

relationships

HELLO DARKNESS, MY OLD FRIEND

This holiday season I became the confused old man behind the wheel that I used to dread encountering on the road

by John Stark | Wednesday, January 15, 2014

I was driving to Ikea to do some holiday shopping. It was 5 p.m. and already very dark out. A light mist was falling. The roads were slick. I've made this 15-mile trip from Boston to Stoughton a million times. I could do it in my sleep.

Only this time I got lost.

I didn't see the on-ramp to I-95 until it was right in front of me. It was too late to take it, unless I swerved without caution. My inner-GPS tried to recalculate my route. In my befuddled state, I ended up on the wrong on-ramp — the one going east, away from Ikea.

At rush hour, the interstate was packed. Granted, my night vision isn't what it used to be, but nothing to worry about when it comes to driving, or so I thought. This time, however, the glare of all the headlights and taillights made it difficult for me to see the road.

All at once, an exit sign appeared on my right. Determined not to miss the off-ramp, I narrowed my eyes and slowed my car to a crawl. Then I swerved. From behind me came the screeching of brakes, and a chilling chorus of car horns.

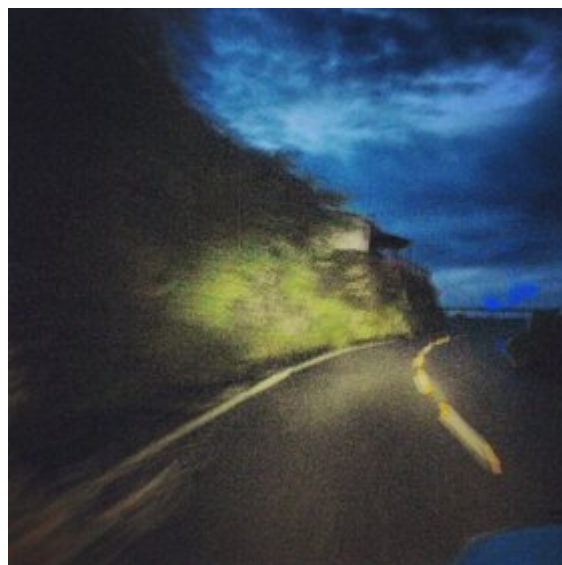
I made it onto the off-ramp without causing a pileup. But there was no relaxing. The road suddenly forked. I hadn't seen that coming! I was forced to make an instant decision or hit the divider pole. A semi behind me blinked its lights. The driver blasted his horn.

Unfortunately, I didn't choose the road that would have circled me back over the interstate and towards Ikea. I took the one that funneled me onto I-95 South to Rhode Island. There was no getting off it for another 10 miles.

I hadn't had such a hair-raising car trip since 1955, when my dad took me on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride at Disneyland.

Yep, it had finally happened: This holiday season I became the confused old man behind the wheel that I used to dread encountering on the road — the one I'd curse and yell at.

I remember my grandfather saying he loved driving on freeways because, "People are so friendly. They're always waving at me."



Darkness on the edge of town.

Now, day driving hasn't gotten to that point. In fact, I can see perfectly fine in the daytime. It's just when the sun goes down that perspectives change and obstacles blur.

I'm hardly alone in my condition, as it turns out. According to an article in Harvard Health Publications, poor night vision is one of the most common problems of the aging eye, even though it doesn't get much attention. "Rare is the person who, starting around age 40, doesn't dread driving at night," says [the report](http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/Harvard_Womens_Health_Watch/2007/June/Blinded-by-the-nigh) (http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/Harvard_Womens_Health_Watch/2007/June/Blinded-by-the-nigh).

Sorry, health-minded boomers. Eating carrots, the study says, isn't going to help. Poor night vision is a fact of getting older, so suck it up. The article gives a detailed explanation of how an aging eye — the pupil, lens and retina — lets in less light, which causes night blindness. As we age, the article says, our pupils shrink from about five millimeters in our youth to three millimeters in old age.

An ophthalmologist friend of mine told me that as eyes get older they lose moisture. That dryness, he said, makes glare worse, especially when roads are wet.

What's the solution?

"Researchers have found that many older drivers voluntarily give up night driving," says the Harvard Health story. "That's often a wise decision."

Wise, perhaps, but not so practical, especially in the winter when days are short. What's a night-blinded boomer to do?

After my last night outing, I've decided to avoid busy highways at night. To that end, I'm scheduling social engagements, like going to the movies or shopping at the mall, for sunny, weekend afternoons. This goes for having friends over, too. A lot of mine have already switched from giving dinners parties to hosting brunches.

I didn't know why at first, but I do now.

It's not that we can't stay up late. We may not want to admit it, but it's getting harder to find our way home in the dark.

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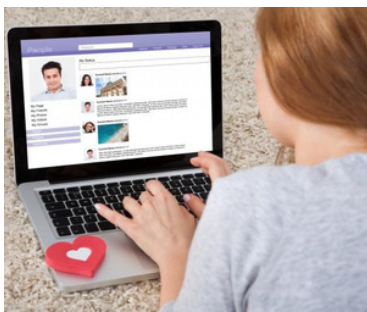
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