

DIAMOND LANE

Biddy Livesey

Voyage #1

Leave Titirangi: 7.15 am

Arrive Takapuna: 8.20 am

In the 1830s, Samuel Morse anticipated the end of the tyranny of distance through his inventions - the telegraph and the 'Morse code' used to transmit information across it. Since then, other advances in technology have also promised to save us from distance (car, train, highway, plane, airmail, email, Skype). None of these technologies have reduced physical distance between different locations on the globe, but they have allowed us to cover distance faster. We use resources such as petrol unthinkingly, and we think about distance less.

I live in Auckland, New Zealand. The distance from my home in Titirangi to my workplace in Takapuna is 28.5 kilometres. Every day, I travel from the Manukau Harbour, which opens out into the Tasman Sea, to the Hauraki Gulf of the

Pacific Ocean. It would take me a full eight-hour working day to walk. Instead, I learnt to drive.

Voyage #3

Leave Titirangi: 7.31 am

Arrive Takapuna: 8.20 am

Driving down Titirangi Road, you can see the wide, misty sweep of the city in front of you. I'm just passing the Tutti Frutti dairy. I'm feeling a little bit nervous, a little bit brave, a little bit depressed. I'm going to have to do this trip again and again and again.

[Handbrake on]

This is the point at which I panic. I will spend the rest of my life slowly manipulating my feet back and forth in order to keep just the right distance behind the metal box in front of me.

[Accelerator]

To be fair, this commute doesn't take that long. The drive from Titirangi to Taka-

puna varies between 39 minutes and 65 minutes. The threshold for a reasonable daily commute is apparently 45 minutes, whether you walk, bike, bus or drive. Above 45 minutes, Swedish researchers have found a positive correlation between commuting and divorce. It's not uncomfortable to sit in a warm car for an hour. The bit I find painful is the powerless, oh-my-god-I-can't-believe-this-is-happening-again existential angst of being a commuter stuck in traffic. I'm experiencing 'commuters' guilt' – and it's a complex phenomenon.

Here's how I think it works:

The only actual deadline for most people is to get to work, right – we all want to get to work on time. But there are all these milestones we have to meet in order to be at work on time. If I don't leave the house by quarter past seven in the morning, traffic will be heavy. If I don't go to bed by ten I won't be able to get up and leave the house early enough to avoid the heavy traffic. If I leave work too late I won't be able to get home, do ev-

everything I need to do, and go to bed early. If I don't get to work early, I can't leave early and I will be stuck in traffic. If the weather is bad or there's a game on or there's an accident on the motorway, my careful schedule will be thrown out and – despite all my best efforts, my clean-living and my bed-times – I will be late for work. Factor A in commuter guilt – omnipresence. If you don't live your life with full recognition of how each action will affect your commute, then you're going to live to regret it. Factor B in commuter guilt – retribution. There's a sense of superiority with commuters, you know? If you can beat the traffic, you're beating the majority – everyone else is a sucker. A traffic jam is a collective occurrence. Everyone has to be there. Or in a perfect world, everyone else has to be there. If you've got up early enough, or taken the clever route, it means you're not a sucker. You deserve your traffic fate. As a commuter, you're not just racing against your own alarm clock, you're also racing against everyone else's. You're competing in an 'alarms race', in which every household in the west of Auckland

sets their clock earlier and earlier until we won't end up sleeping at all. Factor C in commuter guilt – insularity. I use fossil fuels to power the air-conditioning to cool myself while I sit in traffic and my car emits gases which warm the globe.

[Approaching the on-ramp from Great North Road to State Highway 16]

So I want to be in the lane that says 'Motorway only'. A T2 lane runs the length of the Great North Road on-ramp. 'T' stands for 'Transit' – the lane is reserved for cars with two or more passengers. The lane is always empty, so commuters can save a couple of minutes. I am transitting alone. The person in front of me is rubbing her neck as though she has already had a hard day at work. And now she seems to be cleaning her teeth in the rear vision mirror. The person behind me looks like he has gone to sleep, but his car is still slowly moving, like the tide.

In 1976, Joan Didion wrote in celebration of driving unimpeded on the freeway, without being slowed down by

bad drivers or those who are hesitant to change lanes. The essay Bureaucrats in her book *The White Album* records her anger at the creation of an early transit lane called 'The Diamond Lane' which runs along the Santa Monica freeway in Los Angeles. She blames the Diamond Lane for turning one of California's most beautiful freeways into a 16.2-mile-long parking lot. The Diamond Lane is simple in theory – just the idea that the fast inside lane should be reserved for cars with more than three passengers, to encourage consciousness of the impact of the car on the environment. But the inequity of the transit lane – reserving 25% of the road for just 3% of the cars, according to Didion – resulted in citizen unrest, with people splashing paint and scattering nails into the Diamond Lane and attacking maintenance workers.

Voyage #17

Leave Otitori Bay: 7.23 am

Arrive Takapuna: 8.35 am

[Handbrake on]

And I have hit the traffic. I'm next to Fairlands Ave, near Oakley Park – 9.6 kilometres from home, 17.2 kilometres from work. I'm doing about thirty. Mist everywhere.

I'm reading a book at the moment by a journalist called Alex Marshall. It's titled *How Cities Work* and he reckons that the three things you have to understand about cities are politics, economics and transportation. And of those three, transportation is the critical one that drives how our cities function. Politicians make decisions based on economics about transportation. It's quite an old book, probably ten years old. Marshall has got a real bone with New Urbanists who try to recreate community spirit in a suburb by designing new subdivisions to resemble old-fashioned villages. He reckons that will never work because the village is given life by people going to work, going to school, shopping locally. If the activities in your neighbourhood are limited, and you still have to get in your car – by yourself – and drive to the supermarket or to work, you've got a pretty slim chance of

actually creating any kind of community.

I've decided to keep a log of the car number plates I see in front of me when I'm sitting on the Great North Road on-ramp. I'm interested in working out whether I see the same people everyday. I want to know if I'm part of a recognisable community of commuters. I'm not writing down the whole number because I don't want to make people feel I am going to report them for something, but just the three letters from the number plate. For the record, DWR is in front of me.

Voyage #25

Leave Titirangi: 7.35am

Arrive Takapuna: 8.25am

Well, it's voyage... I guess it's officially Voyage 25. I left at about 7.35am and traffic's been good so far. I've only just stopped on the on-ramp. There's a low sun in the sky today. The person next to me has a gyrating plastic hula dancer on their dashboard. The woman in front of me keeps glancing down into the passenger seat, as though she's reading

something or taking a deathly ill dog to the vet. I'm also behind ETH and OR9. Hi guys!

Last night I had a conversation with a friend (I will call her Avondale Lights) who also commutes from Titirangi to Takapuna. She leaves at 8am and gets to work about 9am. We discussed car-pooling once but it's unpredictable what she does in the evenings. She said it took her an hour once just to get to Avondale. And when she was in Avondale, stuck in traffic and it was raining, there was a car crashed on the side of the road and standing next to it was a guy who was obviously not entirely in his senses. He had crashed the car and was yelling at an old woman who had come out of her house to help him. Avondale Lights said she just broke down and cried, sitting at the traffic lights.

Last night, about half-way up the south side of the bridge over the harbour, I drove past a car parked in the narrow median strip. There was a guy just sitting in the car, a young guy. My first thought

was that he'd had a crash, because his car was on a slightly strange angle. But he looked fine. My second thought was that he had to take a cellphone call, but it seemed like a reckless place to stop. I wasn't sure if he could reverse back out onto the road in the evening traffic. I wondered if he was waiting for the Police to assist him. I thought about stopping myself, in case he needed help. But I thought I would be a hazard, so I didn't. I thought I could call 111.

I don't want to be one of those people that just drives past crashes and panic and moments of human need. But it is a big deal to stop your car, particularly when you're moving at speed. It's hard to stop, for anything.

[Handbrake on]

There's a Canadian activist, John Restakis, who writes about co-operatives, and the viability of collaboration as an alternative to competition. He warns that because we use technology that isolates us from each other, our communities have

broken down. Instead of having an experience – going to a dinner party or going to a party or playing sport – you experience it vicariously through the medium of television. The car is also isolating technology. There’s 100 cars on this on-ramp, but there’s no way to communicate, apart from the primitive language of the indicator. There are big signs above the motorway that give each motorist traffic news. The signs could instruct us all to tune to the same radio station, and, you know, dance together.

[Handbrake off]

Ok, I’m next...

Voyage #41

Leave Titirangi: 7.20am

Arrive Takapuna: 7.57am

Here’s a piece of advice from my dental hygienist:

Don’t leave flossing your teeth until the last thing at night, when you’re tired and want to go to bed. Instead, use some

other time of the day to floss – maybe when you’re watching television, or stuck in traffic.

Although she is a dental professional, I began to distrust her advice in general when I realised that she listens to (and forces her patients to listen to) BBC World 2. During the 45 minutes that I lay in the chair, BBC World 2 played two songs, two news broadcasts, and filled the rest of the time with reportage on traffic conditions around the United Kingdom. Apparently, for instance, traffic from Heathrow was ‘horrible’, and a section of the M4 was closed due to structural problems. There were accidents reported in from all over the country. I asked the dental hygienist why she listened to traffic reports from a city on the other side of the world. She said she got pleasure from listening to the terrible traffic and weather reports from London and favourably comparing her life here in New Zealand.

[Indicator]

Last night, I found a soulmate on the in-

ternet. A man called Bill Beaty.

[Handbrake on]

Bill Beaty has a website called 'Traffic Waves – physics for bored commuters'. The site demonstrates how a single motorist can vaporise traffic jams – in his words – like a zen warrior. Beaty's theory is that traffic jams are caused by two lanes of traffic merging together. Every time you do a little manoeuvre – for example, changing lanes – you have to slow down and that means you're slowing everyone else down. According to Beaty, the secret is emptiness. When you're approaching that traffic jam, you let a Big Empty Space open up in front of you. The space could be five, ten, or twenty cars long. You create the space by refusing to zoom up directly behind the car ahead. You create space so people can merge, when they need to merge, without slowing down. By having the Big Empty Space, you keep traffic free-flowing. Beaty reports that he has seen traffic jams vaporise in front of him, so that by the time he reaches the spot where the

traffic is normally snarled, there is hardly anyone there.

[Handbrake off]

Traffic is a social phenomenon. By changing your traffic behaviour, you can influence how the traffic is operating. What Bill Beaty gets really excited about is that not everyone needs to change. It only requires one or two zen warriors per on-ramp to open up Big Empty Spaces and vaporise traffic jams. Unfortunately, the traffic jams I experience are different. The first jam is in suburban Avondale. The road is two lanes all the way, so the jam can't be caused by merging. The second jam is the merge from the Great North Road on-ramp onto the motorway, which is controlled by an electronic pulse system. There's no opportunity for zen motorists to organically create Big Empty Spaces. The truth is, the roads are jammed because there are too many cars.

Voyage #57

Leave Titirangi: Early

Arrive Takapuna: Late

This is ridiculous. I was sitting in traffic for five kilometres, from before Avondale to the Great North Road on-ramp. I don't know how long the commute took this morning, because my cellphone has run out of battery and my iPod isn't telling the truth. This is completely unsustainable – as in, I can't do this every day.

Voyage #69

Leave Titirangi: 7.40am

Arrive Takapuna: 8.45am

Just into Avondale, and traffic has stopped. Beautiful sunrise over the trees, orange and purple. The woman in front is doing her lipstick – her rear-vision mirror is tilted to an angle where she can certainly see herself, but maybe not me. The man next to me is eating a pie for breakfast, as he drives his unmarked white van with car wreckage in the back of it. I read a novel on the weekend about a psychiatry student from Nigeria living in New York. The weather keeps being strange but he's reluctant to put it down to climate change. The student says he believes in

climate change, he thinks, but he won't ascribe any one day's weather to its effect. I can understand that your friends may find it irritating if you always say 'This crazy weather is caused by climate change'. On the other hand, if you refuse to acknowledge the minor events, they will never add up to anything. And that's what we know the effect of a changing climate will be – an increasing frequency of increasingly severe weather events. Stormy days, rainy days, hot days.

[Coming to a stop on the Great North Road on-ramp]

This morning I'm behind ROKE, GGB, AGZ, FHP. The woman in front of me has her bicycle in her car. The cyclist I passed on Titirangi Road is passing us all, riding a beautiful yellow roadbike. I could bike into town, if I was feeling brave. But not to Takapuna – bicycles aren't allowed on the harbour bridge.

Voyage #81

Leave Titirangi: 7.30am

Arrive Takapuna: 8.44am

A motorcyclist with the number plate 'RAPID' weaving his way through the traffic, and a motorist with the number plate 'MANIAC' sitting still.

I am on the Great North Road on-ramp. The woman behind me has beads hanging from her rear-vision mirror, and a small white rabbit sitting on her dashboard. In front of me is BRK. For the first twenty trips, during the school holidays, this on-ramp was the big traffic jam. Now the school holidays have ended, the big wait starts two or three kilometres earlier. By the time I get to the on-ramp, I feel like I'm nearly there.

Voyage #83

Leave Titirangi: 7.00am

Arrive Takapuna: 8.40am

Looked up a timetable, bought a ticket, caught the train. Circled this passage by Martha Rosler as we rumbled past the backs of the houses of Avondale:

'...The earliest cities were political, or-

ganized around institutions of governance. The political city was eventually supplanted in the Middle Ages by the mercantile city, organised around the marketplace, and then by the industrial city, finally entering a critical zone on the way to becoming a full absorption of the agrarian by the urban....In other words, the urban paradigm has overtaken and subsumed all others, determining the social relations and the conduct of daily life within them... Indeed, the very concept of 'daily life' is in itself a product of industrialism and the urban'

Things change. Stopped at the Tutti Frutti dairy on the way home, to buy tulips.

Voyage #91

Leave Titirangi: 7.26am

Arrive Takapuna: 8.20am

I'm on the Great North Road on-ramp. 10.6 kilometres from home, 15.6 kilometres from work. I don't see any number plates I recognise. There are one two three four five six seven eight nine ten eleven twelve thirteen fourteen fifteen

cars ahead of me.

[Handbrake on]

Ten cars ahead of me.

[Handbrake off]

I'm going to move house.

[Handbrake on]

Two cars ahead of me.

[Handbrake off, acceleration]