

The Worst Job in the World (Paul Pierce)

Headed for a padded cell in a Ho, Ho, Ho academy, neurotic Maria Wyeth, Joan Didion's Corvette Stingray heroin in Joanie's 1970 Los Angeles book, Play It As It Lays, slams her 'Ray across four lanes of freeway traffic just south of the Hollywood and Harbor interchange without hitting anything, not even Panther.

Morning, early morning on the devouring freeways of Los Angeles: yeeeech. Traffic is stacked up four lanes wide and barely moving. The monotony of this weighs heavy in the air. Paul ("Panther") Pierce chews gum; fidgets in his seat. Low on the horizon the round red sun glares through the smog, and thousands of drivers adjust their sunglasses and curse. Horns blare. Cars inch along at 15 mph.

There is no accident up ahead; the freeway is merely so overloaded with cars it is strangling. Ahead of Panther the brake lights flash on and off as the flow moves, then stops, then moves, always grudgingly. Behind him the jam overflows beyond the skyline. It must be ten miles long, and growing.

Panther has a passenger in the car with him this morning and the passenger is bored and impatient. He would like to see some action: a juicy 50-car crack-up would be fine. *Anything* would be better than this jam. Panther tells the passenger to relax. The passenger, a captive in the rolling radio station Panther calls a car, has no choice.

Another typical morning on the freeways. Another typical day in the life of Panther Pierce, chronologist of the Los Angeles freeways. It is Panther's job to live on the freeways.

Some job. It combines stultifying boredom with constant danger. Some combination.

Wading knee-deep through four, five, or six lanes of rush hour traffic every morning, Panther may be unable to exceed 15 mph for hours. Behind him a 10-ton dump truck carrying a load of gravel can lose its brakes and flatten everything in its path. A car traveling inbound can rip through the divider fence and clobber the outbound traffic. "Anything is possible," Panther says. Even small airplanes have been known to crash-land on the Los Angeles freeways.

The "worst" job in the world? Panther Pierce's may be that, and more.

He climbs out of a warm bed at four in the morning, Monday through Friday, throws down a cup of coffee, kisses his wife goodbye, starts the car and drives off. In the pre-dawn gloom he is like a soldier going to the front lines. What awaits him this particular morning? Fog on the freeways? Rain? A fire on the Santa Ana freeway? Or possibly to help pull a dead and mangled body out of an overturned car?

The Hollywood freeway will be moribund; too many cars to digest. It is the same each morning. But the Long Beach, San Gabriel River and Santa Ana freeways always are alive and lethal. Truck country. These three serve industrial areas, and bellowing dump trucks filled with sand and gravel and flatbed rigs loaded down with pipe and pulling trailers boom along at high speed, rumbling menacingly in and out of the fast lanes. The dinosaurs top 60 mph while belching black diesel smoke twenty feet into the sky.

Cars still outnumber trucks here by 100 to one. Unlike the twisty Pasadena freeway, the Long Beach, San Gabriel and Santa Ana freeways are for the most part long, straight runways and motorists respond by stabbing the pedals. The speed limit is 65 mph. A joke. "Seventy miles an hour in the fast lane of the San Gabriel River freeway," observes Panther, "will cause you to get run over from behind."

A sensible rule of freeway driving would be to leave one car length between yourself and the car ahead of you for every 10 mph. At 70 mph this would theoretically mean a margin of nearly 140 feet. Another joke. Panther watches a Mustang go past at 70 mph with a Volkswagen glued to its back bumper in what is known as "tailgating."

If it is raining and the freeways are slippery, Panther mutters to himself and holds the steering wheel in a death grip. All around him cars will be going out of control. Worn tires can't grip slick pavement. Glazed brake linings do not do their job. Skids result, with cars spinning into each other.

In the last decade, new freeway problems: small, agile compact cars, the drivers of whom take advantage of the agility by squeezing their way through tiny openings which close in a hurry. Drivers of bigger cars do not see them in time. Panther Pierce, observing all this, wishes he had a dime for every overturned compact he has seen in the last ten year.

All this means that (surprise!) there are accidents on the Los Angeles freeways. Lots of accidents. Often highly spectacular accidents. What begins as a minor fender-bender rear-end collision between two cars becomes an extravaganza as more and more cars smack into the wreckage from behind. The minor crash becomes a disaster; traffic soon pushes backwards for miles. And because freeway drivers tend to panic in such situations there invariably are other, smaller, collisions back down the line. The morning air rings with the sounds of destruction. If one of the cars splits a gas tank, the fire lights up the freeway. There is nothing like a good freeway fire to add to the confusion.

A barrier separates inbound and outbound traffic. In some places the barrier is only a slim steel fence. Arguments between the fence and cars are frequent. The fence, says Panther, always loses. No one keeps score, but it is believed that a laundry truck driver still holds the record for the most-feet-of-fence-torn-out: one foggy morning on the Ventura freeway he dozed at the wheel, hooked the fence with his rear bumper and uprooted 300 feet of it before he woke up.

Millions of individuals use the freeways every morning. Impatient, aggressive, stubborn, completely unpredictable individuals. Long ago Panther gave up attempting to analyze their actions behind the wheel.

Like the 70-year-old dowager who had the throttle of her Cadillac jam wide-open in the fast lane of the San Diego freeway one morning. Instead of switching off the ignition key and applying the brakes she threw open the door and leaped out of the speeding car onto the freeway. She lived. The Ferrari driver who ran amok on the Hollywood freeway at two o'clock in the morning, leading police on a 140 mph chase, was jailed. An ill-fated bank robber tried making his getaway by pulling onto a freeway at rush hour when cars were nosing along at 12-15 mph. As police pulled him from his vapor-locked car, he was laughing hysterically.

These are some of the people who inhabit Panther Pierce's world.

In the early morning he sees them at their groggy, bleary-eyed worst. Women barrel past at terrific speeds, steering with one hand and pulling curlers out of their hair with the

other. Men drive by drinking coffee, or shaving with portable electric razors. Executives in sleek black Lincoln Continentals change lanes while talking on the car phone, or into a Dictaphone.

Who are all these people, and where are they going? In the early morning none of them look as if they are fully awake. The one thing they have in common is that they all drive. Los Angeles is not New York. There is no rapid transit system here. To commute to work everyone is compelled to buy a car, and to use the freeways.

The stars of Panther's world are the cars. He sees station wagons and limousines, junkers and sportscars, and more and more pickup trucks wearing campers on the back. Not too many high-performance cars; perhaps their owners recoil at the idea of 400 horsepower lugging along at 15 mph.

By watching all the cars, by being a part of the slow, boring, frequently dangerous, painfully inevitable freeway process every morning he believes he can hear, and feel, the heartbeat of Los Angeles.

Therefore he drives between 150 and 300 miles a day, about 50,000 to 60,000 a year. In all he has driven half-a-million abrasive freeway miles in the last decade.

His awful job?

He is a professional freeway driver/reporter employed by Los Angeles radio station KMPC. Five days a week he wedges himself behind the wheel of a white Chevrolet wagon with "KMPC" stenciled in red on both sides, the front, tail, and top. Also on the roof are sending and receiving antennas. Crammed inside the wagon is radio sending equipment worth \$6,000. There is so much radio gear there is little room left inside for Panther.

As he patrols the freeways, he broadcasts information on the worst traffic jams, alerting motorists to what sweaty, nauseating delays await them and if possible how to avoid them. The nature of his job causes him to confront the worst jams head-on. Trouble on the freeways pulls him like a magnet.

It is grueling, abominably horrible work – and Panther loves it.

Say a sleepy motorist is inching to work along the dreaded Hollywood freeway, a scowl on his face. He hates all his neighbors in adjoining cars, and all freeways in general. Out of his radio comes Panther's voice saying, cheerfully: "The early morning fog has cleared, and the folks on the Hollywood freeway can see each other and have a good view. At the Vermont off-ramp two motorists have such a good view of each other that one has just zapped the other. Avoid this area if possible. The wreck has backed up traffic so far it looks like something you need a plumber for."

The scowling motorist eases up, he laughs. An unpleasant, uncomfortable, irritating, unavoidable situation has been softened with humor.

Which is how Panther Pierce has retained his sanity after having suffered all those mornings on the freeways. He treats the freeways with wary humor. He can usually seek out the humorous, the absurd, in any situation. And on the freeways there is always a good deal of absurdity mixed in with all the trauma.

In fact Panther spent two years writing a book, *Take An Alternate Route*, which deals with his more bizarre freeway experiences. There are hundreds of them. He recounts the time, for example, that the gate of a cattle truck broke open, depositing wild steers in all the freeway lanes. The resultant round-up of the beasts tied up traffic in both directions for three hours. Even more ridiculous was the morning that a flatbed truck – piled high with wrecked auto

bodies – got wedged beneath an overpass on the Harbor freeway. All four tires blew out and a torch had to be brought in to cut the vehicle loose. A large jack also was used for prying – until the eager beaver wielding the torch accidentally sliced the jack in half and the operation bogged down. So did traffic.

Anything goes in liberty-loving L.A., including keeping your own zoo if you feel like it. One such animal nut had his pet panther escape and get loose on the Ventura freeway; helping round up the beast resulted in Pierce's nickname.

Between listening to Panther Pierce mornings on the radio and reading his book, one almost comes to believe that the freeways of Los Angeles are indeed delightful, motorized playgrounds, lots of fun. Then you drive on one. Ugh. Even Panther says, "I love them (the freeways) and like any lover, I am somewhat blind to their defects."

This was the reason Panther had a passenger riding with him this particular morning. The passenger was a freeway-hater from way back. He hoped that Panther Pierce, down deep, might be one, too.

The passenger had had trouble squeezing into Panther's car. The wagon was crammed full of broadcasting gear. On a rack extending from the dashboard are switches, tuners and a broadcasting mike for him to hail the station with. Stashed behind the back seat is all the sending gear. It is bafflingly complex (Panther tells the passenger he does not understand how it all works, either) and so heavy it makes the car (equipped with heavy-duty shocks, overload springs, big tires) tail-heavy. A photographer who rode in the back seat immediately became carsick. There is an oversized radiator, two batteries and twin alternators to generate enough juice for all the radio apparatus.

It is uncomfortable in the overloaded wagon; also noisy. Panther monitors police calls, fire department calls, and uses two commercial bands leased to the studio for two-way communication. He eavesdrops not only on reports of freeway disasters, but also on shootings, robberies, felony hit-and-runs. Some mornings it seems as if the whole city has gone mad. And playing in the background is always the freewheeling, radio program of a madcap KMPC disc jockey named Dick Whittinghill.

The din is astonishing. It continues, defiantly, all morning.

Persons who boast of having total-recall memories should ride with Panther some mornings. He seldom takes notes. Somehow he is able to retain all the traffic reports the police radio blurts out. Every 15 minutes Whittinghill the disc jockey calls on him to give freeway reports over the air. Panther, still driving, puts on phones to blot out some of the noise, picks up the microphone and spontaneously says something like:

"Traffic is moving normally. The only problems on the freeways have been reported by the Highway Patrol; there are three stalled cars, each if them causing a little lump southbound San Diego freeway in the center divider south of Centinella; northbound Harbor freeway at 93rd; and northbound San Diego freeway between El Segundo and Imperial. I'm just heading north on the San Diego freeway and at the moment traffic seems to be moving very well. The world is divided into half sunshine and half overcast..."

The passenger was thoroughly impressed. This had been a totally impromptu performance; yet Panther had it all organized and it came out concisely, professionally. As he talked he held the mike with one hand and steered with the other, his fingers fidgeting. He

chewed gum and had his headache pills in his breast pocket where he could get at them. Even Panther Pierce is not immune from freeway migraine.

And he is not just a driver, he is a reporter of the highest caliber.

The report over, another one not due for 15 minutes, he relaxed. "Learning to use this radio gear," he said, "is like learning to play the organ. But it's easier now. In the old days the car had a stick shift, not an automatic. You had to use three hands instead of just two."

He is a thickset, fifty-ish man, a professional reporter for 30 years. He does not look like a haunted man. What, after all this time, has brought him down this terrible road, a captive on the freeways?

In his book, he explains: "I enjoy my time on the freeways as much as I've ever enjoyed any job. The views of the city are the best to be had. The mornings are usually spectacular when I start out at dawn, and the two million, two hundred thousand carloads of commuters who daily use the Greater Los Angeles area freeways put on one of the world's greatest shows..."

It is unrequited love. The freeways, the passenger quickly discovers, do not love Panther. Other drivers do not pay him and his wildly pained wagon much attention. Only a few honk in recognition as they pass. More typical was the Camaro that swerved in front of him, barely missing the front fender. Conditioned to driving the freeway as he was, the passenger lost his temper and uttered a rude remark. Panther stayed calm. "Drivers will fight you," he said quietly. "You always have to plan ahead."

Panther has never had a freeway accident. He is an expert driver. Once he was forced up the side of a grass-covered embankment to give way to an on-rushing truck. And he had to spin the wagon into the center divider some years ago. Other than these, no exceptionally bad freeway experiences. Just the everyday, run-of-the-mill bad freeway experiences.

As for the freeway-hating passenger, he would rather be a Pennsylvania coal miner or pull a rickshaw around Hong Kong than do what Panther Pierce does. (1970)

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