



Stark's Reality

She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain
by Thom Stark

Ever since Niels Bohr proposed the planetary model of the atom, it's been an article of modern scientific faith that, on a sub-atomic level, matter predominantly consists of empty space. In fact, according to current quantum physics models, even the solid stuff is mostly wishful thinking.

And that's all well and good. The only problem is that, on the grosser physical scale where you and I experience day-to-day life, it's still very much the case that two solid objects can not occupy the same space at the same time. And, whenever two bodies attempt to test the truth of that principle, disaster inevitably results. Which is why the habit with which so many of the motorists here in Mariposa seem to be afflicted of driving with two wheels casually slung over the center line causes me such great consternation.

If this were Kansas or Nebraska, it wouldn't be so bad. You -- which is to say "I" -- could see the other driver coming from fifty or sixty miles away and have plenty of time in which to pull off onto the shoulder, abandon the car and flee into the surrounding cornfields before the oncoming roadhog actually made it anywhere near your vicinity.

But it's not. Instead, it's Mariposa, which is set in the picturesque Sierra foothills, where the topography dictates that our narrow, winding local roads feature plenty of blind curves and hilltops whose sightlines are further obscured by dense foliage, massive tree trunks and fences. And, just to add to the automotive challenge, there are the seasonal obstructions to be considered: snow and ice in Winter, rain and fog in Spring, smoke from our annual plague of forest fires in Summer and Fall and rockslides at any time of the year.

Not to mention the animate obstacles -- bicyclists, pedestrians, pets and livestock -- that are likely to be lurking on the other side of any curve in the road. And don't get me started about the damned deer. (My doctor keeps insisting that human blood pressure can't physically get that high and I lack the heart to rub his nose in just how wrong medical science can be.)

But, despite all the other indigenous road hazards, Mariposa drivers, whether young or old, male or female -- and regardless of whether the vehicles they pilot are old or new, big or small, decrepit or immaculate -- persist in keeping the center line squarely between their headlights as they wend their merry way thither and yon. And they often do so at exhilarating, NASCAR-like speeds.

I'm amazed that the practice doesn't result in casualty figures on a scale with the Battle of Borodino. Come to think of it, "amazed" seems like such a puny, undersized, 98-pound weakling of a word to describe the full scope and amplitude of my awe.

And never is the feeling more acute than when one of these blithe spirits comes sweeping nonchalantly around a hairpin curve -- all adorned with shrubbery so dense and luxuriant that even Superman with his X-ray vision couldn't penetrate it -- only to be confronted with the spectacle of ANOTHER VEHICLE coming right toward him. Or her. Especially when I'm the one in that other vehicle.

There's always that gaping mouth, open in an "O" of astonishment that such an apparition could materialize out of thin air -- and, what's more, could, in seeming defiance of all logic, actually be taking up HALF THE ROAD. And then, as my heart not only leaps into my mouth, but starts clawing at my teeth in a frantic effort to escape from my body altogether and jump free of the inevitable kerplosion, the operator of the oncoming auto twitches his -- or her -- steering wheel precisely far enough to yield the exactly sufficient portion of my lane to allow my cowering car to slip gratefully by, courtesy of an exciting close encounter with the shoulder of the road.

And he -- or she -- will invariably frown at me in passing, as if to say, "Where in tarnation did YOU come from?"

Mind you, these are local drivers, not tourists. Even if they tend to be a little hazy about speed limit and directional signs, travelers both foreign and domestic are scrupulous about not straying over the center line. (Although, admittedly, visitors from the British Commonwealth occasionally do drive on the wrong side of the road, they are at least careful to keep their vehicles ENTIRELY within the incorrect lane.)

What worries me most about this charming custom is not so much the fear of my own impending horrible death -- even though that is a subject of some concern to me. Nor is it the probable total loss of transportation that, given the abject and unremitting state of poverty that a professional writer like me (by which I mean one with no bestseller to his name) enjoys, is essentially unreplaceable.

No, it's the abject terror of visualizing total disaster being visited not upon my own person, but upon that of my darling wife or of Wolfgang, our beloved dog, that makes me so deeply regret having failed to patent the car-to-car missile 'way back in the 1980's, when the idea first occurred to me. And I'm more concerned about Wolfie's safety than I am about that of my wife because, although the loss of either one would rip a gigantic hole in my heart, my wife is very conscientious about wearing her seat belt. Wolfie, however, is secure only in his unwavering trust in our concern for his well-being.

Unfortunately, should we find ourselves staging a roadside demonstration of the "two solid objects cannot occupy the same space simultaneously" principle, our poor Wolfie will have the unenviable -- and probably fatal -- privilege of staging his own display of another axiom of modern physics: that a moving object (an 80-pound dog, for example) tends to remain in motion unless acted on by an outside force, such as a windshield.

Isn't it amazing how much enjoyment a knowledge of science can add to your life?