

**All is not idyllic
on *Bainbridge*—
*just try to drive.***

By: Kerrie

Houston

Rush-hour traffic etiquette takes on a new meaning on Bainbridge Island, where the streets abound with the sound of children playing; basket-ball hoops hang from trees on opposite sides of the street, the centerline dividing the court; local bicyclists share the road, showcasing their innate sense that cars are bigger than they are. Even the ferry sighs longingly as it leaves the harbor.

But that outward calm is an illusion, Bainbridge's "tranquil island setting" an

oxymoron. Put an islander behind the wheel of a car, and suddenly you are confronted with a moron not of the oxy variety.

Since there are only four stoplights on Bainbridge Island (all located on the highway), its citizens must contend with a number of busy inter-city intersections, governed only by four-way stop signs. There are days when it seems that no one on the entire island knows how to behave at these corners. People here are so gracious that they often get in your way just by trying to stay out of it.

Take, for example, the intersection of Madison and High School roads, where the scenario usually goes something like this: It's time for the woman on my right to go next. But instead of taking her turn, she graciously passes it to the man

on her right. Instead of taking his turn, heaven-bent on being a me-seconder, he graciously passes it back to her. So she mulls over him. He mulls over her. They mull over each other ... as the rest of us look on at the inner workings of this islander social, waiting patiently to take our absurd turn.

I found myself sitting in one of these herky-jerky parades one day, paying particularly close attention to the proceedings. There were 16 cars at the intersection. To get everyone through could have taken nearly a half hour. The woman behind me, obviously growing impatient with island etiquette, kept testing her vehicle's accelerating and braking prowess. She loomed behind me like Shamu's shadow. Every time I moved forward, glaring into my rear-view mirror, I'd

notice that she'd come within inches of hitting me. Which she eventually did, of course.

But before I get to all that, allow me this self-indulgent traffic diversion. I, too, am one of those drivers who is too polite for my own good. I was raised, after all, here in the Emerald City—home to the nation's "most polite drivers." When I was growing up, in the (late) '60s, driving in Seattle was simple. Back then, Wallingford's 45th Street was a virtual side street, and Sunday afternoons meant a pleasant "family drive" through the Arboretum. Today, a drive in Seattle is anything but pleasant. Perhaps, over the years, Washington's Department of Transportation has been busy *creating* monumental traffic problems rather than solving them. Conceivably, the WDOT, like the Scarecrow in the Wizard

of Oz, is in desperate need of a brain.

Consider the "Seattle Scarecrow" (to coin a new term for perpetrators of random acts of brainlessness) who recently rerouted the Bainbridge Island/Bremerton ferry traffic. Previously, it was a simple 5-minute straight shot from 1-5 to and from the ferry. Now it's a nightmarish 55-minute obstacle course, fraught with disoriented drivers trying to maneuver around Pioneer Square, one-way streets, street people, horse buggies and droppings, unsynchronized traffic lights, a ferry traffic U-turn, railroad tracks, and, finally (onward!), through KINGDOME TRAFFIC! Brilliant!

OK, I'm back on the main arterial. (I had no idea that the subject of traffic was so jammed with metaphor.) I believe

I was talking about that inbred Seattle politeness thing. Anyway, I rarely honk my horn. Once I waited patiently at a green light behind a couple kissing. Another time, late to catch a ferry, I uncomplainingly followed a slow-moving vehicle while its male occupant shaved, brushed his teeth, gargled, and flossed.

Polite as I am, though, I am leery about motorists coming up behind me. A few years ago, I was rear-ended with enough force to shove my car under a stalled semi-truck in front of me. As I waited in the back seat of the state patrolman's vehicle, the tourist who'd hit me angrily screamed, "Why'd you stop? I was going the speed limit!" The speed limit on I-5 notwithstanding, I was rendered speechless. And I've been driving with one eye on the rearview mirror ever since.

So, this woman on Bainbridge hit me. I sat there for a moment, reeling at the inevitability of the accident, remembering, vividly, the circumstances of the previous rear-ender, wondering what unearthly exchange would ensue this time. As these things always escalate out of control, I could feel my anger gauge rising. Finally, ready for anything, I got out of my car. Then I looked up *at* the woman and prepared for battle.

"I'm sorry. . . .," she bleated, to my relief. "I don't usually dress like this—but I'm on my way to an aerobics class."

How much more polite can an islander motorist get, anyway? We've descended to the point now, apparently, where we have a dress code for traffic accidents.