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Car Horns

By Michael LaRocca

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CAR HORNS

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Let's pretend that you live in China. Perhaps not in my neighborhood, but in China. Let's also pretend that, unlike me, you own a car. A Volkswagen Santana, of course. Who do you honk the horn at?

Well, you honk at everyone who's in your way, and who you think is in your way, and who you are passing, and who you think is trying to pass you. Every bicycle needs a honk in case the driver can't see you. Every pedestrian, most definitely, because they're not looking at anything except their feet as they float out in front of you.

Every car does this, and the roads become a constant cacophany of car horns. The noise is such that everybody tunes it out in order to function, so the horns are pointless. Nobody is listening to the horns. But honking them is a habit the Chinese driver can't break.

Okay, now here comes a legitimate reason to honk the horn, an emergency, perhaps some fool walking right in front of your car. What do you do? Flick the headlights. Just how stupid is that? If he can't hear your horn, he sure can't hear your headlights. Of course he can't see your headlights, because he's not looking at you. That's what caused the crisis in the first place. Plus, it's daytime.

Car Horns

I offer this little tale for authors who wonder why I prefer understatement. Superlatives are your car horns. Save them until you actually need them.

Michael LaRocca's website at <http://freereads.topcities.com> was chosen by WRITER'S DIGEST as one of The 101 Best Websites For Writers in 2001 and 2002. He published four novels in 2002 and has two more scheduled for publication in 2004. He also works as an editor for an e-publisher. He teaches English at a university in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China, and publishes the free weekly newsletter Mad About Books.

What?!? No Bananas?

By David Leonhardt

"Where are your bananas?" It seemed like a logical question to ask. For all of my forty trips around the sun, bananas were a key item to place in the grocery cart. For the first time I could recall, the banana bin was empty. So I asked a store worker where the bananas were.

"We don't have any," he replied. "We'll be getting some in tomorrow."

It took me a few moments to absorb this information. "What do you mean you don't have any?" I thought. "Every store has bananas." True, sometimes they are almost green enough to pass for bent cucumbers. And they occasionally appear to have lost an arm-wrestling match with a watermelon. But there are always bananas of some sort in the store.

Then it dawned on me just how foolish my expectations were. I live well north of New York City. Even if somebody invented a way to cultivate them in the Great White North, it was early April, and they would not bear fruit at that time of year. For goodness sake, outside the snow was falling and inside I was expecting tropical bananas!

If you commute in a big city, you might have noticed traffic grinding to a halt. Why? Look to bananas for the answer. Just as I was frustrated by my grocery expectations not being met, millions of commuters are frustrated daily by their traffic expectations not being met.

Consider some of the major machines in your life, such as television. Twenty years ago, we would watch a TV show. Ads would come and ads would go, but we would watch it from start to finish. Who does that these days?

"What were you watching, honey?"

"I dunno. But I think I caught 412 channels."

And if ever you should lose the converter ... I know, I know, this is a family publication, so we'll cut the profanity.

Car Horns

And what about the Internet? If a web site takes more than five seconds to load, where are we?

"Did you order that book from Amazon for me?"

"I dunno. But I think I reached warp speed with my clicking finger. Ouch! I think I sprained it."

If fancy TV gadgets and high-speed Internet feed our impatience, what about car ads?

Vrroooooommm. See how fast this car can go? Wow. It does zero to 60 in 5.2 seconds ... in the ad. And zero to zero in half an hour stuck on the Santa Monica Freeway.

As we expect our machines each day to break yesterday's speed record, our cars seem to be slowing to a crawl. That's because more and more people are squeezing onto the same road space trying to zoom faster and faster and honking their horns louder and louder (because we all know that cars move faster when their horns get honked, right? Especially when they get honked LONG and LOUD, right?).

Is it just me, or is this poor math? A realist would expect traffic to get a little slower each year, which just proves how rare realists really are. Every one of us expects to move faster and faster.

And I expect bananas on the store shelf even when it is snowing outside. So what can we do? Easy, we can grumble and complain. We can shout abusive words at store clerks and other drivers. We can honk our horns (not recommended in the fruit section).

Or we can step back and ask ourselves logical questions about what we should realistically expect. For instance, "Can I really expect bananas on my grocer's shelves in the middle of winter when I know the truck is stuck in traffic?"

This article was adapted from an edition of Your Daily Dose of Happiness at

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Guy, author of Climb Your Stairway to Heaven: the 9 habits of maximum happiness at

. Visit his web site at

What?!? No Bananas?

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