

States of the Union

LIMOUSINE RUMINATIONS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*Two got off in Greenwich,
one in Darien*

THE LINES are a refrain from a poem I shall never finish—one I compulsively knit, unravel and then knit again while riding the big, baby blue airport limousine from LaGuardia to my town in Connecticut. The journey takes about 90 minutes, over the past decade I have made it hundreds of times.

Poetry, it turns out, is a poor conveyance of limousine reality. The words that rhyme with Darien do not ride compatibly with me and my fellow passengers. They are too smooth, and pedestrian, to enter our lurching motion-dreams.

In *The Music Man*, singer-suitor Harold Hill gropes for words that rhyme with Marian, the sweet but aloof light of his life. He tries librarian, because she happens to be one, he also tries carrion, which he says he may turn into if she continues to snub him. But he never attempts Darien, possibly because he thinks it a peculiar place to tarry in.

A poem, Marianne Moore tells us, places real toads in imaginary gardens.

But in a limousine stuffed with strangers, each toting his own mythic baggage, such fine distinctions tend to get lost. On a trip I made a few weeks ago, a young man sitting in the back seat told me he was returning from his annual pilgrimage to Disney World in Orlando, Florida. "You'd be surprised how educational it is," he said in response to my unresponsive grunt. "It's a real learning experience."

I asked him what he liked best about Disney World. "That's easy," he said. "When I was a kid I used to watch all those Saturday morning Disney cartoons on TV—you know, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Pluto—and they always showed the same beautiful castle at the start of the movie. You've seen it? It's a huge, pink castle with lots of spires and turrets and things like that. Well, you can imagine what a thrill it was for me when I walked into Disney World the first time, and there it was—the actual castle." Imaginary turrets in real amusement parks.

The talkative fellow was an exception. Harold Hill, that garrulous salesman of other people's imaginary gardens, would not have known what to

make of our habitually taciturn limousine manners. He was accustomed to the easy sociability of trains, of men's smokers where he could light up a big cigar and trade stories with his fellow passengers, most of them drummers like himself. If coal pushed the engine, talk pushed the minutes.

That lumbering train, whose chief cargo was unhurried conversation, was the fastest mode of transportation then available, the rails were as frictionless a travelway as engineers had yet devised. Not so our limousine, a device of fits and starts, an annoying anti-climax to our just-finished jet journeys. Each rider—who only an hour or so before was departing Cleveland, St. Louis, Atlanta—stiffens for the long, final passage through Bronx, Westchester and Fairfield counties. Each soul strains homeward. It is the reason most of us are silent most of the time.

Once a teenage girl and her mother, both bedecked in pastel pants-suits, boarded the limousine and sat among us tired businessmen hunched in our dark overcoats. As we crossed the Whitestone bridge, I heard the daughter whisper to the mother, "They aren't very gala, are they?"

*She overheard our heavy sighs,
we weren't exactly clarion*

The women bring a loquacious touch of civilization to our limousine—they are unfamiliar with the rules of the cave. The other day, an attractive elderly lady locked me in a lengthy discussion about men and their myriad weaknesses. She was a widow, she said, in search of a man worthy of succeeding Henry, her late husband. The search drew her to Ft. Lauderdale, where she bought a condominium and instantly began dating a dapper retired accountant who lived on the floor below.

"Good," I muttered.

"That's what I thought, too," she said. "But then I discovered that he was just like all the other men. He could only talk about one thing."

"What one thing was that?"

"Well, what one thing do you

think? He'd call me on the phone after midnight and say things like, 'Come on down, baby, and keep me warm' "

"And what did you say?"

"I'd say, 'What kind of a gal do you think I am, anyway?' Then I'd hang up "

She lacked a suitable condominium to marry in

But let me start the trip. Usually I am the first rider, decanting as I do more often than not out of "Eastern Shuttle," a dismal vat of a terminal, unencumbered by a single chair to rest on or clock to watch. From there the driver and I lurch along the busy parabola of air terminals, stopping to pick up passengers at TWA, United, American, until the 11 seats are filled. There is an unspoken etiquette that governs this loading process. If two of us occupy a seat, and a third wants to join us, I don't just open the door and slide over to make room for him, no, I get out of the limousine and let the latecomer sit in the middle, where he must straddle the hump in the floor. For a long time the women passengers didn't seem to know about this custom that rewarded earlybirds, they would invariably shift to the middle. But nowadays, I have noticed, the women have learned to play our endgame—surely a victory for the Movement.

Other small revolutions have occasionally managed to penetrate our rolling cell. In the late '60s many were marching while we were riding—and once in a great while some of us seemed to catch their cadences. We would enter into dialogues about peace and war, blacks and whites. Nobody raised his voice, nobody implied for a moment that there were fewer than two sides to a question.

But then, unexpectedly, someone's true feelings might surface. Once, as our limousine was crawling in heavy traffic toward a toll booth, a Cadillac full of blacks breezed past us, making illegal use of the thruway shoulder.

"There's one in every crowd," said a passenger philosophically.

"What can you expect?" asked another. "Did you see who was in the car?" Given another time and place, I might have answered, but rebuttal was off limousine limits. As it happened, though, I got my chance a few miles down the road when another Cadillac cut suddenly in front of us, forcing our driver to brake and swerve.

"Damn!" said the driver.

"Did you notice who was driving?" I asked.

"No. Who?"

"A white man."

*Suddenly I was Che Guevara
lunching with Rotarians*

THE CIVIL RIGHTS stream ducked underground years ago, and we limousine riders remain lily-white. Some of the drivers, though, are black now. One of them, a tall young man who wears his cap at a rakish angle, knows me by name and likes to talk. "How can a person improve his writing?" he asked me recently.

I gave him useless advice. "Practice," I said.

"It seems as if I can't get the hang of it," he said. "When I talk, it's like that water"—he pointed to the Hutchinson River paralleling the highway—"nice and smooth and easy. But when I write, it's all rocks and pot-holes."

*His thoughts were rugged,
his dreams, riparian*

This young man was both victim and beneficiary of the '60s. He had attended Iowa State University at the height of the struggle, and with his friends one day had found himself "sitting in," occupying the administration building and making a shambles of the president's office.

"What exactly were you protesting about?" I asked him.

"That's the funny thing. I can't remember. But when it was all over and things were back to normal, I could tell I was kind of a marked person. So I split."

He transferred to a college in Wis-

consin and finished up there with a degree in education. "It didn't take any work to speak of, I guess. I just got lucky. Then I thought I'd stuck around and get a master's. That was a mistake. I flunked out. Just couldn't write those papers."

"Have you ever thought of going back?"

"Yah. That's why I'm asking you—how does a person improve his writing?"

I am sitting up front with this driver. We have stopped at Greenwich, Riverside and Stamford, the rest of the seats are empty now, except for the one far back where an old man dozes intermittently. Between snores he joins our conversation. "It's a matter of education," he tells the driver. "When you were a kid, maybe you went to a no-good school."

"That's true," the young man answers. "It was what you call a deprived school."

"Grammar is very important in education," says the man in back. "I had a teacher in the third grade—Miss Caldwell was her name—who drummed grammar into us. That made all the difference."

"Yah," says the driver. "I can see what you're getting at."

We pull into a dimly-lit motel parking lot in Darien, the old man's stop. "Have a good night," he says.

"You too," I murmur, and instantly settle into a half-sleep, a twirling twilight of bad rhymes and social riddles.

*One got off in Darien—
a study octogenarian*

We are moving again, easing up the ramp and into the humdrum limbo of I-90. I open my eyes to see exit signs drift by in the homeward gloaming. What was it Sartre's "ordinary man" said in *No Exit*? "Now I know what hell is. Hell is other people." Then limbo must be other people's exits.

Goodnight, other people, goodnight twilight, goodnight young steerer, collector of bum steers. I have miles to go before I wake.