The Pinings of a Toronto Commuter Andre Masella

In my final year of high school, I had the opportunity to go to the Ontario Science Centre to take certain OAC classes. I did any I enjoyed my time there very much, but there was a problem: the commute.

I live in Etobicoke, around Royal York Road and Eglington Avenue. For me to get to the Science Centre by public transit takes about one and a half hours. It involves walking 10 minutes to catch the southbound 73--Royal York North (10 minute wait) to Royal York station. From there, it is a 5 minute wait, a 35 minute subway ride to Pape station and a 10 minute wait for the 25--Don Mills northbound which takes 20 minutes to land in front of the OSC. That's a grand total of 105 minutes, but those wait times are maximum, so it was usually a bit shorter. Still, it was 3 hours of my day that were totally wasted. Eventually, I cracked under the stress of that and started feeling really, really ill when commuting. I stuck it out the end and my anxiety went away.

During my first co-op term, I started commuting by subway to King station. Initially it was not a problem, but eventually, it began to wear thin and I found myself under the same stress as my OSC commute. I returned to the company the next term, but armed with several coping strategies. The most useful was reading. I quickly learnt to read, even on a bus, and spent my time efficiently shredding novels (in one work term, I did 4 novels, the *Harry* Potter series, a book on ethics and a primer on Sanskrit). I didn't much like the subway, but I was comfortable with it. My environmentalist tendencies told me it was the right thing to do.

Now, the following work term, my sister was attending school at the Science Centre, and, by total fluke, I was very near by (in fact, I could see the OSC from my office window). Since we both had G2 licenses, we decided to drive the 401. My sister drove there and I drove home.

I hate it.

Actually riding on the highway is awful. On an average day, it saves about one half hour compared to the subway commute. However, it is far more entrapping. No matter how long an eternity it may seem when you are stressed and wanting to get off at the next station, the highway exits are much, much further apart time-wise, and transfers are insanely far apart. If you do get off the highway, you are usually in the middle of nowhere. The only subway stops that are not surrounded by restaurants, banks and stores are Old Mill, High Park and Castle Frank. That's three of more than 30 stations on the Bloor-Danforth line. Now, when actually driving myself, there is the added stress of actually piloting a large hunk of petroleum-powered steel. Naturally, the other drivers think that by driving aggressively, they can get ahead of me and arrive at their destination faster. After some time, I have reached a sort of premonition of who is going to cut me off, when, and how fast.

Now, the true paradox of the highway is the travel time. If we leave from the OSC at 4:30-4:40, we will make it home by 5:15-5:20. If we leave at 4:40-4:50, we will be home between 5:20-5:40 on most days. If we leave at 4:50-5:00, we will make it home between 5:50-6:00. If we leave 5:00-5:10, we will arrive between 5:50-6:00. Ahh, the paradox. I don't try to explain, I just make sure I leave at the right time. Of course, some days are horribly slow because of ''volume delays'' (read, no reason).

My sister and father have tried to figure it out. I have an explanation that is satisfactory in my mind, but it's rather strange. The highway is basically a chaotic amplifier. During rush hour, people leave very little gap between vehicles. Now, at some point, somewhere, someone will brake to slow down a bit. If there is only a tiny gap, the driver behind them will brake, but longer. And there it begins. The car behind that one will brake. The lane will slow down and some impatient driver will attempt a lane change below speed, slowing down the driver behind him in the lane into which he is changing. From there, it blossoms outward bringing a whole section of highway to a crawl. The system has amplified a tiny, random disruption into mass flow disruption.

Now, I began to think about fluid in a tube. Water molecules travelling in a pipe must, at some point, be randomly perturbed, but that doesn't slow down the flow of water in a pipe. Part of this is the scale of the system, but part of it is the distance. Water molecules have huge gaps in between them, but the gaps are elastic. When one is perturbed, the molecules behind it can slow down into the gap while the perturbed molecule can begin to accelerate again. Aye, there is the rub. During rush hour, commuters don't want to leave big gaps because that would be a waste of space when the want to go fast, but those gaps are what allow them to go fast.

You never appreciate what you have until it's gone. I just want a novel and a Metro-pass.