

The following appeared recently in *The New Yorker*. It explores commuting in America, and deals with people who commute to city jobs. The Blue Ridge is not Atlanta; but housing prices are forcing more of us to live further away from jobs in town. How long is *your* commute? (One guy drives 372 miles a day.) If it's too long, what can you do about it? We'd like your comments.

**Annals of Transport**

## **There and Back Again**

**The soul of the commuter.**

by [Nick Paumgarten](#) April 16, 2007

People may endure miserable commutes out of an inability to weigh their general well-being against quantifiable material gains.

Last year, Midas, the muffler company, in honor of its fiftieth anniversary, gave an award for America's longest commute to an engineer at Cisco Systems, in California, who travels three hundred and seventy-two miles—seven hours—a day, from the Sierra foothills to San Jose and back. "It's actually exhilarating," the man said of his morning drive. "When I get in, I'm pumped up, ready to go." People like to compare commutes, to complain or boast about their own and, depending on whether their pride derives from misery or efficiency, to exaggerate the length or the brevity of their trip. People who feel they have smooth, manageable commutes tend to evangelize. Those who hate the commute think of it as a core affliction, like a chronic illness. Once you raise the subject, the testimonies pour out, and, if your ears are tuned to it, you begin overhearing commute talk everywhere: mode of transport, time spent on train/interstate/treadmill/homework help, crossword-puzzle aptitude—limitless variations on a stock tale. People who are normally circumspect may, when describing their commutes, be unexpectedly candid in divulging the intimate details of their lives. They have it all worked out, down to the number of minutes it takes them to shave or get stuck at a particular light. But commuting is like sex or sleep: everyone lies. It is said that doctors, when they ask you how much you drink, will take the answer and double it. When a commuter says, "It's an hour, door-to-door," tack on twenty minutes.

Seven hours is extraordinary, but four hours, increasingly, is not. Roughly one out of every six

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American workers commutes more than forty-five minutes, each way. People travel between counties the way they used to travel between neighborhoods. The number of commuters who travel ninety minutes or more each way—known to the Census Bureau as “extreme commuters”—has reached 3.5 million, almost double the number in 1990. They’re the fastest-growing category, the vanguard in a land of stagnant wages, low interest rates, and ever-radiating sprawl. They’re the talk-radio listeners, billboard glimpsers, gas guzzlers, and swing voters, and they don’t—can’t—watch the evening news. Some take on long commutes by choice, and some out of necessity, although the difference between one and the other can be hard to discern. A commute is a distillation of a life’s main ingredients, a product of fundamental values and choices. And time is the vital currency: how much of it you spend—and how you spend it—reveals a great deal about how much you think it is worth.

This winter, a friend told me about a colleague of hers named Judy Rossi, a legal secretary at Arnold & Porter, a firm in Manhattan, who has a commute of three hours and fifteen minutes each way—six and a half hours a day, five days a week. If you discount vacation time, this adds up to two months a year. Rossi lives in Pike County, Pennsylvania, in the northeast corner of the state. (It is the fastest-growing county in Pennsylvania, owing in part to an infusion of extreme commuters.) Her alarm goes off at 4:30 A.M. She’s out of the house by six-fifteen and at her desk at nine-thirty. She gets home each evening at around eight-forty-five. The first thing Rossi said to me, when we met during her lunch break one day, was “I am not insane.”

Rossi has an extensive commuter career; it encapsulates a broad range of fortunes. She is fifty-seven years old. Born and reared in Flatbush, Brooklyn, she married at the age of twenty and had a son, but was divorced after four years. She paid her lawyer by going to work for him as a secretary. For ten years, she took the subway to his office in Manhattan every day—an hour and a half each way. When the neighborhood began to change, in the early eighties—when her son could no longer ride his bicycle around the corner without being pushed off it—she moved upstate, to Orange County, a burgeoning exurb. She married a firefighter, with whom she commuted to the city by motorcycle (an hour and a half each way). She would sometimes fall asleep on the back. His firehouse was in the South Bronx; he’d drop her off at a subway station nearby, and she’d complete the journey to midtown. He died in 1999. Five years ago, she bought four acres in Pike County, on the outskirts of Milford, and built her dream house there, a piece of the country, a place to retire. For a while, she tried driving, but found that her fatigue at the end of the day made the trip treacherous. And it got expensive—gas, tolls, tires. The bus was cheaper, but it depressed her. So she began to take the train, which (with parking) costs her four hundred dollars a month. This does not include the cost of her reading material, which Rossi, employing prison logic, treats as a kind of tinder for the burning of time. “Books cost money”—she doesn’t have time to go to a library—“so I try to stretch them out,” she told me. Still, she reads a book a week.

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One evening, Rossi let me tag along. I met her in the lobby of her office building, on Lexington Avenue, at Fifty-third Street. It was five-thirty. Out of haste rather than rudeness, she didn't stop to greet me but headed through the revolving doors and diagonally across the avenue, toward the subway entrance. She wore a down overcoat, a red backpack, a pin that read "I [heart] my dog," a fortifying layer of makeup, and an expression of wry resignation. Her trip home consists of a subway ride on the E train to Pennsylvania Station (seventeen minutes), a New Jersey Transit train to Secaucus (eleven minutes), and a transfer there to a train that heads northwest to the end of the line, in Port Jervis, New York (two hours). From there, she drives across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania (thirty minutes). Missing the six-eighteen to Port Jervis can cost her an additional twenty-one minutes, so she has crafted a commute with just enough slack time (a total of about fifteen minutes) to keep it anxiety-free. She's an escalator-stander. "I hate running for trains," she said.

The commuter takes on compulsive attributes. Some people decipher where on a subway train it is best to ride, for optimum exiting, and, therefore, where to stand on the platform, by a particular pay phone or blackened patch of gum. On the E train, Rossi knows where she should be—the front positions her best for Penn Station—but she prefers to be farther back, where it is less crowded. Also, she never boards any train's first or last car. "If there's an accident, they're the first to go off the track," she said. On the subway, she always stands, and never reads, for fear of missing her stop. She stood on the next train, too—the five-fifty-two to Long Branch, first stop Secaucus. "We'll make it fine, unless we get stuck in the tunnel," she said, then added quickly, "I shouldn't say that."

In Secaucus, she joined other regulars out on the platform. One of them was a man who works at an auto-parts dealership in Queens, commuting two hours each way from Harriman, New York. He had on a T-shirt that said "Daytona Bike Week 2007," and in 1995 he was one number away from winning ten million dollars in the lottery. He reasoned that he makes thirty-five per cent more money working in the city than he would near home. Rossi, whose salary is under a hundred thousand dollars, estimates that she makes twice as much, although it's been years since she actually looked.

The train arrived, and we sat down, finally. From the backpack Rossi produced some photographs of her house, her swimming pool, and her granddaughter: her recompense, her consolation. "I keep these pictures above my desk at work," she said. "Whenever I get fed up, I look at these and say, 'That's why I commute.'" Her son lives with his wife and two children in a separate house on the lot; unable to endure the same commute, he found a job working for Orange County, half an hour away. The property is surrounded by woods. Deer come and go. In her calculations, such blandishments outweigh the inconveniences and squandered hours.

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At Harriman, most of the passengers disembarked, and Rossi removed her coat and put her bag on the floor. She took out her book, a James Patterson hardcover. For an hour, the train rattled through the night. Middletown, Otisville, Port Jervis, the end of the line. With keys in hand, she stepped out onto an open-air platform. The parking lot was part of a larger one abutting a mall. The night was dead-battery cold. "It's a half hour from here," she said.

Her car, a Toyota hatchback, smelled of cigarettes and dogs. (Rossi's dogs—a standard poodle, a pit-lab, and a bichon frise—pass the days indoors.) She put on an oldies station—the Jackson 5 serendipitously singing "I'll Be There"—and drove along a state road past shopping centers whose varying vintages indicated the advance of rural ruin. We passed a Price Chopper market, where Rossi does her food shopping twice a month. She gave up cooking some years ago. Now she gets home, feeds her dogs, then heats up soup or pizza she buys at a pizzeria on weekends. She takes a shower and goes to bed, maybe watching a taped episode of "CSI."

The road grew windy and dark. We pulled in to her driveway at eight-thirty-seven. The headlights washed over a single-story seventeen-hundred-square-foot clapboard ranch-style house, in a clearing. The house's darkened windows brought to mind arriving at a borrowed country house in the dead of night. "It may not seem like it's worth it in the winter," she said, "but in the summer, when it's green and lush and someone just cut his lawn and you get that smell—"

The next morning, she caught the six-fifty-four out of Port Jervis. The train was nearly empty. The conductor sat in the row in front of her, looking through a catalogue advertising semi-automatic weapons. Rossi played solitaire on a handheld device—"I try to win three games before I hit Middletown," she said—until she dozed off. She generally sleeps for an hour. A man sat across from her tearing bank correspondence into bits, which he then stuffed into an empty plastic-foam coffee cup. The train filled up and came out of the Hudson highlands. At Secaucus, Rossi made her way to the next track. A train into Penn Station was waiting when she reached the platform, but she did not make a run for it. It pulled away without her. She'd catch the next one.

There are, of course, all kinds of commuters—from migrant workers to intercontinental business-class weekenders. Last year, the Transportation Research Board of the National Academies released an exhaustive, decennial report titled "Commuting in America III." "What a privilege it is to work on a subject that is a source of endless interest," its author, Alan Pisarski,

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wrote. Pisarski calls commuting “the interaction of demography with geography,” and the nuances are legion. (Hispanics drive alone less; women leave home later.) But the average travel time keeps going up.

Americans, for all their bellyaching, are not the world’s most afflicted commuters. They average fifty-one minutes a day, to and from work. Pity the Romanians, who average fifty-four. Or the citizens of Bangkok, who average—average!—two hours. A business trip to Bangkok will buck up the glummiest Van Wyck Expressway rubbernecker; the traffic there, as in so many automobile-plagued Asian mega-capitals, is apocalyptic. In Japan, land of the bullet train, workers spend almost ninety minutes a day.

The term “commute” derives from its original meaning of “to change to another less severe.” In the eighteen-forties, the men who rode the railways each day from newly established suburbs to work in the cities did so at a reduced rate. The railroad, in other words, commuted their fares, in exchange for reliable ridership (as it still does, if you consider the monthly pass). In time, the commuted became commuters. In New York, and in cities like Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago, railways begat reachable and desirable suburbs, so that, by the time the automobile came along, patterns of development, and a calculus of class and status, had already been established. It was this kind of commute—the forty-minute train trip, bookended by a short drive or walk or subway ride—that people grew accustomed to, and even fond of. Here was a measure of inconvenience that could be integrated into daily life, albeit with certain bleak side effects, as chronicled by John Cheever and Richard Yates. Commuting by rail became a kind of gateway drug.

Is there a perfect commute? Many citizens of Bronxville, a small, exclusive, affluent, mostly white enclave that is as close as a town can be to New York City without being part of it, would nominate theirs. A place like this could not exist, of course, without a daily influx of labor from neighboring towns. (“Every Bronxville needs its Yonkers,” the historian Kenneth T. Jackson told me.) The Bronxville commute—twenty-eight minutes from Grand Central Terminal—is a well-oiled one, and it has its proud and cagey veterans, some of them whose fathers made the same commute, back when men wore hats. Many people still walk to the train station, timing their arrival on the platform to coincide with the opening of the train’s doors. And many walk through tunnels from Grand Central to their office buildings; they hardly ever see the street.

Commuting is an exercise in repetition. The will to efficiency varies, but it expresses itself in the hardening of commuters’ habits, as they seek to alleviate the dissipation of time and sanity. Some people travel with coffee; they have a place to buy it, a preferred approach to not spilling it, a manner of discarding the cup. You can spot the novice: he’s rifling through pockets in

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search of his ticket, coffee bubbling up out the pinprick holes of his flattop lid, leading him to wonder how it is possible for the coffee to be leaking when the top is on tight. He has no strategy for newsprint stain. The pros have their routines. There's a group that plays bridge on the seven-fifty-eight to Grand Central. To get in a game during the short ride, they play speed bridge, a customized version with complicated rules. They often get into game-halting arguments about these rules, so they wind up playing less bridge than they would at normal speed. Still, the fellowship, and the attempt at optimization, must bring some measure of happiness.

Nationwide, the automobile took over from the train long ago. Nine out of ten people travel to work by car, and, of those, eighty-eight per cent drive alone. The car, and the sprawl that comes with it (each—familiar story—having helped to engender and entrench the other), ushers in another kind of experience. The gray-suited armies of Cheever's 5:48 have given way to the business-casual soloists, whose loneliness is no longer merely existential. They hardly even have the opportunity to feel estranged at home, their time there is so brief.

"Drive until you qualify" is a phrase that real-estate agents use to describe a central tenet of the commuting life: you travel away from the workplace until you reach an exit where you can afford to buy a house that meets your standards. The size of the wallet determines that of the mortgage, and therefore the length of the commute. Although there are other variables (schools, spouse, status, climate, race, religion, taxes, taste) and occasional exceptions (inner cities, Princeton), in this equation you're trading time for space, miles for square feet. Sometimes contentment figures in, and sometimes it does not.

Commuting makes people unhappy, or so many studies have shown. Recently, the Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman and the economist Alan Krueger asked nine hundred working women in Texas to rate their daily activities, according to how much they enjoyed them. Commuting came in last. (Sex came in first.) The source of the unhappiness is not so much the commute itself as what it deprives you of. When you are commuting by car, you are not hanging out with the kids, sleeping with your spouse (or anyone else), playing soccer, watching soccer, coaching soccer, arguing about politics, praying in a church, or drinking in a bar. In short, you are not spending time with other people. The two hours or more of leisure time granted by the introduction, in the early twentieth century, of the eight-hour workday are now passed in solitude. You have cup holders for company.

"I was shocked to find how robust a predictor of social isolation commuting is," Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist, told me. (Putnam wrote the best-seller "Bowling Alone," about the disintegration of American civic life.) "There's a simple rule of thumb: Every ten

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minutes of commuting results in ten per cent fewer social connections. Commuting is connected to social isolation, which causes unhappiness.”

Commuter-wise, New York City is an anomaly. New Yorkers have the highest average journey-to-work times (thirty-nine minutes) of any city in the country, but are apparently much happier with their commutes than people are elsewhere. It could be that New Yorkers are better conditioned to megalopolitan hardships, or that public transportation ameliorates some of the psychic costs. Or maybe they're better at lying to themselves.

Drivers often say they prize the time alone—to gather their wits, listen to music, or talk on the phone. They also like the freedom, the ability, illusory though it may be, to come and go as they please; schedules can seem an imposition, as can a crowded train's cattle-car ambience. But the driver's seat is a lonely place. People tend to behave in their cars as though they are alone in a room. Road rage is one symptom of this; on the street or on the train, people don't generally walk around calling each other assholes. Howard Stern is another; you can listen to lewd evocations without feeling as though you were pushing the bounds of the social contract. You could drive to work without your pants on, and no one would know.

The loneliness quotient might also account for some of the commute tolerance in New York. On the train or the bus, one can experience an illusion of fellowship, even if you disdain your fellow-passengers or are revolted by them. Perhaps there's succor in inadvertent eye contact, the presence of a pretty woman, shared disgruntlement (over a delay or a spilled Pepsi), or the shuffle through the doors, which requires, on a subconscious level, an array of social compromises and collaborations. Train riding has other benefits. Passengers can sleep or read, send e-mails or play cards. Delays are out of their control.

Three years ago, two economists at the University of Zurich, Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer, released a study called “Stress That Doesn't Pay: The Commuting Paradox.” They found that, if your trip is an hour each way, you'd have to make forty per cent more in salary to be as “satisfied” with life as a noncommuter is. (Their data come from Germany, where you'd think speedy Autobahns and punctual trains would bring a little *Freude* to the proceedings, and their methodology is elaborate and thorough, if impenetrable to the layman, relying on equations like

$$U = a + \beta D$$

$$D$$

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$+ \gamma X + \delta$

1

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y.) The commuting paradox reflects the notion that many people, who are supposedly rational (according to classical economic theory, at least), commute even though it makes them miserable. They are not, in the final accounting, adequately compensated.

“People with long journeys to and from work are systematically worse off and report significantly lower subjective well-being,” Stutzer told me. According to the economic concept of equilibrium, people will move or change jobs to make up for imbalances in compensation. Commute time should be offset by higher pay or lower living costs, or a better standard of living. It is this last category that people apparently have trouble measuring. They tend to overvalue the material fruits of their commute—money, house, prestige—and to undervalue what they’re giving up: sleep, exercise, fun.

“They have to trade off social goods for material goods,” Stutzer said. “This is very difficult for people. They make systematic mistakes. We are very good at predicting whether we’ll like something but not at knowing for how long.” People adapt to a higher living standard but not to social isolation. Frey and Stutzer infer that some people, even when the costs become clear, just lack the will power to change. “People have limited self-control and insufficient energy, inducing some people to not even try to improve their lot,” they write. In this regard, they say, commuting resembles smoking and failing to save money.

This analysis presupposes that commuting represents what economists call a rational choice, as opposed to a constrained choice. Postwar zoning laws aggressively separated living space from commercial space, requiring more roads and parking lots—known to planners as Euclidean zoning (after a Supreme Court decision involving Euclid, Ohio), and to civilians as sprawl. Putnam likes to imagine that there is a triangle, its points comprising where you sleep, where you work, and where you shop. In a canonical English village, or in a university town, the sides of that triangle are very short: a five-minute walk from one point to the next. In many American cities, you can spend an hour or two travelling each side. “You live in Pasadena, work in North Hollywood, shop in the Valley,” Putnam said. “Where is your community?” The smaller the triangle, the happier the human, as long as there is social interaction to be had. In that kind of life, you have a small refrigerator, because you can get to the store quickly and



often. By this logic, the bigger the refrigerator, the lonelier the soul.

Putnam's favorite city is Bologna, in Italy, which has a population of three hundred and fifty thousand; it's just small enough to retain village-like characteristics. "It would be interesting to swap the citizens of Bologna with the population of New Jersey," Putnam said. "Do the Bolognese become disconnected and grouchy? Is there a sudden explosion of malls in Bologna? How much of the way we live is forced on us? How much is our choice?"

Atlanta is perhaps the purest specimen of a vexed commuter town, a big-fridge paradise. Los Angeles, the country's most sprawling megalopolis, may boast a more dizzying array of horrible commutes, but many of them are the result of a difficult landscape—ocean restricting growth on one side, mountains on another. Chicago, Washington, D.C., and the Bay Area are worthy candidates, but they, too, owe a degree of complication to bodies of water. But Atlanta, like Houston, sprawls without impediment in all directions, and an inordinate number of the commutes range from one edge of the sprawl to the opposite side. People live and work on the outskirts. For them, the city itself is little more than an obstacle and an idea.

Atlanta is a beltway town—it is defined by the interstate, known as the Perimeter, that encircles it. It has a notoriously paltry system of public transportation. The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, or MARTA, operates two rail lines, which form a cross whose ends extend, at most, a few stops past the Perimeter. Most communities have no access to it, and there are prejudices against it. (You don't have to be in Atlanta long before someone relates, ruefully or conspiratorially, an alternative source of the acronym—"Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta.") Decades ago, residents of two counties surrounding the city voted down an extension of the MARTA system. Ninety-four per cent of Atlantans commute by car, and the city has the highest annual per-capita gasoline costs in the country. According to the last census, the travel time in Atlanta grew faster in the nineties than in any other American city, and it's getting worse. Travelling ten miles can take forty-five minutes.

Road-building doesn't much help. Atlanta is a showcase for a phenomenon called "induced traffic": the more highway lanes you build, the more traffic you get. People find it agreeable to move farther away, and, as others join them, they find it less agreeable (or affordable), and so they move farther still. The lanes fill up.

The antidote, in vogue in planning circles, if not in state houses, is mixed-use zoning and

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mixed-income dwelling, so that people don't have to travel so far to go to work or to buy what they need. Smaller triangles, in other words. Michael Dobbins, a planner and architect at Georgia Tech, told me that to substantially reduce congestion all you'd need to do is cut the average daily driving miles from thirty-five to thirty-one. He noted, as others had, that Atlanta was in the midst of a reurbanizing boom, with people moving downtown again and condominium towers sprouting up, amid increasingly vigorous agitations for more public transportation. Still, the centrifugal force of exurban growth was overpowering.

A few weeks before I visited Atlanta this winter, to do some commuting, a perfect storm of traffic struck: twenty-five accidents on the Downtown Connector (the interstate that bisects the city), a poultry exposition downtown, and, at the sports arena, a Get Motivated seminar. The highways in Atlanta follow what are known as dendritic patterns: as you near the city, the routes converge, and alternatives disappear, so that an accident on a main highway creates bottlenecks all the way up the line. I half hoped for such luck.

My first ride was with Tom Scruggs, a program manager in the I.T. department at a credit-card company. Its headquarters are situated near Dunwoody, north of the city, in an office park with the evocatively oxymoronic name of the Perimeter Center. The building stands across a parking lot from a Fuddruggers; outdoor speakers play easylistening music, for the smokers who may linger in the pines that surround it. From the lot, you can look out over the trees and see a landscape of office buildings, which look as though they'd been overtaken, in a "Logan's Run" kind of way, by the woodlands that they are in fact rapidly displacing. Dunwoody, in the vulgate, is an "edge city"—a commercial district virtually without residents.

Scruggs, who is thirty-seven, with sandy hair, a few extra pounds, and kind but weary eyes, has a wife and three young children. He lives fifty miles from his office, in a newish subdivision well south of the city, in the town of Sharpsburg. His commute home starts in his cubicle. "This is my jail cell," he told me, when I met up with him there at five one evening. He was dressed in a blue shirt, brown slacks, and brown square-toed shoes. "This is the first time in a week and a half that I get to leave while it's still light out." He got in his car, a BMW sedan, and, as he laid out his things in the center console, it occurred to him that he'd forgotten his sunglasses, useful for the drive into the setting sun. He's a Perimeter man, although others like to take the Downtown Connector. "Usually, that's a parking lot, too, so it's pick your poison." The parking lot itself can be a problem: getting out of it has taken him as long as an hour, because of traffic generated by an adjacent mall.

It was a Monday, the lightest of Atlanta traffic weekdays. Scruggs put on the radio, which was playing the traffic report—gibberish, to an out-of-towner. (He'd already looked up the traffic

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cams online.) The traffic nudged along, with occasional soul-corroding full stops. He usually listens to sports talk or a personal-finance show. “People are calling in all the time to talk about how much debt they have,” he said. “It makes you feel better.”

Scruggs’s commute is not outrageous. On a perfect day, it is not even extreme, technically, although at least once a week it can take two hours or more, and it has taken as long as three, such as when a truck flipped on the interstate and spilled a load of battery acid. But the trip wears him down, with its toxic blend of predictability and unpredictability—tedium broken by episodes of aggravation and despair. Barring the invention of the jet pack, the trip can only get longer. Ultimately, his decision not to move closer to work is based on inertia and vague reasoning. His wife grew up on the south side and her parents live nearby. They have friends, although they don’t often see them. Their social life consists of a get-together with the neighbors once a month or so for a barbecue or a theme party: beach, Mardi Gras, the eighties. Scruggs said, “If you had told me ten years ago that I’d be going fifty miles to and from work, I would have said, ‘No way.’ I kind of eased into it.”

Scruggs tapped the steering wheel as traffic slowed again. “When you’ve had a long day and then sit in traffic for two hours, you say, I gotta find something else,” he said. “But then when you’re home there’s a reality check. My commute’s no different really from the commutes of people who are coming from the north side, where the cost of living is substantially higher. When you take all the factors into consideration, as frustrated as you get, I’m still not sure whether it’s worth making a move.”

I had talked to one Atlanta commuter who smokes a cigar to stay awake on his drive home each day, and to another who plays harmonica. One commuter began trying a meditation technique—breathe in one nostril and out the other—and got pulled over for speeding. Scruggs favored a more traditional approach. “The key is to eat a light lunch,” he said.

He exited the interstate at 6:06 P.M. “It’s ten or twelve minutes from here,” he said. “Piece of cake.” The road passed by a golf course, a high school, and a series of ranch houses with boats and cars out front, most of them apparently still operational. After a while, he made a right on Kripple Kreek Drive, which led him into a development called Barrington Farms. Home: 6:30 P.M.—one hour and twenty-two minutes. Deep twilight. His house was an off-white clapboard four-bedroom, on a one-acre lot. The kids were out playing on a swing set in the back yard. There was no arrival fanfare: Ulysses, ignored. He tends to see his kids for five minutes in the morning, and an hour in the evenings.

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Scruggs's wife was waiting in the kitchen, checking on the kids through the window, looking forward to a beer and some grownup company. When I asked her what she thought of his commute, she said, "I hate it." She's a part-time preschool teacher, eager to get back to full time. "He works eight to five but is gone from six-thirty to seven. I can't rely on the fact that he'll even be here."

"When I get off work, I don't know what I'm up against," Scruggs said. "Frankly, today was the best day I've had in a month."

The home or the job: to shorten the trip between the two, you usually have to give one of them up. A year ago, Stephen Kocis, a Pittsburgh native who has lived in (or, at least, near) Atlanta for twenty years, got a new job, as a design manager at Silgan Plastics, developing containers for shampoo, mouthwash, and powdered drinks. His office is on the outskirts northeast of the city, and his home is well to the south, in Peachtree City (population 35,000)—a planned community of well-heeled developments connected by golf-cart paths. The commute is fifty-two miles. Though Kocis is normally a fitness freak, with a black belt in karate, in the past year he'd put on twenty pounds and developed nerve problems in his back. For a while, he tried leaving at five, to get to the office at six-thirty, in time to work out, but it exhausted him. So he gave up exercise.

"I don't have a social life," he told me. He and his wife, Martha, get a babysitter once a month or so and go out for dinner in Peachtree City; they hardly ever go into Atlanta. Generally, he comes home, helps his two sons with their homework, puts them to bed, works a little bit, then watches "Grey's Anatomy" or "Desperate Housewives" on TV. "My wife enjoys it, but, God, I hope she doesn't relate to it," he said.

I joined the family one morning around dawn. The kids were eating Cheerios, and Martha was in her bathrobe, making them lunch. Kocis was checking traffic reports on TV. The house was a stucco five-bedroom in a cul-de-sac, but it was no longer theirs. Nine days earlier, they had sold it, having decided that they could no longer endure his commute. They were moving in a few weeks to a house on the north side of town, closer to his office. Martha had had to give up a career in real estate for a job at a pharmaceutical company. The kids were changing schools, but would be commuting back to Peachtree once a week for karate lessons.

We got into Kocis's pickup truck, which had a dent in the driver's-side door, caused by a collision with a deer. The trip took eighty minutes, with no accidents or extenuating

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Wednesday, 25 April 2007 11:24

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circumstances—just enough time to engender the feeling that we deserved a nap or a big greasy breakfast. He parked his car outside his office: a one-story industrial building overlooking the interstate. He had worked downtown previously and so had come into contact with other people—in the foyer, at lunch, on the way to the garage. “That’s what makes this so damn boring,” he said. “I wouldn’t have moved if I could’ve taken public transportation. I could read a book or talk to somebody.” He slipped in through a side door and into his office; it was a little like going into a motel. There was no one around to greet him or to make small talk.

“Here are some of our products,” he said, showing me svelte ergonomic containers for soup (Campbell’s Soup at Hand) and dog treats (Pup-peroni to Go). There was a watercolor of his kids over his desk. We went to get a cup of coffee. A few lab workers in hairnets wandered about in the corridors. In the kitchen, a TV was playing an ad for Ambien.

One remedy for social isolation and frequent tire replacement is the van pool. I caught a ride in one that evening, heading north from Cumberland, Georgia, another edge city on the north side of the Atlanta Perimeter, up into the countryside near Tennessee—a commute with no city in it, and yet with some of the worst traffic in the country. The van-pool driver was a woman named Janice Moss, who works as a property manager in Cumberland, in a two-mile-long ring of office buildings called Circle 75. Moss, who is fifty-eight, lives two hours away, with her sister and two cats, near the town of Ellijay, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Moss and the other members of the pool met through an organization called the Commuter Club, which provides the van; Moss, as the farthest-flung rider, is its keeper. The pickups and drop-offs have lengthened her trip a bit, but the company and the savings (each rider pays just fifty dollars a month) make up for that. “You’ve got someone to talk to when you’re stuck in all this traffic,” she told me, as we retrieved the van from a basement garage. “It’s been nice to meet people I wouldn’t normally meet.” It was 5 P.M. She drove around Circle 75 and picked up her passengers, six of them. The last to get in was the only man, Glenn, an auto-parts buyer. He climbed in back and asked that the heat be turned down, then began to read a book—“The Postman,” the post-apocalyptic fantasy that became a Kevin Costner film. Moss steered the van onto I-75, where it joined a river of steel: eight northbound lanes, none of them flowing. A sign over the freeway relayed that it would take twenty-five minutes or more to travel the next seven miles, but the ladies hardly paid that any mind, engaged as they were in an appraisal of Costner’s career. “I liked ‘Robin Hood.’ ”

“ ‘Tin Cup. ’ ”

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“I liked that one, too.”

No one mentioned “Fandango.” Moss finally took note of the grim vista beyond her dash. “This is what we call merging madness,” she said. “The designers of the roads down here did not take things into consideration.”

Among those things was the fact that there was no H.O.V. or express lane, although there might not have been anybody to take advantage of it: every car, save ours, seemed to have just one person in it. Long lines of stalled traffic were still trying to join the flow north, even though we were now nearly thirty miles outside Atlanta.

After about an hour, four passengers disembarked in the town of Woodstock, in the parking lot of a Home Depot, where they got into their own cars to head home (some several miles back in the direction we’d just come from). The van then continued north on a newer spur, I-575. The last rider got off in Canton, at another Home Depot. From this point, Moss is on her own.

Seven years ago, she and her sister built a custom cedar house, thirty-four hundred square feet, on a five-and-a-half-acre lot, overlooking a creek. They are dedicated knitters, and recently, as a sideline, they opened a yarn shop in Ellijay, which her sister runs. They are also very involved in their church; Moss is a devout Baptist, having been born again in 1978, after surviving a life-threatening illness. She has no children.

After a while, a sign indicated that Ellijay was thirty-three miles away. We’d been on the road for an hour and twenty minutes. The Blue Ridge Mountains came into view; fog settled in the marshes and creek beds, and pinewoods stretched in all directions. “When I get up here, the stress of the day, it all starts melting away,” Moss said.

As we entered Ellijay’s outskirts, we passed a place where a mountain had been levelled to make way for a shopping center, whose chief tenants—a Wal-Mart, a Lowe’s, a Wendy’s—were the same as those along Judy Rossi’s drive, in Pennsylvania, and it occurred to me that Moss’s commute, and her situation, were not unlike Rossi’s. Both women had the unquittable job, the dream house in the sticks, and the gantlet in between. In their determination to live in the country, they had almost, but not quite, outflanked a landscape of sprawl that resolutely discouraged them from trying. Still, they had their patch—hours be

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damned.

Before going home for the night, Moss stopped at the yarn shop, which occupied a storefront in a shopping center that had until recently been home to a bath-mat factory. She and her sister had named it Strings & Sticks. Moss parked the van and went inside. Racks and racks of multicolored yarn looked resplendent in the fluorescent light. Her sister was there with a neighbor who had come for a knitting lesson. The three women sat around a table counting stitches. For a moment, you could say the trip had been worth it.