

What I Did on My Christmas Vacation

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I usually spend Christmas at home, either with my cats or with friends, but this year I decided to visit my dad, whom I hadn't seen for almost two years. I left work early the day before Christmas and drove the 230 miles south to Porterville, where my dad lives.

I expected the drive to be hell because my car stereo was stolen not long ago, but the cookies Nina Berry sent kept me good company. In particular, I liked the lemon cookie and the iced sugar cookies and the chocolate chocolate chip cookies and the M&M cookies and the

Being a programmer, I can put my most important tool for work between my ears and carry it around with me. I happened to have this tool, sometimes call a brain, with me during the drive to my dad's house on Friday. I used it to get a lot of work done. I was compelled to sign a non-disclosure agreement about my work, so if I told you about it, I'd have to kill you. In lieu of that, I'll tell you what I thought between the times when I was working while I was driving.

Almost as soon as I got on the freeway (east bound Highway 580), well before reaching the hills to the east of Livermore (for those of you who know where I live and where the Livermore hills are in relation to that), I noticed that other people were driving faster than me. I felt no guilt about going slower than them because I was driving 65 miles per hour—ten miles per hour faster than the speed limit. There wasn't much traffic, and the faster lanes to the left of me were almost always clear, so anyone who wanted to pass me could probably do so without ever getting very close or having to slow down.

Did they pass in such an effortless manner? Of course not. For some reason, people who were going faster than me and came up on my tail got right up behind me and tailgated for a minute or two before pulling to the left and then speeding ahead. They usually gave me a dirty look, too.

Why did they do this when they could have moved to the left before even reaching me and then passed me without slowing at all? Maybe they wanted me to feel guilty for making them go slow. Maybe they wanted me to get angry about them tailgating in the same way that they got angry that I was going slow. Maybe they wanted me to understand that I was offending them by going slow. Maybe they were inspecting my tail-pipe. I can't tell you why they bothered to slow down. I can tell you that any attempts at guilt were futile at best.

It reminded me of a dog walking on the sidewalk. A bigger, faster dog approaches him. Does the bigger dog just pass without a notice? Nope. The bigger dog must smell the first dog's rear before moving along.

The most notable time a person tailgated me occurred several hours later on Highway 99, about two miles north of Goshen. I was creeping along at a measly 65 when I noticed a car behind me so close that I couldn't see its headlights. As before, the left lane was clear. Also, there were no off-ramps for miles and miles, so it wasn't like the car couldn't get around me before approaching an off-ramp she needed to take. In short, I don't know why the car was tail-gating.

I took a chance at being rear-ended and took my foot off the gas. I tapped the breaks to flash my lights, too. Then I slowed, expecting the car to immediately pull to the left and speed ahead.

We slowed to 60. 55. 50. 45. 40. 35. She was still behind me. I thought 35 was slow enough for anyone, so I put my foot back on the gas and cruised at that speed to see what she'd do.

Fully two minutes later she was still behind me, and a pick-up truck from way back behind us pulled to the left and sped away. It was followed by a big, gas-guzzling sedan. I could see through the tailgater's front and back windows that there were no more cars behind her. Still, we trudged on at 35 miles per hour.

At least two minutes passed, and I saw her head move. She looked around, then pulled to the left and sped up. I expected a condemning dirty look when she passed me.

Boy, was I surprised! No dirty look but one of blank confusion. This look was *perfectly* executed but was made even better, if such a thing is possible, by her tiny little opaque sun glasses and her overly rouged lips that were puckered around a candy cane. I have only rarely seen looks of such mindless confusion in my life.

She sped away and was soon out of sight, while I gently returned to 65 mph and rode past a speed limit sign that said I was breaking the law.

About fifteen miles later, I moved left into the fast lane because I saw a slow big-rig ahead. (Note that I was preparing to pass it in exactly the effortless and practical manner that other drivers were not using.) As I got closer, I saw a little dark blue Honda tailgating it. It was the woman who had been tailgating me earlier! Other than me and the truck, there were no other cars around, so there was no need for her to tailgate or even hang around a truck that was going slower than she wanted. Yet she was squarely and securely planted in the driver's blind spot, not six feet behind it at 55 mph, tightly clutching the steering wheel with both hands, leaning forward as if in intense concentration, and still sucking on that candy cane. I don't think she noticed me.

I entertained myself for a few miles with thoughts about this rather confusing (or confused) woman. I've already described her glasses and her full, rouged lips. She also had straight, bobbed, black hair. She was driving a Honda, or a Hyundai, or some other semi-vogue hatch-back. I wondered only two things about her: "What did she look like below the neck?" and "Was she a yuppie or a bimbo?"

Bimbos, as I understand the concept, are usually blonde and have much

more sex appeal than mental capacity. They are petty and materialistic. They usually use their sex appeal to trick dull-witted guys into giving them petty materials like jewelry, cars, shoes, and clothes.

Yuppies are usually not too bright, either, but that doesn't stop them from obtaining a degree in business or law. They dress much more tastefully than bimbos. In that respect, they are not like bimbos. They are petty and materialistic, though.

Was the confused tail-gating woman a bimbo or a yuppie? Maybe she was both. Now that I think of it, I see ditsy New Age yuppies like her all the time.

I'd like to take this time to suggest a new term. When you encounter a person who is both a bimbo and a yuppie, call him a *bimpy*.

Later, south-bound on highway 65, ten minutes north of Porterville, I learned what faster drivers felt like when they came across me.

There's a wide turn on Highway 65. It's banked, and the pavement is always in excellent condition, and people always (and needlessly) take it very, very slow. In short, it's an ideally designed curve in terms of safety, and for some unknown reason, many drivers are unusually cautious when they drive through it. So I don't know why there have always been a lot of accidents at that corner.

There used to be a building on the outside of that turn. It was not exactly a house but not exactly a business. In fact, I have no clue about its purpose or function. During the six or seven years I lived in that area, I passed through that corner at least once a month. The building was smashed for at least half of those times. Sometimes, the wreckage of a truck would still be in the wreckage for the building.

Of course, it was always a truck. That area of California is lone, dry, forgotten, backwards, ignorant, oppressive, boring, and worthless socially, but it's real good farmland. The larger portion of the people who live there resemble the land.

A man's worth in central California is in his pick-up truck. If a man wants to be important, his truck must be raised, brightly painted, clean, have all manner of off-road gear (that is never used), and have a very loud stereo complete with an equalizer with all the knobs shoved to the top. Such an engine of transport and distorter of music (*boom, boom, boom*) invariably costs half of the man's salary (he is, after all, just a farmer or—worse—a farmer's unemployed son).

Back to the corner: As I've already said, the corner should be pretty safe. So why was the house there so frequently smashed by a truck? I think the trucks must have been driven by smashed farmers.

Now, if your car was the apple of your eye and the biggest expense in your life, would **you** get drunk and then drive it? I didn't think so. But a farmer would!

I can just see a speeding, macho pick-up truck, KC lights a-blazing, whizzing straight as an arrow down highway 65 and forgetting about that big, banked curve. I estimate the banking at about 45 degrees, which would help the pick-up get nicely airborne when it forgot to turn with the curve. It would sail through the air gracefully and land on the poor, useless building that was minding its own business and smash it to bits.

So much for ancient history.

When I encountered this curve on Friday, I was behind a car that insisted on taking it at safe and secure 35 mph. At such a slow speed, I was able to recall all of the ancient history of the corner as well as to notice that the useless building had been replaced with a great, big, brand-spanking new and expensive-looking apartment building.

I can just picture the next drunk farmer's son driving the pride of his life who comes through that curve. It'll be quite a stew.

Christmas came and went, as it has for hundreds of years. After all these years, it's gotten to be kind of a drag. I did enjoy this one at least a little. I had some good conversation with my dad—the first in almost two years, and I've already mentioned that I lived through it all. That alone is a triumph of which to be proud. I drove home on Christmas day.

I stopped at Andersen's Pea Soup restaurant on I-5, three miles north of Highway 152. Between two urinals in the men's rest-room was an ash tray. There was no sand in it, but there were two cigarette butts. Why would anyone want to smoke while taking a leak? Could it take that little time to smoke a cig? Could it take that much time to take a leak? As I exited, I banged my left shoulder on the vending machine for Famous Brand Condoms. Uh-huh.

As always, the split-pea soup was good even though I couldn't stop thinking about the ash tray separating the urinals.