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# A PIECE OF LaROCQUE

by Tom  
LaRocque

## Backing her way through Ketchum

I recently heard a story about a Ketchum woman whose transmission failed just as she began driving to work. None of the forward gears would work at all. Undaunted, she put the car in reverse and *backed* all the way to work — a distance of more than a mile.

What's most surprising about this story is that she had the skill to maneuver her car in reverse for more than a mile. Not the least bit surprising is the fact that she got away with it. In a place like

Ketchum, you can do things like that.

In the cities, things are different. In Chicago, for instance, the same woman might have been arrested or scorned to death by other drivers. Here's how it would happen:

She piles into her car at 7:34 a.m. with her briefcase, her purse and her aerobics bag. "Twenty-six minutes," she thinks. She twists the ignition key and the Toyota cranks sluggishly. Finally the engine kicks over and she

breathes a sigh of relief. She puts the car into drive, and nothing.

Cursing, she throws the shift lever wildly to every position. Reverse is the only working gear. She plants her head on the steering wheel in defeat. Then her head rises slowly, and she eyes the "R" on the automatic transmission. "Why not?" she thinks. The car shoots backward like a nuclear missile.

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tendant stares open-mouthed as the Toyota leaves the underground garage backwards at 20 mph. The tires squeal as the driver begins backing her way toward the expressway. She cranes her neck to see out the rear window.

A light drizzle begins to fall. She reaches for the wipers' switch, and then catches herself. "What am I doing?" she thinks. She silently curses her husband for not letting her order the rear wiper as an option.

She's gaining confidence as she wheels her way onto Dempster Street at 40 mph. The noise of car horns is all around her. But that's nothing unusual for rush hour, she thinks. She spins her head forward momentarily to tune the radio, and sees a man following her in a Cadillac, gesturing obscenely. She gestures back.

The expressway is bumper to bumper, and she resolutely merges into the 5 mph procession. By now she is sitting forward, relaxed, driving exclusively by the rear view mirror. She ignores the suspicious sidelong glances from passing motorists. Her exit appears, and she backs onto the exit ramp. She turns left and hammers the gas pedal. The backwards Toyota is into its final kick, sprinting madly toward the finish line. "It's 7:58," says the radio announcer.

But the wail of a police siren drowns out the radio. The driver pulls over, and a sleepy-eyed police officer steps up beside her.

"May I see your license?"

"Was I doing something wrong,?" she asks.

He examines her driver's license perfunctorily. "Yeah," he says finally. "No left turn."

She blames her mirror-

image view of the road for the illegal turn, but it does her no good. She signs the citation and waits for the police officer to pull away. He does, and she sheepishly slips the car back into reverse. Carefully, she creeps the last half mile and parks her car, late for work again.

The city of Chicago and the Wood River Valley are very roughly equivalent in area. To drive from the Picabo Hills to Galena Summit is to cover the approximate distance from Chicago's south border to its north border.

The difference is, in Chicago it's solid urban development. And cars everywhere, from north to south. Imagine traffic at its worst during peak tourist season in Ketchum, with drivers snarling and cars and trucks dodging each other at intersections. Now extrapolate that mess to an area the size of the Wood River Valley. That's Chicago.

"I'm going to the south side to pick up some bathroom tile," people say on Chicago's north side. Then they get in their cars, and it's like fighting traffic from Galena to Picabo. Admittedly, much of the traveling is done on expressways, but much of that is bumper to bumper.

And that's just the Chicago city limits. The entire metropolitan area, which is largely, if not solidly developed, is many times bigger.

Traffic can seem pretty nasty in Ketchum this time of year. Hailey too has a respectable "rush hour." But who's complaining? Not me. I think it's nice to live in a place where you can still back your car to work.