (non-) scotoma checked.

There were no repeat incidents for the next week and Phil did not consult any other specialists. But he did learn something from a new employee named Marjorie. She wasn't really that new but was new to Phil's area. Ramon, whose assignments tended, enviably, to feature a much higher productive work to meetings ratio, had time to be sociable and learned that this Marjorie had worked for Glenn at the company where both she and he had previously worked.

"You have to meet her," Ramon prompted at the coffee machine. "She told me some interesting things about Glenn. Like a scouting report."

Marjorie turned out to be a rather short woman, looking to be mid-thirties in age, with cropped salt and pepper hair and a wise facial expression like that of a person who has seen a lot of the world. Or one who thinks that the small portion of the world she has seen is a significant portion. She had certainly seen a lot of Glenn and Ramon eagerly goaded her into sharing some of the anecdotes.

"He once told his group his philosophy of management," Marjorie told them after a lengthy tale. "We had a retreat and basically everyone was supposed to contribute something they learned about teamwork and leadership. He said that a strong leader creates tests to reveal who is ready to work for the team. I don't think he was supposed to say something like that because it sounds like a cover story for employment discrimination. Human Resources probably slapped his wrist and he was never that honest again. But I think he genuinely believes in his heart that he is doing something for the company by making it difficult for people to have lives outside of work."

"But it still is discrimination," Ramon objected.

She nodded. "And have you gone to a conference with Glenn yet?"

"Yeah. Are you talking about the extra days before the Conference starts?"

"Exactly. All part of his master plan. If someone feels like they can only be available for the conference itself, they aren't really ready to be a team player. They can contribute on the margins, they're sort of a helper, but they aren't a main player. And do you have a regular staff meeting?"

Phil nodded grimly. "It had been 9:30 on Tuesdays when Glenn joined us but a month ago it moved to 8 AM on Mondays."

"And that guarantees that you have to work on Sunday to be ready for it," said Ramon.

"Well, sometimes he just calls on Sunday. And then it's the game of him pretending he doesn't care if you don't have time to talk with him and you have to be able to translate that into the exact opposite, that this is absolutely the main test. I knew a girl there who told me, the most definite way you could tell that you had been relegated to the B team is if Glenn wanted a meeting or call that you couldn't manage and he said 'don't worry, it can wait til Monday.' That means it can wait forever because he is going to find someone who can waste the time with him when he feels like wasting it."

"He still does the random weekend calls," Phil acknowledged.

“Back at my old company,” Marjorie continued, “he had a tactic that we used to call musical chairs. He would find some excuse to reduce the number of chairs at a meeting, so that there was one less than the number of people invited. Then whoever came late would have to make a big show of getting an extra chair, like a public shaming.” Phil flushed rather than respond in words.

“Same old Glenn,” said Marjorie, stirring her coffee smugly. When she sauntered off like someone who had just explained the concept of parallax, Ramon raised his eyebrows at Phil.

“I told you it would be useful to hear from Marjorie. Now you know all his tricks.”

“Useful how? I knew his tricks already, and she didn’t tell me anything I could do about it. What steps would you take?”

Ramon took a sip of his coffee. “I don’t know. My boss isn’t that way. It would probably be worth some more conversations with Marjorie. She is the one who survived working for Glenn.”

“Well, she didn’t tell us anything to do about it. All she did was outlast him, and he left her company and came here. Am I supposed to just outlast Glenn?”

Ramon made an ambiguous expression with his eyebrows and Phil would have bet \$10 that Ramon was now thinking about his lunch.

Nevertheless and against all principles of pride and of better judgment, Phil doubled down on the Kenilworth Inn approach, and scheduled a two-day stay there and then a three-day stay, broken up only by the need to go to his real home and do laundry and throw out groceries that had expired. This seemed to pay off at least twice when an evening meeting suddenly appeared or Glenn wanted to make a call before a 7:30. At the last meeting before Glenn was scheduled for a week’s vacation, Glenn seemed to nod appreciatively at Phil and Phil couldn’t decide whether he, Phil, was more revolted by the steps he had taken to win Glenn’s approval or the approval itself.

Of course, Glenn’s vacation was better for all of his reports than if they had been on vacation themselves. At that final meeting, Glenn had made a big production of how his wife insisted that he completely disconnect when on vacation, so Phil prepared for the exact opposite, though he felt he could at least stay at his own home. Glenn defied expectations all the way through Thursday by not calling or emailing. Friday, Phil felt he could commemorate the end of Glenn’s (and everyone’s vacation) by stopping for breakfast on Rte 1 before getting to the Parkway.

While he was in line to pick up his food, his phone rang and it was Glenn.

“Hey, Phil. Hope you’ve been having a good week. My wife took the kids to some art class thing so this is the first time this week I have some time to catch up with work. I have some concepts I’d like to run by you.”

“OK, great, shoot.”

“Are you at your office? I want you to plug some values into that franchise first three years spreadsheet.”

Phil almost walked into the trap of mentioning the time but remembered that this would be interpreted as accepting the bizarre premise that there were any times of day that shouldn't be dedicated to the Company.

"I'm still commuting. But I could talk now if there were some big picture details that I could absorb before I have access to the network."

"No, it can wait a little. Makes more sense to start with the concrete. Are you about half an hour out?"

"An hour might be safer," Phil said, visualizing some of his brownie points burning up.

"Family will be back then. Short leash, am I right? See if you can call me back on this number in half an hour. If not, it can wait until Monday."

So, Phil left the restaurant and returned to his car and Rte 1, wondering what short cuts there could possibly be that he had never discovered before, short cuts so efficient that he would be at his office with enough time to boot up his laptop and activate the network, which currently seemed to take four passwords on average though with some variance from day to day and hour to hour. Traffic was sufficiently summer-Friday-like for the rest of Rte 1 to the Parkway entrance, and on through the first few checkpoints, past the Conrail Overpass, Wood Avenue South, and the Middlesex Essex Turnpike. He had the luxury of recognizing that even in light traffic, he would barely reach his office in half an hour and would need to respond so brilliantly to whatever crap Glenn wanted to discuss that Glenn would forget that Phil was not going to be armed with spreadsheets for the first drop of information.

Route 27 fell by, and Oak Tree Road, New Dover Road, and Westfield Avenue vanished in the rearview mirror. And then, approaching Kenilworth Boulevard, the cars all stopped.

The car in front of Phil was a tall fire-hydrant colored van, so he couldn't see what was ahead and had caused the stoppage. All he could see was cars to his left and right and ahead and behind. He did see a helicopter somewhat north of his location. He could not tell how far he actually was from the off-ramp to Kenilworth Boulevard, which was significant because he knew an alternate from there though even if he could get to it he would be looking at maybe 10 minutes with Glenn. And it would also mean that he would have to alert Glenn that he would be late for his early call and Glenn was very likely to just say there was no point now and it could wait for Monday. The dreaded words.

The orange van was moving, accomplishing a steady one to two miles per hour, which added to the frustration. If traffic was completely unmoving or if he was nowhere near an alternative, he would have to accept failing Glenn's little test, but while there was some movement he had to keep trying. Phil tried the radio, which never had traffic anymore, and a couple of traffic web pages that he knew that he also knew were seldom very up to date. None of these sources had information about a Parkway jam extending to Kenilworth Boulevard.

Then, as if in answer to a prayer that he hadn't prayed, there was some slightly more decisive movement. The van wedged its way into the next lane to the left, and the car that had been in front of the van went to the right. There was appreciable flow now in the lanes on either side of Phil, and he could see the exit lane moving almost freely. In front of him, there seemed to be two more cars and then a large, inviting gap. Phil could see nothing in his lane along the lines of a wreck or emergency vehicles or accident trash or a dead deer. The car two ahead of him seemed to be driven by someone

on the nervous side who waited on several breaks in the traffic to the left into which other drivers would have sped. Just as the car right before Phil moved to cut off the car in front, the car in front finally went to the right and in the same moment, the next car went left.

In front of Phil was blank space that the rest of traffic seemed to be avoiding. It looked like, from the empty lane, he could still get to the exit he wanted but it also seemed unnecessary, if the Parkway was moving again. He looked again at the lane the rest of the traffic had shunned, which was as blank as it had been before, and as some jerk behind him honked, he decided that successful people take advantage of opportunities that other people avoid, and he plunged ahead into the space.