

The Spot

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It's been years now that I've owned a car. Six. I say "now" to refer to my New York years. The other years during which I've owned a car don't satisfy the purposes of this account. Suffice to say, I have long been familiar with driving and parking a car that I have had the privilege of owning.

I would go so far as to say that I view owning a car as equivalent to a right of citizenship. Given current sensitivities surrounding climate change and car owners' collective contribution of carbon dioxide, I recognize this may not be a popular notion. But I dare say it is not an uncommon one.

Don't get me wrong. I take public transit to work. I'm not one of those people who gets into the car every time I have a craving for a deli ice pop. My car is a fuel efficient, mid-size Volvo. I use it for the occasional weekend trip, to pick up mounds of toilet paper and 60-pound bins of cat litter at the Costco, to go to Brooklyn's Prospect Park ice rink for ice skating in the winter, and for periodic trips to the neighborhood mechanic for repair and maintenance. I'm no ecomaniac, but I'm proud to say the Volvo pretty much just sits. This is not the place to describe "it," except to point out that the Volvo in question is not a piece of furniture. One does not claim as a right of citizenship a damask armchair or a Victorian table lamp inherited from an ancestor. Every Tuesday or Monday morning for the past six years, my fellow citizens and I have not arisen and shifted the armchair and the lamp from the front of the house to the back. And three hours later, put those pieces of furniture back to their rightful spots. Of course not. But car ownership requires us to do so.

Across New York City it is so. Drivers start their engines and move their cars from their prized spots for the good of all, so the cleared-of-cars side of the street can be cleaned by the street sweeper which never fails to come along and do its best to uphold civility and deter crime and promote good behavior, tidy streets being as essential to a civil society as timely garbage collection and tax-supported fireworks displays for fine-weather holidays.

This principle is being sorely tested now in my neighborhood in Brooklyn, where the authorities have seen fit to suspend what is known as alternate side of the street parking until further notice. A message, obtained and forwarded to neighbors' inboxes and mail slots by some unknown citizen, states: "Regulations will be temporarily suspended until further notice as authorities install signs with new, reduced regulations."



To question the wisdom of bureaucracy, the cant of interrupting a democratic practice for the dubious purpose of changing signs and their wording, is to review the dance of the angels on the head of a pin.

But the use of the car. The promise of a spot, when for days at a time now these cars aren't moving, will not move, shan't not move "until further notice," is another matter. I was one day the citizen motorist. I am now the marooned. A car owner with the most delicate choice to make. My toilet paper is low, I have plans to attend a memorial upstate in two weeks, the car will have to be moved, and there is a new calculus. I haven't the foggiest idea if I will be able to find a place to leave the car when



I return home.

I venture to say, as everyone seems to be fond of saying these days, that change is great for politics. But for alternate side of the street parking?

It's past time for my trip to the Costco. For the past six years to keep our monthly bills in order we buy necessities, from cat litter to Brita water filters to paper towels at the Costco. But I don't go. I don't want to lose my spot.

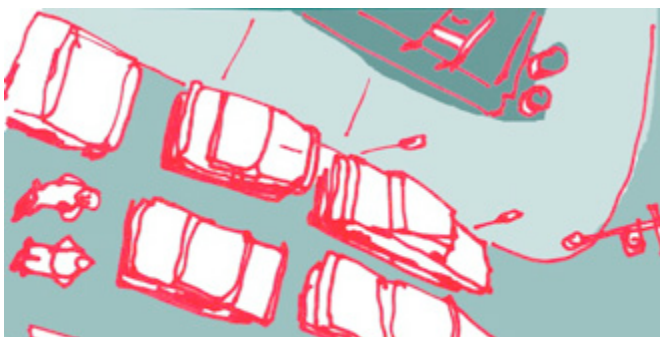
Someone has estimated that there are about two thousand parking spots in my neighborhood and twenty thousand cars that would like to be parked there. (For the tax dollars we spend, I think there should be hard figures here, a section of the traffic police that rather than slaps orange slips under wipers for the most dubious offenses provides this

information as a public service, but that is for another account.) Before the suspension, on Mondays and Tuesdays on my street, we drivers arrived at our parked cars, started our engines and shifted our vehicles to a double-parked position on the alternate side of the street. Before going back inside our houses, we left notes on the windshields, with phone numbers and addresses so the driver boxed in, needing to get out, could do so by alerting us. Meanwhile the sweeper did its thing, and in three short hours we were back, to return our cars to the now-legal and brushed-clean curbside. Of course, like musical chairs, there's a strategy (which I'm not going to reveal here, for goodness sakes) but suffice to say those with six or so years of experience have learned enough tricks to get the jump on those thousands of other cars hungry for the spot I vacated at 8 a.m. Monday. I may not have gotten the precise spot I had had before the sweeping, but when the music stopped, I had a spot and my Volvo was good for another week, when we would do our car-hopping game of musical chairs all over again. It was hardly a perfect system, but in our neighborhood it worked.

If I have a claim to a right of citizenship in New York, a place where people gather in a civil and responsible fashion to promote public cleanliness and exercise a fair exchange of a valuable resource, it is during this modest weekly routine of alternate side of the street parking. If cars had been around in the eighteenth century, the New York delegation to the Constitutional Convention would have lobbied to include their ownership in our founding document. Surely they would've gotten the right to park in there too.

Say I do go to the Costco. When I return, after unloading my cargo at home, my spot will certainly be gone. People who can afford parking in a garage and are equipped with any sense have already taken up those spaces. With no regular weekday alternate side of street parking until further notice in a neighborhood of two thousand spaces, there is no refreshing of spots. Not only are burger wrappers and tree schmutz and beer bottles and dog poop bags collecting under our cars, but the cars are trapped in their spots; to leave is to perhaps never return.

Consider that game of musical chairs. There are ten people standing and five sitting. But the band suddenly goes on strike. Are the five sitters going to get up without hearing the music? When will the music begin again? And what are those ten poor suckers to do?



I've come up with some scenarios. I leave my spot to go to the Costco and a driver from Ditmas comes and plunks his car in my spot. The Chevy from Ditmas is an old clunker of a thing that the owner has been trying to sell but he hasn't had any luck and the dealer won't give him much in a trade. So the owner takes a promotional short-term lease on a brand-new Hyundai Santa Fe and in the meantime, while deciding what to do about the Chevy, he takes it to my neighborhood,



where he has learned that the parking is free and unlimited, and, delighted to find my spot, dumps it there. I drive and drive around the neighborhood and find not a single open spot.

Endlessly, I circle. An hour goes by. Two. Finally, I find a spot, but it is two miles outside the restricted zone, and I must be back at 8 a.m. the next day to move it, to do my civic duty. I'm back at the Volvo the next morning, and return it to my neighborhood. Not far from home, I see a plumber's vehicle has a prized spot. I wait double-parked beside it, for hours if need be, until it moves and I pull up and park in the vacated space.

I leave my spot to go to the Costco and a short-term parker, a telephone repair van, gets it. Rather than pursue the unlikely event of finding an empty spot among the prized two thousand, I remain in the car, double-parked for as long as it takes, until the repair worker returns to retrieve his vehicle, and, gratefully, I pull into the space.

I leave my spot to go to the Costco and I look in the rearview mirror to see two cars pull up at the same time. One has signaled her intention, pulled ahead to back in and the other, a tiny Smart car, zips in before her and grabs the space. The first driver jumps out of the car and bangs heavily on the windshield of the Smart car. The Smart driver is not getting out. I can't see him from my vantage point, but I imagine he is acting pretty smug. A police cruiser arrives and I decide to return to the spot and provide an eyewitness to the cop. If I play my cards right, the cop will get so fed up with the two of them that he will boot them from the spot and I will repark my Volvo. Costco will have to wait.

It's been said that New York is a prison built by the inmates. We are its guards too. But we don't know it's a prison. We're proud of what we've built and we won't leave it for all the money in the world.

That's particularly true this summer. Because if I do, I will lose my spot.

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