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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"You are going to die at this corner before the year is out."

The Face at Death Corner

By PAUL ERNST

Inexplicably, death after death occurred in traffic accidents at Death Corner, and a young reporter set out to find out why

THE other of the two men who had been in the death car still lay on the reddened pavement at the corner of King and Altsheller Streets. On what was left of him rested a ten-ton coal truck with a front wheel off. It would be hours before that immense bulk was jacked up and the dragged wisp of ex-humanity removed.

This one, who had driven the car, lay in the emergency ward, raving in delirium,

with a cover mercifully concealing his body. He was dying, and the hospital was doing nothing but administer drugs to dull his agony. After a glance at him, the head surgeon had shrugged and declared it was futile even to try to operate.

One dead man back at King and Altsheller under the tons of metal and coal! One dying man here! That was the fatal toll of the spot recently nicknamed Death Corner.

The dying man stared at and through me in his feeble delirium.

"The face!" he gasped out. "Oh, my God—the face!"

I leaned forward urgently. The nurse made as if to stop me, then shrugged as the surgeon had done. The man would die in a few minutes anyway.

"What face?" I said. "What face? Can't you tell me?"

The dying man did not hear. He was almost in another world.

"The face," he whispered, with a look in his starting eyes that made the nurse bite her lips till the blood almost came, in a wave of horror.

He sank back then, and his eyes closed.

"Dead?" I asked the nurse in a low tone.

She nodded, and sighed, a long, shuddering sigh like a sob.

"You were at that corner when this happened, weren't you?" she said.

I nodded, staring at the mask of terror which was the dead man's face.

"How in the world could it have happened?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I can tell you *what* happened: this man was crossing King Street in a hurry to beat the red light, and he ran his sedan head on into a coal truck hurrying from the opposite direction. But I can't tell you *how* it happened—because I can't figure that out myself."

"They ought to block that corner off, do something about it," said the nurse.

I made some absent-minded reply, and went to the hospital's registry desk. There, still absent-mindedly, I went through a newspaper reporter's routine in such cases. I got the man's name and address, as given by identifying papers in his pocket, and his occupation and business address as given by a business card. He was a Mr. Lincoln Abner, wholesaler in furniture.

I phoned the dope in to Morgan, city editor.

"Stick around that corner, Brennan," he said. "That's your assignment from now on, remember, till we make something out of this."

He didn't hint at the nature of the "something" I might possibly "make out of this," because he had no idea of what it might be, any more than I did. But I knew that he was as sure as I was that something peculiar *did* lie at the bottom of it.

Eleven dead within the past three weeks in traffic accidents at the corner of King and Altsheller Streets! No wonder it had suddenly come to be named Death Corner!

But what, I speculated as I went slowly back to the fatal spot, had suddenly inaugurated this reign of death? The intersection was a secondary one, with no more traffic on it than on dozens of others in the big city. Till recently it had had a modest sum of fatalities; perhaps two killed there a year, perhaps less than that.

Now, in three weeks—eleven had died!

Morgan had called me in two days ago. Before him were clippings, and a sheet of paper on which he had listed items.

"Bill," he said, "you brought in that last story of an accident at King and Altsheller, the one where the man and woman in the blue coupé were killed when they slammed into the nose of a speeding ambulance. Didn't it occur to you that there was something mighty funny about that corner lately?"

I admitted that it hadn't.

"It wouldn't occur to most of you guys to come in out of the rain, unless you had an important assignment that should take you out," Morgan growled. "Well, it occurred to *me* that it was queer. So I started checking facts. And the total is queerer yet."

HE ARRANGED the news clippings on his crowded desk.

"Until three weeks ago King and Alt-

sheller was just another corner. Then cars began plowing into each other, or running down pedestrians. Now—bingo! Nine dead!

"The first was an old woman, nameless and homeless as far as the police could find out, an old crone of no consequence. A drunk ran over her and she died half an hour later. The next was a motorcycle delivery boy named Freis, who smashed into the front of a dry-goods truck and broke his neck. Next were two men in a roadster who met a moving-van head on."

He went down the list of victims.

"Nine, Brennan. And in each accident several of the same sets of circumstances have cropped out."

He stared at me with a somber light in his eyes.

"Each accident has occurred between the hours of five and six in the afternoon. Each has happened for absolutely no reason at all: cars running into other cars or running over pedestrians as though the drivers had suddenly gone blind. And in each case . . . here's the oddest part . . . in each case, as reported by witnesses to the accident, the car driver seemed to be frightened of something just before he crashed. That might seem goofy, but on several of the dead faces, after the accidents, a look of terror was still stamped, which lends veracity to the witnesses' reports."

"Well?" I said, after a little silence.

"Well," snarled Morgan, "what do you want me to do—write your story for you? Get onto this. Stick around Altsheller and King and see what you can see. If there's another accident, trail along and try to find out something. Why would people at that corner suddenly look scared to death and then step blindly under the wheels of a truck, or otherwise die all over the pavement?"

So I had gone to King and Altsheller, and stuck around. For two days I'd been

there, particularly from five to six in the afternoon.

The first day nothing whatever had happened, not so much as a crumpled fender. On this, the second, afternoon . . .

Altsheller and King, as has been said, is a secondary intersection. It hasn't the traffic crushes of some of the downtown streets. But traffic moves fast there. King is broad, with stop signs on all side streets running into it. Cars speed on it. When they come to Altsheller, which is a car-line street of normal size, they often crowd the traffic light there. They do this particularly because there aren't many pedestrians: the district is devoted more to business than to stores, with old three and four story buildings on all four corners; nothing to call forth large crowds.

On the second afternoon, when the thing happened that brought the total of fatalities at Death Corner from nine to eleven, there had been practically nothing moving along King Street but the two vehicles which crashed. I know because I saw the whole thing.

It was at ten minutes to six. The dying sun slanted down Altsheller Street's narrow canyon, gilding the corner of the old loft building on the southeast corner of the intersection. I lounged against that building, looking around for—I knew not what.

I saw the coal truck coming down King Street, from the south. It was coming fast; these huge trucks can go like the wind. The driver was evidently late on a delivery and thinking of dinner.

From the north came a small sedan with two men in the front seat. The fall day was warm. The sedan's driver had his window open, so that I could see his face with cameo clarity.

I saw these two rapidly moving things approach each other. I saw the traffic light change from green to yellow. And I saw both truck and sedan spurt forward to cross before the red showed.

The rest was as bewildering as it was horrible.

The driver of the sedan had been smiling, probably at something the other man said. And then, as his front wheels whirred past the curb line and onto the intersection, he turned his face from the road ahead. He looked in my direction. Indeed, I thought for a fraction of a second that he was looking at me, before I realized that his gaze went over my head.

The smile froze on his lips. Abruptly there came to his face such a look of horror that I felt the breath freeze in my throat. I'll swear I saw his eyes glaze, like the eyes of a man newly dead.

All this was a matter of a half-second. And then I shouted aloud, as did several other people near by—screamed to the man, and pointed ahead of him in warning.

The driver of the truck was half standing in his cab as he smashed down on his brake with all his power. He was hauling at the ponderous steering-wheel. But it was useless.

The sedan's driver had jerked his wheel a little to the left, in the direction of his horrified gaze. His light car was shooting straight toward the nose of the truck.

Time seemed to stand still in that hideous second; rather, it seemed to hang suspended on a hook of horror. Then the two rapidly moving masses of metal met head on.

I heard a scream that was perhaps from one of the doomed men in the sedan and perhaps from a bystander. I saw the white, appalled face of the truck driver. Then—the end.

The sedan was a mass of junk, half under the truck. One of the truck's big front wheels had cracked off with the crash, slamming the truck to the pavement.

The driver of the sedan lay thirty feet away, as still as though already dead. The man who had ridden beside him had been

thrown forward through the windshield at the moment of impact and had somehow gotten under the truck when the ten-ton bulk carried the light sedan back along its tracks for a few yards. People were trying to avert their eyes from the body under the truck. . . .

I had followed the ambulance that bore the sedan driver to the emergency ward. And I had there heard the dying man's whisper, in accents of horror, of a "face."

What face? What in God's name had he been raving about? And why had he taken his eyes off the street and rammed straight into the coal truck?

Eleven killed on Death Corner through reasonless accidents! Had all felt terror freeze their blood while they took their glazed eyes from the road just long enough for motored death to overrun them? Had all seen—a "face"?

BACK at Death Corner, I found that the truck had been jacked up and the other body removed from under it. Men were working to clear the giant thing off the street. And I got to work myself.

I had one slight lead to go on: the direction in which the driver of the sedan had looked, with horror in his eyes, just before he hit the truck.

He had seemed to look right at me—but then I had got the impression that his gaze went over my head. And it was just after he looked that the glaze of terror had come to his eyes.

What in the world had he seen? And where had he seen it?

The latter question I set about trying to answer first.

I had been leaning against the corner of the building at the northeast corner of the intersection. And somewhere at that building the driver must have looked. I examined the front of it from across the street.

It was a three-story building, long past the point where it should have been torn

down to make room for a more modern structure. The first floor was occupied by business concerns. The second and third floors had windows so grimy that I could not tell if they were occupied or not.

I crossed over, found a door leading to a stairway, and went up to the second floor.

There was a corridor up there, and off it were doors with frosted glass panels. On some of the panels were traces of lettering, indicating that doctors' offices and small sales representatives' headquarters had once been here. But as far as I could see, none of the places was tenanted now.

I went down the corridor, opening first one door and then another. All the doors were unlocked; for the purpose, I suppose, of letting the building agent show prospective renters without bothering to get keys. Each office was dust-covered, long vacant. I went to the street window of each cubicle, and looked carefully at the floor under it, and at the dusty sills. Possibly the driver of the sedan had seen someone or something in one of these windows that had horrified him.

But office after office presented the same thing: unbroken dust layers all around the King Street windows, proving that no one had stood near them for many weeks.

All—but the last office.

I was about ready to conclude that none of the little offices was occupied when I came to that last one, in the King and Alsheller corner of the building. Then I saw that the door of this corner office was open. And I heard a stir of movement in there.

My heart began to thud in my throat. Someone up here after all! Perhaps the key to the mystery was about to be discovered.

But my thought died when a person backed out of the office and started to shut and fasten the door after her. An old woman, shabbily dressed, with gray hair stringing in wisps from under a hat so

shapeless and drab that I can't remember now what it looked like; I can only remember that she did wear a hat.

She turned and saw me. She was older even than I had thought from seeing her bent back. At least eighty, I'd say. But there was a sort of strength in her wrinkled, ugly hag's face that relieved her age. Old she might be, and feeble, but she was not senile—not with that light of intelligence in her dim eyes, and the alertness of her manner as she saw me.

She straightened. "You wanted to see me, young man?" she cackled. "You need my services?"

I smiled a little at that.

"Your services?" I said.

"Yes. You would like to know your future?"

I tumbled then, of course. The crone, a fortune-teller, had picked up one of these empty offices cheap for her sucker business. I started to grin, then switched it off. The old woman's window looked down on the scene of the accident. She might be able to tell me a little about it, but she'd have to be pumped subtly. The angle of her long jaw, curving up a bit at the end toward her long, craggy nose, indicated obstinacy.

"Why, yes," I said, "I would like to have my fortune told. If you have the time——"

"I have all the time in the world," she said, smiling.

I almost shuddered at her smile. It creased her old face till it looked like a withered apple. And into the lines and creases crept a look of dark decay where the pigment under the ancient skin was bunched together. She had a wen the size of the end of my thumb on her left cheek, near her ear, that didn't help improve her appearance at all.

She turned to the door and opened it again. She waved me in. I entered, looking around.

There was a bare table in the center of the place, with a plain wooden chair on each side of it. The office had two windows, one on King Street and one on Altsheller. It was quite dim; the sun had set some time ago and only dusk lit the place; but she made no move to turn on the lights.

She sat on one of the chairs, and nodded for me to take the other one.

"Cards, or palm?" she said.

"Palm," I said, extending my hand.

She took it in her dry claw. I felt chilled by the contact. She stared at my palm. And I tried to get information.

"That was a bad accident that happened on this corner a little while ago," I said.

"The heart line runs straight across the palm," the crone mumbled. "Accident?"

"Yes. A sedan hit a truck, head on. Didn't you hear it, or look out and see the crowds afterward?"

"Oh, yes, I heard it. The heart line parallels the head line, save at the end."

"Both men were killed in the sedan," I said. "And no one can figure out why the man drove into the truck."

THE crone raised her head a little and looked at me in the dusk of the office. It was now so late that I could see her eyes only as dim, dark glints.

"No one can figure it out?" she droned. "No. And no one can figure out why the other accidents happened at this corner. Except for the first one."

"The first one?" I repeated.

"Yes. The one in which a helpless old woman was run down by a drunken driver." The hag's voice quivered with anger. Old herself, she evidently felt enraged for the similar type of person who had met her death just outside because a driver had been criminally drunken and careless.

"Were you here when that happened?" I said.

She nodded. The repulsive wen on her left cheek seemed about to be engulfed by the loose folds of her ancient skin. "Yes, I was at this corner when it happened. Your emotions are ruled by your reason. You are calculating, a little selfish, and slow to anger——"

"I saw the accident this afternoon," I said. "Just before it occurred, a curious thing happened. The driver of the sedan looked toward this building, toward this very corner of it, and saw something. I don't know what it was, but it distracted his attention so that he didn't look where he was going."

The old woman stared at me.

"Did you come to have your future revealed, or to talk nonsense?" she said.

I shrugged.

"Frankly," I said, "I came to see if you could give me any information concerning this afternoon's accident, or any of the other accidents. Your windows look down on the scene of all of them."

She got up, dropping my hand. And that was one relief at least: the cessation of contact with her dry, chill skin.

"The first accident is all that concerns me. The murder—for that's what it was—of a harmless old person. The other deaths"—she shrugged—"are no more than deserved, to pay for that first one."

I started toward the door, but the old hag wasn't quite through yet.

"You lied when you said you wanted your future foretold," she spat at me. "But you shall hear anyway. You are going to die before the year is out—at *this corner!*"

I got out then, in a hurry. I'm a fairly young man, fairly muscular. She was a bent wisp of an old woman. But there was something in the febrile light of her dim eyes that frightened me. I was glad to get away.

However, I had discovered precisely nothing from following my lead. I hadn't found out what the sedan's driver looked

at, and I hadn't uncovered any least clue to his rambling talk of "the face."

I STARTED toward the office. There was one more thing I could do, I thought. That was—to undergo myself the conditions under which these mysterious accidents had occurred at Death Corner.

Morgan looked at me strangely when I suggested it.

"You want a car, and you want to drive across the intersection at King and Altsheller yourself?" he repeated.

I nodded. "Yes. Maybe I can find out that way what causes the accidents."

He fiddled with a pencil.

"Maybe you could," he said. "But maybe you wouldn't be able to tell anyone about it afterward."

He threw the pencil down.

"You damn fool! Everyone who has been in an accident at the corner has died as a result of it! You're a bum reporter, but at that you're more use to me alive than dead."

"Some of 'em haven't died," I pointed out. "The driver of the coal truck, for example——"

"From what you tell me," he pointed out, "the driver of the coal truck didn't see anything to horrify him, either. It's the people who see that, whatever it is, that die. So if you did accomplish what you set out to do, you wouldn't be writing any accounts of it later."

"Nuts!" I said, more confidently than I felt. I put from my mind the words of the old hag who had professed to foretell my future: "*You are going to die before the year is out—at this corner!*"

"Supply me a car," I urged. "Probably nothing at all will happen. But it's worth a try, anyway."

NEXT afternoon at a quarter of five, I drove slowly down King Street toward Altsheller. All the accidents had oc-

curred between five and six. So I was getting there at a quarter of five to be sure and cover the time—if there was anything but coincidence in the hour of the accidents.

I planned to cruise back and forth across that intersection from a little before five to a little past six—and see if anything happened to me. In theory it was like holding a loaded gun to your head and pulling the trigger to see if the bullet would miss fire. In fact, I was able to laugh it off to some extent. Of course nothing would happen, particularly when I was on the alert for anything peculiar that might occur. None of the other drivers who had been killed here had been forewarned.

Duplicate all circumstances of the other accident, and see what happened. Well, I began.

I rolled to a stop at the red light, then started up and crossed Altsheller. . . .

I got across that intersection with my breath aching in my throat and with cold perspiration studding my forehead. I wouldn't have admitted it to a soul, because it sounded too crazy; but I was filled with foreboding. Something, I felt, was going to happen on this corner again today. And the words of the hag with the wen on her cheek rang in my ears: that I would die at this intersection before the year was out. Well, it was fall now. That didn't give me much time, I tried to tell myself jokingly. . . .

I turned at the next block, and came back. Again I drove across the intersection. . . .

I had made perhaps twenty trips back and forth over the crossing, sometimes swiftly with the green light, sometimes starting up after the red, when I thought for a moment I might have discovered the reason for the accidents.

The dying sun was slanting down Altsheller Street. Something about the con-

formation of the street seemed to funnel the light, making it stronger than normal sunset. And as I crossed the intersection at about twenty minutes past five, I found myself blinded for an instant. It was as if a powerful spotlight had been focussed directly into my eyes.

I cursed and slammed on the brakes, narrowly missing a man who had been running in front of me against the lights; and not missing a heavy bump in the rear from the car behind me, which had had no warning of my swift stop, and could not stop in time.

No damage was done, I saw as I pulled over to the curb after getting beyond the intersection. I examined the source of the brilliant light that had dazzled me.

It was a very simple thing. The sun, for an instant of angle that had been just right, had glanced from the polished chromium knob that controlled the opening and closing of the windshield in the center of the dash. Due to the slant of Altsheller Street, that instant of blinding reflection had occurred at the worst possible time—just as I was in the middle of the intersection. That must have happened to the others, I theorized.

Two things were not taken into account by this theory. One was the look of horror on the faces of those about to die. The other was the fact that only my make of car, probably, had a windshield control-knob at just that spot. However, I thought I could explain those two things.

"On all cars," I told myself, "there are probably *some* polished dash-gadgets that could reflect the sunlight at day's end between five and six. As for the look of horror—a driver, blinded and fearing to hit something in his blindness, would tend to look horrified. The driver of the sedan, for instance, must have been dazzled, have looked away to try to blink his sight back again, and have expressed horror because for the moment he was helpless."

Just that simple, I thought. And, thinking it, I started the car again to go back to the office and report my findings to Morgan for whatever they might be worth.

The newspaper office was north of me, which meant that it was across Altsheller from where I had parked. I made a wide turn on King Street, and headed back north.

I had laced back and forth over that intersection till I knew every cobblestone in it. The familiarity with it bred the slight carelessness that familiarity always breeds, I suppose. And I was sure Death Corner's riddle lay in reflected sunlight that occurred at the sunset hour—a danger I could eliminate by simply turning the bright windshield knob so that it slanted at a different angle.

I was in a hurry to get to the office, and I had the green light, so I spun the car along up to twenty-five miles an hour before reaching to shift from second gear. But the reach was not completed.

When I got to about twenty yards of the intersection, the green light shifted to yellow. The lights are long there, and, as I said, I was in a hurry, now. I stepped hard on the accelerator, still in second gear.

The car spurted forward. I was doing a little better than thirty, I think, when I came to the crossing. Coming down the other side of the street I saw a big sedan. It was racing for the light, too. But I paid it little attention. We would pass on that wide street with twenty feet between us.

Like a yellow golden shaft, the sun hit me down Altsheller Street. And I suddenly felt cold with a chill from the tomb. I only remember three things, fragments from the chaos that ensued in the next few seconds. One was this ghastly feeling of chill, another was an overwhelming compulsion to look to the left, though God knows I should have kept my eyes on the road.

The third was—the thing I saw when my eyes turned left.

I looked straight at it, as though an eery hand had turned my head in precisely the right direction. And as I looked, I heard my own voice raised high in a scream of horror.

THE dying sun glittered full on the corner windows of the old building on the northeast corner of the intersection. Particularly they glistened on the second floor window. The yellow rays were like a brilliant amber spotlight played full on that window. Their strength dissipated the grime on the panes, and showed in every ghastly detail the thing pressed there.

That thing was a face.

I saw a long, craggy jaw upturned at the end toward a long, craggy nose. I saw a countenance seamed with a million wrinkles, with the creased skin showing ashen and decayed-looking where the pigmentation was gathered. I saw, even in that flash and at that distance, a hairy protuberance on the left cheek, a wen, like an evil eruption on dead flesh.

But that was not the full horror. The thing that wrung the scream from my lips was the head.

The face was turned down, lowering at me, so that I could see most of the top of the head. Only—there was no top.

Where the round of the skull should have shown through lank, stringy gray hair, there was a gory and uneven hole. The whole top of the skull was gone, as the top of a can is removed by a can-opener. And I could see the contents of the skull, as the contents of an open can may be seen.

With that ghastly sight filling my horror-dilated eyes, and with the sound of my own scream keening in my ears, I hit something. I felt my body rising in the seat, felt myself strike the windshield of the car. Then—nothing.

GRADUALLY I became aware of pain. It racked me from head to foot, drew a moan from my aching lips. I opened my eyes.

I saw white walls, the white enamel bars of a hospital bed, a girl in a white uniform beside me. I heard a man say: "Look, he's coming out of it at last."

Full consciousness came back to me then and I struggled to sit up.

"The face!" I whispered. "Oh, God—the face!"

Another figure came into my range of vision, then. It was Morgan, city editor. He stared down at me with a look in his eyes unlike any I'd ever seen there before. The sight of his familiar and prosaic features calmed me a little. I controlled my twitching lips—even made them attempt a grin, though the attempt must have been pretty bad.

"Well," I said weakly, "I've got the story of Death Corner for you, though you'll have to get someone else to write it."

I noticed then that it was daylight. "I've been unconscious all night!" I exclaimed.

"You've been out of your head for three days," Morgan said gruffly.

"Three days!" It didn't seem possible. I tried to shrug, and winced with the movement. "It doesn't matter. The story's as good now as it was three days ago. You go to the building on the northeast corner of King and Altsheller, and in the second-floor corner office——"

The expression on his face stopped me. He laid his hand lightly on my shoulder.

"I've already gone, Bill," he said. "You told everything in your delirium, over and over again."

I stared at him.

"You told of meeting an old hag of a fortune-teller in that office. You told of her prophecy that you'd die at the intersection. You told of seeing her face at the

window later, and of the sight of her head."

He stopped for a moment, then went on.

"You were watching that face you thought you saw, so closely that you ran head on into a big sedan coming from the opposite direction."

"Face I *thought* I saw?" I echoed. "It was considerably more than a thought! I *did* see it! And I think I know the answer. That old woman was insanely angered when the other old crone—you know, the first on the new list of accidents at Death Corner—was run down and killed. She took that office, and in a sort of crazed revenge she daubed red on her skull to make it look as if it had been battered open, and then pressed her face, like the face of a dead woman, against the window. The sun at that hour strikes full on the window, and someone, pedestrian or driver, was bound to see it. . . ."

Again my words trailed to a stop at the look on Morgan's face. The queer expression in his eyes had deepened.

"Sure, Bill," he said hesitantly. It was the first time I had ever seen Morgan—hard-boiled Morgan—hesitant about anything. "I doped that out too. And as I said, we went to look at that office."

His hand touched my shoulder again.

"Dust gathers fast in a city, Bill. There was half an inch of dust, literally, over everything in the office. It covered the floor, and the window-sills, and an old table and two chairs someone had left in there. . . . Well, now wait. It didn't cover one of the chairs. That seemed to have been sat on recently, and on the table were two spots as though two arms had rested on it for a minute."

"Just *one*—of the chairs—had been used?" I whispered.

He nodded. "Just one of them. And there was no trace whatever of feet in the dust around the windows. The building manager says no one of the offices has been tenanted for at least eighteen months, including the corner one. And there has never been a fortune-teller on their board."

I could feel the slow blood pump thickly through my pulses. Morgan cleared his throat.

"I dug up the police description of the first woman killed, Bill. She was a wrinkled old hag, unidentified. She had a large wen on her left cheek. . . ."

He stepped away from my bed, at a warning glance from the nurse.

"I'd better run along, Bill. You'll be out in a month, the doc says, but you're pretty weak now. As for the story of Death Corner . . . I think maybe we'd better just say between us that you imagined something, and let it go at that."

We looked at each other for a long time.

"Yes," I said hoarsely, "I guess we'd better—let it go at that."

I WAS out of the hospital in the promised month. I didn't die at Death Corner as was prophesied. Of course, I still have a month to go at this writing and the prophecy was that I'd die before the year was out. . . .

However, I tell myself that even the thought of such a thing is absurd. To beat it, I make myself walk across the intersection of King and Altsheller every day on my way to and from the office.

But I wait very carefully for the traffic lights to turn before I step from the curb. And even then, sometimes, I wonder. . . .

