ANNALS OF TRANSPORTATION

# NO-PARKING ZONE: THE PERILS OF FINDING A SPOT IN N.Y.C.

*Why do city drivers waste two hundred million hours a year circling the block?*

**By Zach Helfand**

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If you arranged all of New York's curbside parking spaces single file, the line would reach Australia. Yet nobody can find a spot. Illustration by Pierre-Nicolas Riou

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One of the first jobs that George Bichikashvili had in America was securing some street-parking spaces in the Bronx for Con Edison, at ten dollars an hour. Bichikashvili, who is from Tbilisi, Georgia, didn't understand why anyone would pay for this. "You just take up four spots of parking and sit there until they tell you to leave," he said. But a job was a job. On the morning of November 18, 2022, Bichikashvili pulled a blue Chrysler minivan onto St. Theresa Avenue, in Pelham Bay. As directed, he parked atop a Con Ed manhole, set out some orange cones, and settled in. He wore a safety helmet and a neon work vest. The morning was beautiful. He watched the sunrise in the rearview mirror. Winter was creeping in. His breath fogged up the glass.

Bichikashvili was twenty-nine, an outgoing guy with a bright optimism. He'd moved to New York because he was determined to live an interesting life. In Tbilisi, he'd danced in the Sukhishvili National Ballet, Georgia's most prestigious troupe. He loved Americans, in part because of Kobe Bryant. He loved New York because of the TV show "Suits." He told himself that in this country he could do anything.

In the minivan, he passed the day making video calls to Tbilisi. He used the bathroom in a bodega. He is an eager conversationalist, but sitting in the car sapped his desire to do anything, so he mostly scrolled his phone. A supervisor had told him that Con Ed needed him to block off several parking spaces and the manhole so that some repairs could be made. No one told him when the work crew might come. Night fell and he dozed off. He woke up every four hours to upload a photo in an app, as he'd been instructed, confirming his location, and to turn on the heat for a bit. There was a frost. By sunrise, he was wearing leggings, two pairs of pants, two shirts, a hat, and two jackets, which was every item of warm clothing he had with him.

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Covers by Christoph Niemann

In the morning, he walked around the corner to a Planet Fitness to shower and brush his teeth. He got coffee and cigarettes at the bodega. He called Tbilisi. He sat and scrolled. He put on all his clothes before going to sleep. He woke up every four hours. The next day passed in the same way, as did the one after that. A malaise set in. He lost track of the days. He spent his first Thanksgiving in the parking spot. He didn't notice. Christmas decorations went up.

New York's problem is that it doesn't have enough parking and it has too much parking. If you arranged all the curbside spots single file, the line would reach Australia. Yet nobody can find a spot. At any time, about half the cars driving in Park Slope are just circling, waiting for someone to leave. It's not unheard of for parkers to stray so far from home that they come back on a bus or in a cab. Drivers, naturally, tend to advocate for more parking. This runs into problems of geometry. A city with ample parking is, eventually, no longer a city. To

offer as many spaces per capita as Los Angeles County, you'd need a garage the size of Manhattan, ten stories high.

Unlike the bodega bag or admission to the Metropolitan Museum, parking, with enough wiles and time, can still be had for free. There are some three million street spots. Ninety-seven per cent cost nothing, the domain of one of New York's weirdest institutions: alternate-side parking. The real estate alone—the same as thirteen Central Parks—is worth hundreds of billions of dollars. Every day, it's the world's biggest land rush. This produces strange behaviors.



The director Noah Baumbach, who grew up in Park Slope, used parking as a metaphor for entitlement, grievance, and impotence in his films "The Squid and the Whale" and "The Meyerowitz Stories"; the experience of looking for a spot makes you think that you're the only person who hasn't got one. In "Bananas," Woody Allen has a dream in which he is nailed to a cross and carried by hooded figures into a parking spot, where the cortege gets into a brawl with another group of hooded figures carrying another crucified man, who also want the space. Even when you've got the spot, you're stuck.

The rhythms of the curb are governed by byzantine alternate-side rules. Most blocks have signs indicating that, for a ninety-minute period on different days of the week, the cars on one side of the street must clear out to allow the street sweeper to go by. During that window, cars are supposed to vacate their blocks and park elsewhere. In practice, most people end up sitting in their cars and waiting until the sweeper appears, at which point they quickly double-park on the opposite side so they can reclaim their spot in a mad dash once the street has been

cleaned. In New York, more people take part in this ritual than attend church. A few hundred thousand city dwellers pay to keep their cars in garages, but the monthly cost in Manhattan usually starts at four hundred and fifty dollars. To be a street parker, you need scrappiness and a certain finesse. Mother Teresa, who ran an AIDS hospice in the West Village in the nineteen-eighties, once dropped in at Gracie Mansion unannounced to persuade Ed Koch to give her two reserved spaces. Drivers build lives around parking: the work shifts altered to align with the alternate-side-rotation hours, the keys always in the pocket, the Pavlovian alertness at the chirp of an unlocking car. A friend who no longer parks in the city told me that when he encounters a vacant spot he experiences a kind of phantom-limb pain. Parking can weasel its way into any conversation. When Rudy Giuliani spoke after the September 11th attacks, he included the announcement "Alternate-side street parking is suspended."

Once parkers move in, they're difficult to dislodge. During the pandemic, the city reappropriated eighty-five hundred spots for outdoor dining sheds. (Drivers had only recently adjusted to the loss of the thousands of spots given over to Citi Bike kiosks.) Initially, this caused a reëxamination: people noticed that parking was the thing preventing new bus lanes, bike lanes, rat-proof trash bins, flood-mitigation gardens, drop-off zones, and pedestrian plazas. Henry Grabar, whose 2023 book, "Paved Paradise," argued that an overabundance of street parking has decimated cities and driven up rents, told me, "When I started writing the book, I said, 'Wouldn't it be great if people could realize how much value is locked up in the curb?' And then it actually happened." The next thing that happened was the pandemic's car boom, which made parking even scarcer. Sam Schwartz, a former N.Y.C. traffic commissioner, recommended eliminating three parking spaces near a hospital in Washington Heights, because ambulances were getting stuck in jams. "You would've thought I was seizing the firstborn of people in that community,"

he told me. The spots remained. Last year, the outdoor dining sheds came down, and the parkers pulled back in.

The unusual vehemence of city parkers could have something to do with the fact that circling for a spot produces a hormonal response similar to being at war. Every year in New York, people are bludgeoned, shot, or killed over parking spaces. Aggression arises from desperation, and from violations of unwritten codes. In 2018, a pedestrian was holding a spot for a family member when another driver swooped in. The police arrived after the losing parker apparently punched the victor in the face. The alleged puncher was Alec Baldwin. (Baldwin claims it was a light push.) This incident proved that you can have the resources of a garage guy and the disposition of a street guy. "I've got every fucking numb-nuts asshole in the world writing to me online, going, 'You don't have a garage?' " he said afterward. "I have a parking garage down the block, actually."

On St. Theresa Avenue, George Bichikashvili learned that, in order to maintain friendly relations, he had to share his spots. He let neighbors move his cones and park, provided they left their phone numbers and moved when called. One family asked Bichikashvili to make his spaces available during a birthday party. He agreed. They invited him to join, but he wasn't in a party mood.

One day, a Con Ed truck finally showed up. Bichikashvili moved the minivan, and the workers opened the manhole. He asked them, "Today we're closed? The job is finished?" The crew said he had to stay.

Around day twenty, he woke up with a toothache. It became difficult to sleep. A darkness set in. "I had bad feelings for life," he said.

It can take years to learn the rules and cadences of a neighborhood. Parking customs function like accents. It's easy to identify the interlopers. People in the Rockaways are friendly to neighbors but shun outsiders. In Chelsea, drivers used to double-park on the opposite side and await the sweeper, but now they don't

move until the sweeper honks at them. This development, common around the city, may demonstrate pandemic-related behavioral shifts, or, perhaps, the breakdown of our social fabric. Levels of courtesy, aggression, and entitlement vary. There are blocks of Brooklyn Heights where people sit in their cars but never move at all, even when the sweeper arrives. All New Yorkers think that their neighborhood is the worst, though some are less bad. Over a three-year stretch, three hundred thousand cars were towed or booted citywide for parking illegally, but zero in Staten Island.

In Ridgewood, Queens, I met an Eastern European Uber driver who said he often slept in his car in order to pounce on early spots. "Parking here, it's the ass," he told me. On a block in South Ozone Park, one man had nineteen cars that he moved back and forth. There are double-parkers who stay in the car, double-parkers who leave, and double-parkers who put a note on the dash displaying their phone number, in case someone needs them to move. In Mott Haven, in the South Bronx, cars double-park long-term. "People honk for hours and nobody comes," a woman named Liz told me from her Honda Pilot.

In Greenwich Village, near Fifth Avenue, cars move for the sweeper in an elegant, coördinated undulation. "It's like the wave at Citi Field," John Bianchi, an editor at a P.R. agency and a musician who has been parking in the area for twenty-five years, told me. Re-parking is like the closing of a zipper. These are complicated crowd dynamics. "You have to have a chess mentality," Bianchi said. "You need to think two or three moves ahead. Some people have a checkers mentality, and it screws everything up completely." Bianchi compared the maneuver to an oral tradition, passed down through generations. The Homer of Fifth Avenue was a local building super he'd nicknamed the Mayor of Parking, because of how he supervised the alternate-side dance and generally insured orderly conduct, such as maintaining proper spacing between cars. Eighteen inches is considered both respectful and efficient. It's just enough for the garbage men to get through.


*"They say it's the hot-dog water that makes all the difference."*

Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

There are universal rules. Parking sharks—poachers who trail the sweeper in order to slip into vacated spaces—are handled through mob justice. Reversing into a spot is regarded as proper. One parker told me, "Head first is barbaric." Bianchi once found himself in a Seinfeldian standoff in front of his apartment—he backing in, his rival pulling in. "I said, 'I can stay here all night,' " he recalled. She said, 'I can stay here all night.' So I left the car, turned it off, and went upstairs, and I sat by the window reading a book until she gave up."

Asking about someone's preferred parking spot is like asking to see their tax return. People clam up. There are a couple of blocks with a thirty-minute alternate-side window, rather than the usual ninety: the parker's arbitrage. Some people know alternate-side blocks where the sweeper never comes, which means, as Bianchi put it, "We have actually formally created a law in which New Yorkers have to be in a certain place at a certain time for no fucking reason at all." Enterprising parkers have found work-arounds. A guy named Carmine who used to hang out at a social club in Little Italy moved cars as a side gig. One woman paid him a hundred bucks a month. "The biggest tension was he would always find a spot by his house, which was, like, two and a half blocks away from mine," she told me.

Mostly, people sit in their cars and find ways to fill the time—the nappers, Bible studiers, book readers. Mary Norris, an author and a former copy editor at *The New Yorker*, wrote a blog called *The Alternate Side Parking Reader*. Jim Downey, a longtime head writer for "Saturday Night Live," thought of bits. His car jokes include O. J. Simpson gags for Norm Macdonald's "Weekend Update" and lines for Stefon, the Bill Hader character. In a parking space, the juices flow. "You're in this little cocoon," Downey told me. "People aren't bugging you." These days, people do therapy sessions, or take work calls or video meetings. Where else, in a city of eight million, do we get such solitude? Bianchi likes to make music. "The ukulele is easy because it fits behind the wheel," he said.

Parking problems began, more or less, with the first vehicles. In 705 B.C., the Assyrian king Sennacherib prohibited chariot parking on royal roads. Violators could be beheaded. One of New York's first parking panics came in the nineteen-twenties. Young couples, having discovered that cars were a nice, private place for making out, began parking wherever passion called. At night, fifty or sixty automobiles would clog Kings Highway, in Brooklyn. Another popular spot was Lookout Hill, in Prospect Park. The police staged periodic raids. After one,

the Brooklyn *Eagle* wrote, "And so the petters, like the Gypsies, must move on again, a wandering tribe with every hand against them." But to where? City designers at the time were lining streets with little parks. These became filled up with cars. We replaced parks with parking.

In the first decades of the automobile age, New York banned parking for longer than a few hours. The prohibition was irregularly followed. The N.Y.P.D. would just drive the illegally parked cars to the police station. (A later proposal suggested letting the air out of violators' tires.)

The other day, I visited parking court. Manhattan's Parking Violations Bureau is housed in an office building downtown. The vast majority of defendants argue their cases online. (Generally, the best defense is not to argue circumstances or evidence but to find an error on the ticket.) A handful show up in person. The bureau looks like a D.M.V., with a counter for checking in. The head judge, Marian Morris, talked affably with me. She asked what my neighborhood does when the sweeper comes. I told her that everyone double-parks. She winced.

There are parking defense attorneys, but not many; the penalty for ignoring alternate-side rules and blocking the sweeper is just sixty-five dollars, which is what a few hours in a midtown garage goes for. (The city tows, too, but usually only cars with unpaid fines.) Larry Berezin got into parking after he retired as a personal-injury lawyer. "People I beat parking tickets for were more grateful than people I beat criminal charges for," he told me. In 2018, the city created a new position, the parking-summons advocate, whose office is in the Parking Violations Bureau. The current advocate is Anthony Tse, a friendly man who grew up in Bensonhurst, where his father scrapped for alternate-side parking. Now Tse lives in downtown Brooklyn and pays for a garage. His office instructs drivers on how to prepare evidence for their hearings (it helps if photos and videos are time-stamped and show a street sign), and, in obviously losing cases, educates people on the rules. He also assists a lot of people who were parked in a legal spot, only to be

towed—by utility workers or film crews—to an illegal spot, where they were then ticketed.

As mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia once sat as a parking magistrate for a day. He stayed for five hours, heard a hundred and ninety-seven cases, and left in a police car that had been stationed next to a "No Parking" sign. Under Giuliani, the Parking Violations Bureau was transferred to the Department of Finance. Dennis Boshnack, a former parking judge who now contests parking tickets for clients, told me that this creates an unavoidable conflict of interest. "The Department of Finance, their mission is to collect money for the city," he said. Judges can see a case every couple of minutes.

Parking court was empty when I arrived. A few defendants trickled in. A FedEx driver showed up with ten tickets. A security guard recognized him. "You're a regular!" she said. He took off his hat when his hearing began. One woman came in with two tickets for using a fraudulent Department of Transportation parking permit. (The permit was legitimate, it turned out.)

Each hearing room is just a small office. A judge sits at a desk with a computer. The respondent sits in a chair. I watched one case involving a guy who lived on West Forty-eighth Street. He had six tickets on his Porsche. The first charge was a street-sweeping violation. The judge swore him in.

"How do you plead?" she asked.

"Not guilty." He told the judge, "I was actually in the car fixing my daughter's car seat." Tse told me people often don't realize that sitting in the car or double-parking for the sweeper isn't a legal defense.

Over time, though, parking practices tend to solidify into law. New York ended its overnight-parking ban in 1954. The reason cited by the mayor was that no one

was following the law, anyway. The reversal received modest press coverage. An argument could be made that it ranks among the most consequential decisions the city has ever made. It was also one of the most casual.

George Bichikashvili didn't know it, but he was part of an entire industry of professional parkers. One consequence of New York legalizing free long-term parking is that much of the city's critical infrastructure is now covered by parked cars. When Con Ed needs to access electric cables or steam lines, it sends someone like Bichikashvili, called a parking spotter, to reserve space around the manhole. Spotters work for cable companies, gas utilities, and movie shoots, but Con Ed's are everywhere. Each year, the company spends millions of dollars on spotting. This is how New York has decided to keep the lights on. Owing to the unpredictability of the work, it's not unusual for spotters to spend days, weeks, or more living in a parking space.

For Con Ed, spotters are an easy solution to a persistent problem. "We're as frustrated as anyone is about the difficulty of parking in New York," Jamie McShane, a Con Ed spokesperson, told me. The company farms out the jobs to a big contractor called CE Solutions. CE Solutions passes the work on to an array of subcontractors. The ideal subcontractor is just a guy who knows guys. One subcontractor was a reputed soldier for the Genovese crime family; another was a reggae musician in Harlem. Subcontractors typically get twenty-one to twenty-nine dollars per hour of spotting, and pay spotters as little as eight. On occasion, subcontractors get sued for failing to comply with New York's overtime and minimum-wage laws. (Today, the minimum wage is sixteen dollars and fifty cents an hour.) Generally, courts have found that the layers of outsourcing insulate Con Ed and CE Solutions from liability. One subcontractor, CE 217, accused CE Solutions, in a lawsuit, of using subcontractors in "an elaborate shell game" to skirt labor laws. (A lawyer representing CE Solutions said, "The allegation is completely false.")

Bichikashvili found the spotting job through a Georgian friend he called Sam. He was renting a room from Sam in Gravesend, Brooklyn. Later, Bichikashvili worked for another subcontractor, called A&M Transport. One former A&M employee has sued the company, alleging that his supervisor, Madina Shukurova, withheld his pay when his car broke down and he had to leave his spot, telling him that she would "make sure he can never get work." In another lawsuit, workers alleged that supervisors controlled their bathroom breaks. When their break requests weren't granted, they sometimes had to use a bucket. (Shukurova said in legal filings that she doesn't have enough information to confirm or deny this.) The year that Bichikashvili was parked on St. Theresa Avenue, A&M made eight and a half million dollars.

New York drivers waste two hundred million hours each year circling for parking. This is enough man-hours to build four Nimitz-class U.S. Navy aircraft carriers. Twenty minutes to find a spot is routine. An hour isn't crazy. Drivers have always complained that parking has never been worse. (In the nineteen-twenties, the city considered building a thirty-thousand-space lot beneath Central Park.) Car ownership keeps going up. Risks have gone down. In 1990, one car was stolen off the street for every fifty residents. Last year, it was one in six hundred.

Parking is the city's most visible form of corruption. Roy Cohn got his start fixing his teachers' parking tickets. A kickback scandal at the Parking Violations Bureau almost took down the Koch administration. Eric Adams has used parking as a political favor. As the Brooklyn borough president, he rewarded staffers with spots in the middle of the pedestrian plaza outside Borough Hall. (Adams compared one anonymous critic of his parking regime to a Klansman.) Back when diplomats at the U.N. were immune from paying parking tickets, they often just parked in front of a driveway. The more corrupt a diplomat's home nation, the more brazen the parker. Kuwaitis were the worst offenders. The Canadian delegation went

without a violation for eight years. In the eighties, the city began towing diplomats' cars, and Sam Schwartz, who was then the traffic commissioner, was hauled before the U.N. "I addressed what I heard was the best-attended session of the General Assembly ever," he told me. He recalled that the issue united the Arabs and the Israelis.

Every year, the city issues around a hundred thousand parking permits, called placards, to groups like the police and fire departments, and to people with disabilities. In 2017, Bill de Blasio gave placards to fifty thousand teachers and school employees during his reëlection campaign. Legally, placards confer limited privileges (you can park in some restricted zones; meters are free), but in practice they can function as blanket immunity. On the black market, placards go for as much as twenty-six hundred dollars. People also counterfeit their own. On cars parked in bus lanes or beside fire hydrants, you can find placards purporting to be from FEMA or the Red Cross, or just pieces of paper listing professions: "WORKING PRESS," "DOCTOR OF PODIATRIC MEDICINE," "NEW YORK STATE FUNERAL DIRECTORS OFFICIAL BUSINESS." These work surprisingly well. For years, Jann Wenner, the editor and publisher of *Rolling Stone*, wangled special press plates for his car which allowed him to park where most others couldn't.

The worst placard abusers are the police, who park on sidewalks, in front of hydrants, and in traffic lanes, bus lanes, and bike lanes. In the past, ticketing agents have been arrested for writing tickets to police officers. In 2011, eleven N.Y.P.D. officers were charged with fixing more than a million dollars' worth of parking tickets. Patrick Lynch, the head of the police union at the time, said that the practice had been "accepted at all ranks for decades." On the Upper West Side, officers of the Twentieth Precinct double-park their personal cars in the middle of Columbus Avenue. Cops get free subway and bus rides, but the precinct's traffic sergeant argued that the parkers had no choice. "I can't tell all the officers they need to take mass transit," he said.

I recently met up with Gersh Kuntzman, the editor of the transportation website *Streetsblog*. Kuntzman hunts for traffic cheats—placard scofflaws, license-plate defacers. (People alter their plates to escape detection on tow cameras.) We wandered Brooklyn Heights to check out some parked cars. Kuntzman rode a bike that had a big parking placard on it. "I'm a chaplain!" he said. As part of an investigation, he had paid seven hundred and fifty dollars to something called the New York State Chaplain Group, which gave him a scam placard and a badge.

The first block we looked at was anarchy—placard cheats, meter skippers. On the dashboard of one car was a neon M.T.A. work vest. "He's an M.T.A. employee?" Kuntzman said. "Why's he driving to work? Because he's an asshole." He noticed that it had out-of-state plates. "Oh, he's a Jersey asshole."

We talked about parking over eggs at a nearby diner. "The question is not 'Why is it too hard to park?' " he said. "It's 'Why is it so easy to own a car in the city with the most congestion in the world?' "

Kuntzman thinks that street parking should be mostly banned, and, when available, very expensive. Charging for parking was essentially the life's work of Donald Shoup, a professor at U.C.L.A. and the country's foremost parking scholar. Shoup died in February. His obituary in the *Wall Street Journal* said, "The magnitude of his influence has been likened to that of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs." (Moses happened to oppose street parking on national-security grounds: if the Soviets bombed, the congestion would be deadly.) The *Journal* continued, "He's also been compared—in seriousness, by serious people—to Pythagoras, Cezzane and Einstein." Shoup calculated that the country dedicates more space to parking each car than to housing each human. His insight was that free parking is not actually free. We spend as much on off-street parking—via things like taxes, higher rents, and subsidies—as we spend on Medicare. Shoup's proposed solution was to charge enough that there's always an open space or two on every block. The

payments could be made in a number of ways: dynamically priced meters, residential parking permits. In Europe, cars come equipped with sensors that detect when you're in a parking space and allow you to pay automatically, sort of like a parking E-ZPass. In Manhattan, of course, the market price might be obscenely high—probably not much less than a monthly garage. "He sounds like an enlightened individual," Mary Norris told me, of Shoup. "But he was my archenemy." If priced right, on the other hand, Shoup's proposal could eliminate the time wasted on spot hunting.

I'm sometimes asked what I do in my spare time. I park. For years, I lived in Cobble Hill, where the alternate-side custom is to double-park but remain in the car, which I think of as responsible yet expedient. While I wait for the sweeper, I eat breakfast in the car. I look at the birds. It's a nice time to think. Occasionally, as we all wait, someone drives onto the block and pulls into a space on the vacated side. Now it's musical chairs. Everyone scrambles back across the street, and one person loses. I call this the stampede. At home, I spend a lot of time looking out the window to watch for cars leaving. If you catch it right, you can sometimes move your car back and forth in such a way that you avoid the alternate-side wait for the week. Recently, I moved to Brooklyn Heights, which, despite being only a ten-minute walk away, is inscrutable to me. My street inexplicably has a ten-hour alternate-side window, instead of the usual ninety minutes, which requires a sit-and-wait in the morning and in the evening. I did it a few times, then gave up and went back to my old block.

To this, Kuntzman said, "Look at how much mental capacity you need to be able to figure this out." The odd thing, I told him, is that I hardly use the car. I drive it occasionally to leave the city, but almost never within the city. In New York, only a small fraction of car owners drive to work. To city residents, the car is mostly a pleasure vehicle, or—in theory, at least—a convenience. This, paradoxically, binds us to the parking spot more than to the car. The dynamic is found almost nowhere

else, except maybe Boston, where Henry Grabar, the author, discovered a woman who was so afraid of losing her spot that she wouldn't drive to the supermarket and had consequently lost eleven pounds. Kuntzman threw up his hands. "They sold you on a car, a symbol of American freedom," he said. "And you're shackled!"

When I'm looking for a parking space, I turn into a monster. One popular anger-management book advises drivers, enraged at a rival stealing their spot, to pretend that the space was taken by something without malicious intent, like a cow. I've only once considered keying someone's car. Usually, I just scream. One time, as the sweeper went by, a woman in an S.U.V. darted into my vacated space. I opened the window and yelled, "You can't do that!" It turned out that there was room enough for two cars, and she was just pulling forward, out of my way. Moo. Parking is one of the most consistent sources of stress in my life. When I'm parking, the radio gets switched off. Conversation stops. And yet the euphoria of finding a spot is somehow worth it. I'd compare the tension, shock, and release to those videos in which a soldier has a surprise reunion with a loved one.

On familiar turf, I'm a good parker. The Guinness World Record for tightest parallel park is 2.95 inches of clearance, performed by a stunt driver in a Fiat 500. Most street parkers I know (myself included) are convinced that they've done tighter. Like fishermen, we have our trophies. Mine was on Congress Street, where, after forty-five minutes of circling, I once launched a thirty-point assault on a spot I'd dismissed several times earlier. I made it in. You could've fit a couple pieces of paper on either side of my bumper. On the Upper West Side, I've been told, this is referred to as "cracking the matzo." This was before the back-up camera, which ruined the sport of it, like baseball in the live-ball era.

Several people have told me that it makes them sad to contemplate how their years of parking knowledge will disappear when they die. There's our Talmudic reading of the alternate-side calendar, with its we-are-the-world assemblage of holidays: to celebrate the Solemnity of the Ascension, Eid al-Adha, and Tisha B'Av, a day of fasting that commemorates various Jewish disasters, nobody has to

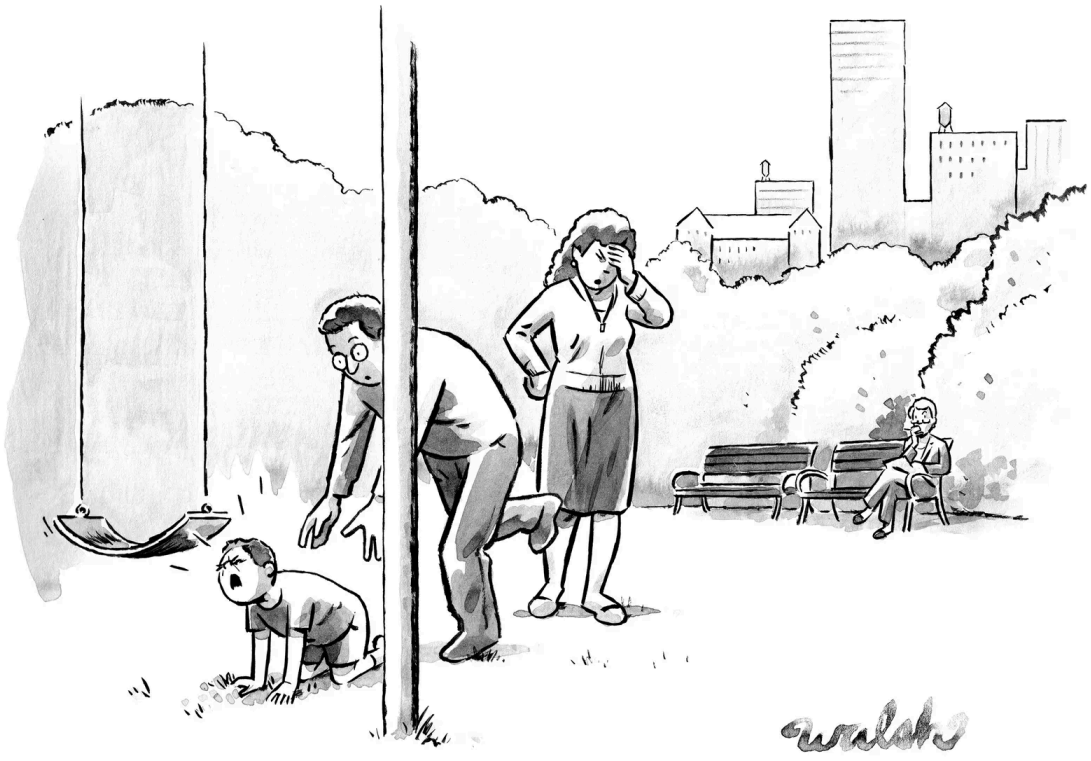
move their car. Some years, with enough planning, you can string together several holidays in a row. "It's like drawing a straight flush," Jim Downey, the "Saturday Night Live" writer, said. He once planned a vacation around a two-week holiday string, then came back to find he'd been towed by a crew shooting "Law & Order" to a non-holiday spot. This year, the calendar added Losar, the Tibetan Buddhist New Year. Ben Furnas, the executive director of the street-reform nonprofit Transportation Alternatives, is a free-parking skeptic, but nevertheless told me, of the calendar, "It brings tears to my eyes. It's one of the most beautiful illustrations of multiculturalism anywhere in the world. It's just deeply hilarious that it's associated with having to move your car on a certain day. It sort of shows the ad-hoc, historically contingent way in which we found ourselves here."

Parking is a way of seeing the world. I can tell you where every fire hydrant is in my neighborhood. I drive down the streets in the same way each time, in ever widening circles, a route I've refined over years. Drew Velkey, a neuroscientist who has studied hunting strategies across species, identified two main ones in parkers. "We call it soaring versus perching," he said. "Eagles will get into these flight patterns where they're soaring over the landscape and more actively searching. Owls and falcons will sit on a branch and wait for the food to come by." Velkey said that New York City—resource-scarce, competition-heavy—rewards a third strategy, a ritualized hunting route. We're cheetahs, essentially. One parker spoke of marital tensions arising from irreconcilable parking differences: one is a circler; one is a waiter.

One night, as George Bichikashvili slept in the minivan, the temperature dropped. He shivered in his two jackets. He couldn't sleep. "Sometimes, a little bit, I cried," he said.

The work crew came again and left again. His tooth ached. He video-chatted with a friend celebrating a birthday. "I had a beer and three shots of whiskey," he told

me. “It was not good.”



*“Oh, God, I think that’s the Times’ parenting critic.”*

Cartoon by Liam Francis Walsh

Open cartoon gallery

After a while, another Con Ed parking spotter showed up: a woman living in a Mercedes, which she parked over another manhole. She was a model and an aspiring influencer. They began talking. The guys in the bodega took a liking to him. They let him pay a little less for cigarettes. He told himself, “I’ve got a fighting spirit for my life goals.” He channelled Kobe Bryant.

On day thirty-three, the work crew came again. This time, he was exasperated. He implored, “When will this end?”

The average street sweeper collects fifteen hundred pounds of debris every day. "We pick up rats, pigeons," Antonio Taliercio, who has driven a street sweeper for nineteen years, told me on a recent morning.

He was on Seventy-second and Amsterdam with his supervisor, John Piazza. His shift was about to begin. The Department of Sanitation calls this district Manhattan 7. The sweeper comes here twice a week on each side. Different neighborhoods are swept at different frequencies. This is determined in part by a cleanliness rating calculated by Sanitation, and in part by community request. "Certain areas tend to coöperate better than others," Taliercio said. "We find that the Upper West Side is generally a problem."

Piazza nodded his head at Taliercio. "His brother used to sweep in this district and then left," he said. "It's frustrating every day. You don't want to take that home to your family." The Sanitation Department used to slap neon stickers on the windows of cars that didn't move for the sweeper, as a shaming tactic, but the City Council forced them to stop. "I believe it was deemed, like, cruel and unusual punishment," Taliercio said.

Taliercio, who wore a green Sanitation hoodie and driving gloves, hopped up into the cab. I got in a jump seat. He used a few dials to control the broom speed and the pressure. At one point, we squeezed past a double-parked car with a few inches on either side. "That's all experience, my friend," he said. "I can do this route with my eyes closed." Basically no cars moved until we were right behind them, honking.

Piazza's job was to drive another car, leading the sweeper and cajoling drivers sitting in parked cars to move out of the way, ticketing non-compliers. This buddy system is deployed frequently in problem districts. (Sanitation issues about a million alternate-side-parking tickets a year; the N.Y.P.D. issues three million.)

There's currently a bill in the State Senate to outfit the sweepers with cameras that would automatically photograph violators and send out tickets by mail.

Their route for the day wound from Riverside Drive to Central Park, mostly in the Eighties and Nineties. Piazza communicated with Taliercio via walkie-talkie. Trouble began almost immediately. On Ninetieth Street, a woman in a white Subaru blocked the sweeper while she carried items from her building. "But if I tag her I'm an evil person," Piazza said. There was a woman who'd fallen asleep in her car, a belligerent guy with a dog, a Range Rover driving the wrong way. "He's about to kill someone," Piazza said. Across Columbus, a double-parked construction van caused a clog. Piazza yelled up to a worker on some scaffolding: "Yo!" The worker jumped down and moved the van. It took Taliercio twenty-two minutes to travel three blocks. This was three per cent of the route.

After many years, Piazza can recognize the license plates of serial offenders. He's more lenient with some buildings—a funeral parlor, a school—because the occupants keep the street clean themselves. He has a good relationship with the doormen along Central Park, who'll run out of a building to move cars for the broom. Piazza told me, "I've had kids in the car, alone. 'Hi, I don't have a license.' Well, tell your parents—they're getting a ticket."

On Central Park West, he honked repeatedly at one oblivious parker. "This guy's picking his ear," he said.

The caravan turned onto Eighty-ninth Street. Piazza got out to tell someone to move. "I've been sitting in the car. I don't know how to drive it," an older man said.

"I've gotta write you a ticket," Piazza said.

The man said that he was helping out a woman who was away.

“She set you up for failure!” Piazza said. He wrote a ticket.

The pair made it through only a fraction of the route. I asked Taliercio what sweeping has taught him. “People are territorial,” he said. It’s the lack of courtesy that bothers him, not the parking. He drives to work, and parks in the Sanitation garage, so he can avoid his own alternate-side obligations. Piazza lives in Riverdale and drives to work, too. “I’m never home, so when I am on a day that there’s alternate side I don’t think about it. I’ve gotten tickets. I’m, like, ‘All right, I screwed up.’ ”

On day thirty-three, shortly after George Bichikashvili’s outburst to the work crew, he was notified that the job was closed. He bellowed, “Freedom!” He blasted electronic music and drove straight home. He showered and went to the barber. He had a drink and relaxed. He bought a plane ticket for somewhere warm. He spent New Year’s in Miami.

Upon returning, with no other options, he picked up more spotting work. He had a shift of twenty-seven days, again in the Bronx. There was a twenty-four-day stint on 149th Street. “Every narco man and every homeless lived on this street, and also me, together,” he said. He gave dollars to the homeless. He liked parking in Manhattan better. He had conversations with doormen and dog-walkers. During a stint on West End Avenue, he befriended a writer, Daniel Krieger, who photographed him for a short online article. Sometimes people would ask why he was living in a parking spot. “One time, someone told me, ‘America’s good, right?’ I told them, ‘Why?’ He said, ‘Because you do nothing and someone gives you salary.’ ”

He found that, despite the job, he did love America. On the flight back from Miami, he felt himself longing for New York. “It was a feeling of coming home,” he said.

He quit spotting after nine months. Recently, he joined a lawsuit against CE Solutions, A&M Transport, Shukurova, and others, for failure to pay minimum wage and overtime.

He's moved on. He reminded himself that he is a world-class dancer, and that, in Tbilisi, he'd run two small businesses. "I have two hands, two legs, two eyes. I can do everything," he said. "I just need my time." Recently, he has worked as a driver for Access-A-Ride and Lyft. One perk is that, when he's working, he never has to park. ♦

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*Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.*



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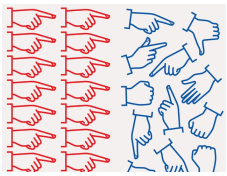

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