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Country roads were never like this
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I had been dreading this past weekend for a month.

The country mouse from Blue Grass, population about 50, was headed to the City of New York. For an important occasion like this, I would normally wear a shirt with buttons.

But I was not a tourist nibbling at The Big Apple. I was, rather, a U-Hauling Daddy, dragging a 20-foot-long, 1,800-pound, four-wheel trailer filled with more than a ton of my daughter's furniture, books, electronics, kitchen spoons, clothes, shoes, knickknacks, gels, shampoos and female mystery potions. In my 22-foot-long Ford truck, we rigged out like a tractor trailer.

I christened the U-Haul, The Titanic, and broke a bottle of aspirin on its metal tongue.

Molly, who occasionally claims to be related to me, had been hired as a reporter by Bloomberg News and rented an apartment in Astoria, Queens. I offered to move her the 500 miles between here and there.

I had U-Hauled Molly to Chicago about 18 months earlier when she enrolled at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism for graduate work. I learned that driving The Titanic is pretty easy on the Interstates, but it's a nightmare on big-city streets in big-city traffic during big-city rush hours.

We left at 7 a.m. on Friday morning. We blazed north on I-81 and east on I-78 at a steady 55 mph. Then we waded up at the George Washington Bridge over the Hudson River at about 5 p.m. and fell into a crawl over the newly named Robert F. Kennedy Bridge, which used to be known as the Triborough Bridge (and still was on my 2008 road atlas) and now is often referred to as the RFK-Triboro Bridge, or just The Triboro, which is how I had known it years ago.

Both bridges are relics of our colonial past when old game trails across these rivers were widened to accommodate four-legged horses. The Titanic with its flared wheel wells filled these ancient lanes, from stripe to stripe. I drove toward Queens for two hours, centimeters away in both directions from scrapes, sideswipes and New York lawsuits.

I saw no other U-Haulers on New York roads.

But I did see hundreds of sleek black SUVs, each larger than a locomotive.

They wore jumbo, add-on steel grills, capable of stopping a charging elephant. They bore bumper-sticker tattoos that read, “Kiss my attitude,” or a word of comparable content with a specific geographical focus. I seemed to be driving The Titanic through an enemy tank formation.

Construction began on The Triboro on Black Friday in 1929. When the money ran out the next day, a lite version survived. A sign was once affixed to it, according to New York Times columnist William Safire, that read: “In event of attack, drive off bridge.”

“Where?” I shouted. “Where?”

When our exit finally came into view, I was three lanes of 40-mph traffic to the left of the ramp. I signaled. I waved. I blinkered. I told Molly to wave. I told Molly to blinker. I told Molly to show some leg.

To avoid missing the exit, I had to stop in my lane. Horns honked. New Yorkers shouted local welcoming remarks, with which I agreed. Visions of a three-lane crash danced in my head like rancid sugar plums.

Then I gunned the Ford over and up the ramp, hoping the U-Haul would clear before causing a wreck. We barely made it. The four-tire icebergs on the Grand Central Expressway had been closing fast on The Titanic.

We collapsed into the motel parking lot, only to discover that it did not have room for the likes of us. I had no way of unhooking and docking the loaded Titanic. The alternative seemed to be to park across five spaces at a cost of about \$100 and an unhappy parking attendant.

I had had enough of this day. I eased the Ford over the curb and onto the lawn, cut hard to the left, and came to rest in a single space—with The Titanic beached at an angle behind me on the grass. The attendant said I was “very creative.” Country smarts had rescued me.

We crept down the narrow streets of Queens the next morning. Each right turn was a finger-crosser. I now understood why driving a bus had turned Ralph Kramden into a shrieking wacko. And I didn’t even have to make change.

I parked on 35th street in front of Molly’s walk-up building. Cars lined both curbs.

I pulled tight to the left, leaving a wide-enough drive-through lane.

Antonio and Jesus, the movers Molly had hired, were on time. Molly started supervising; I started unloading; and they started moving things to the second

floor.

Five minutes later, the mother of all trucks roared down the street. I buttoned up the trailer and scooted around the block.

I started unloading again. Then a small, compact-size police car approached. Antonio and Jesus rolled their eyes. They had seen this before. I was in for a blocking-traffic ticket.

The police car slowed. I jumped in front of it and started walking it forward through the open lane. The officer hesitated, then begrudgingly moved forward with three feet of clearance on each side. He followed my signals. He never stopped. I waved him on his way with a smile.

Antonio and Jesus were impressed. They had never seen an officer obey a civilian. They had thought me just another big, old, bald white guy, but now I was a homey. I turned my ball cap backward and a little to the side. We did one of those complicated handshake things until I got confused. I think I ended up dapping, “Hold the mayo.” in sign language.

We were done in two hours. I dropped the trailer deep in Queens, next to an underpass that surely was where “West Side Story” filmed the fight between the Jets and the Sharks 50 years ago.

I left Molly’s apartment at 5:30 a.m. on Monday to beat the traffic. I missed the Triboro Bridge, which is like David failing to see Goliath, because I didn’t follow the sign to the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge, which I did not know at the time was the new name for the old Triboro. I was heading out of New York, but either north or east, not south.

I pulled into a small service station, located between the divided highway. I got gas, took a deep breath and turned back the way I came.

I edged the Ford onto the 30-foot-long entrance ramp. I looked into the mirrors. An endless chain of parallel headlights came toward me in the blackness. I put on my right turn signal. I waited for an opening. I waited. I turned in my seat. I waited some more. Work-bound cars were moving at 50 mph, with no more than a half-inch between them. I waited. A car pulled in behind me. I waited. I waited some more, looking for an opening.

Suddenly, a loudspeaker barked. “You in the red truck. You have to move into traffic.”

Since I shared this sentiment, I got out and walked back to the car from where these instructions seemed to be coming.

It was an unmarked police car with a well-marked police officer sitting inside.

“I can’t enter,” I said. “There’s no opening. I’m not being a wimp about this.”

“Just pull in,” he said.

That was like telling me to just drive off the Triboro Bridge and things will work out on the way down.

I returned to my truck. The headlights of incoming cars were four unbroken strands of double diamonds, moving toward me in a solid block.

Out of nowhere, the darkness was rent by a siren and a firecracker of flashing lights—reds, yellows, maybe others. I’m cooked, I thought. Blocking traffic again. Second-degree stalling. I was facing time for being a felonious chicken.

The unmarked police car behind me cranked up all of its tricks. In an act of suicidal courage, it pulled halfway into traffic. Cars screeched, brakes smoked, jaws dropped.

I had my opening. I did what I did when I was 17: I peeled out.

I nestled into my lane, breathing normally, just one of thousands moving in the same direction. I hit I-87 South. I hit the Triboro Bridge and all of its aliases. I hit the George Washington Bridge.

I was full of confidence...as I missed New Jersey Turnpike South. I realized this around Parsippany, 20 miles west of the turn.

I’m sure Parsippany is a fine town and Parsippanians are fine folks. None should pay attention to what I was shouting that morning.

As I retraced my miles, I discovered that New Jersey Turnpike signs are located on the side of the road at knee level, usually behind shrubs native to Normandy’s hedgerows. They’re painted green to blend with the shrubbery hiding them. The NJT signs themselves are no bigger than small raisins.

To the unknown cop who helped me get home: Thanks. I will always think better of unmarked police cars.

Have I U-Hauled Molly for the last time? I don’t mind the lifting, toting, grunting and sweating that moving involves. It’s the driving that drives me batty.

And then she said, “Thank you, Daddy.”

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