

JUNE 26, 2000

Have Cell Phone, Will Travel

Ever since I acquired a cell phone a few months back, I've begun to notice that I'm spending more and more time in my car. Not driving, mind you. Living.

I should explain that I am one of that hardy band of New Yorkers—most of us raised in suburbs where to live was to drive—who for many years used our cars to do all kinds of errands around the city: pick up theater tickets, get our kids from school, go grocery shopping, drive to the hairdresser's. I am used to being regarded by my city-born-and-bred neighbors as slightly daft for doing so, the victim of some sort of auto addiction—public transport aversion.

In addition—and this is where I began to stand out from my fellow dependents, who are forever getting tickets for double parking or other misdemeanors—I've become famous among friends and family for my uncanny ability to find available meters and free parking places where none seemingly existed before. Which, of course, only fed my habit. So clearly I was already spending far more time behind the wheel than most New Yorkers who keep a car here and only use it on weekends or for reverse commuting.

But lately I would say that I've entered a new and far more intimate relationship with my car. It all started the day when, having secured a meter outside our local library—in this case the jackpot of meters, a failed one—I finished my research but not the food shopping that needed to be done if we were going to feed the guests we'd invited for dinner. Planning to complete the irksome task after I went home to check my messages and eat lunch, I bought a chicken salad wrap "to go" and headed for the car.

It was then that it occurred to me—Eureka!—that if I stayed in the car, I could check and return my messages on my cell phone in complete privacy, eat my sandwich and avoid having to find a parking space near my apartment that I'd only have to give up later when I drove to the Third Avenue Citarella to shop (tough parking area, by the way) and then crosstown for the sale at the Express on Columbus (great spot for meters). The efficiency of it all stunned me.

It wasn't long until this became my preferred M.O. In fact I found myself planning my errands around either morning rounds, during which I could indulge my secret passion for Howard Stern while drinking Vanilla Almond from a nearby Timothy's, and occasionally pulling over to check or answer messages; or midday lunch rounds, when the added benefits include Leonard Lopate for company on the radio. And as if this weren't entertainment enough, there's the unparalleled view of New Yorkers passing by: a once-active businessman in a windbreaker looking shellshocked and aimless in retirement; a harried mother yanking on the arm of a balky 3-year-old while pushing a broken-down stroller full of groceries; two shifty-eyed, slouching truants smoking cigarettes; a perky professional dog walker with 10 wildly mismatched yet surprisingly docile charges sniffing at lampposts or the caked earth around a dying ailanthus. And all of them (except, perhaps, the astute Labrador) unaware of the observer conducting business from behind the wheel.

What's more, while the subjects of my scrutiny may be panting from the summer's heat, or shivering in the cold, I'm always in a temperate zone. My trusty "climate control" system takes care of that. Which is only one of the reasons my car, a high-riding Ford Explorer, has turned out to be the perfect choice for these voyeuristic experiences.

Yes, I confess I drive one of those monsters of the road so tall and klutzy that it's almost impossible to see the normal-size cars behind or beside you when you're at the wheel, thus increasing the likelihood of accidents. But when parked, the extra inches and cushiony, levitating seat make it the ideal vehicle for undetected people-watching. And at rest, its empyrean height only increases my sense of lofty detachment and cozy isolation. Originally bought for its ability to traverse the dirt roads we travel on trips to the country, the Explorer turns out to suit my city life perfectly. Talk



about a match made in heaven.

And, speaking of the country, there is always Central Park. If I'm in a bucolic mood and have a little extra time, I sometimes enter the park and cruise around the rim to check out the new plantings, the state of the pool-rink at 110th Street, the topiary at the Tavern on the Green, or my favorite view of the Met, the glass-enclosed sculpture court at the rear. That is, if the park is open. Who can explain the arcane mysteries of its openings and closings, most of which bear little relation to the posted hours? Even with my years of experience, I find that they defy all logic. I mean, do they really want to encourage joggers to run at midnight by keeping the park closed for their benefit?

If I do succeed in getting in, I take my sandwich and park in the lot near the boathouse where all the cabbies gather for their midday break. The cops are fiends there (no private car parking allowed), but just as on the street, I'm safe even in questionably legal parking spots, since I can easily pull out if I see a patrol car approaching.

Best of all, while I'm on the phone after lunch, whether in a town or country setting, I can smoke my one after-meal cigarette a day far from the contemptuous looks of other diners in restaurants or my

husband at home. I even keep a cache of toothpicks and napkins in the small compartment between the seats, along with the cell-phone charger, several rolls of quarters for the meters and a supply of plastic garbage bags in the glove compartment.

If my errands involve long trips downtown in heavy traffic, I might listen to one of the taped books I keep in the back-seat pocket. I recently "read" *The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing* over several weeks that way (great book), though the *Selected Shorts* from *Symphony Space* are bet-

ter, since they can usually be heard in the time it takes to go from 94th and Third to the Russ and Daughters on East Houston. No longer feeling out of touch in the car, I feel delightfully encapsulated in my home away from home. Nor do I hazard picking up the phone or making calls while driving. Safety is certainly a factor. But the fact is, it's only when I'm parked that the phone and I can enjoy quality time together.

And now, whereas I once ignored the empty coffee cups on the floor and let the soda bottles roll around in back, I've taken to keeping the car much neater than it used to be. What's that saying about not fouling one's own nest? Once in a while, I'll even give the fender a friendly pat. I used to have lunch with friends. And in a way I still do. It's just that instead of sitting in some crowded restaurant trying to catch a waiter's eye and carry on a conversation over the din, I'm on the phone having a cozy chat from the quietest and most exclusive place I know in town.

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