

Ta-Ta, RaChaCha!!

Fock 1: The Road

The New York Thruway is a pretty empty road, at least in Upstate and Western NY. And there is a difference between those two terms. Western NY'ers – i.e., Rochesterians, Fredonians, Ithacats, Syracusations, Buffaloheads, and their ilk – all seem to shun the term “upstate.” I first used it when I moved to Rochester, and was given bad vibes and askance looks by the locals. It was as bad as mispronouncing Rochester itself.

There is no emphasis or syllabic accent used in the name Rochester. To those who live there, it is not a dominating first syllable followed by two subservient ones, as Jack Benny's servant was (*Oh, RAW-chester...*). It is truly a self-deprecating name, little more than a murmur, where no syllable stands out. You slide through the first syllable (*ro-*), then the second (*ches-*), as if the third one would have all the bang to it (*ro-ches-TER*). But when you get to that closing syllable, you act like you already used up your allotted emphasis quota, and just slide right out of the word (*rochester*). It hurries to get itself over with, like it's not worthy of any attention. It shouldn't even be capitalized. How very humble.



Rochester calls itself The Flower City. It used to be The Flour City, but when the flour industry along the mighty Genesee River relocated elsewhere decades ago, the city invoked the little known Homonym Rule, and went floral. Then they set about planting lilacs and such all over the city.

The flowers do thrive in the non-winter months (i.e., mid-May through mid-October) but that's mainly because of all the damn rain. It's certainly not due to a wealth of sunshine; Rachacha only gets an average of 95 days a year of sun. That's barely one day out of four. The overwhelming grayness is deeee-pressing. If by chance you awake to sunny skies one day, you want to call in sick to work because you don't want to waste the rare opportunity to revel in the warm rays that are so alive.



There was one chilly, gray, slushy Monday in March when a co-worker said to me, “Did you see the forecast for tomorrow? It's supposed to be a nice day!” and strolled off all happy and optimistic. Well, yes, I had just seen the forecast for Tuesday: mostly cloudy with glimpses of sun, 40% chance of wet snow, high around 42. And that was enough of a “nice day” to evoke a positive attitude.

But, to be totally fair, very late spring through mid-autumn – we're talking end of May till mid-October here, so only about 4½ months – can be quite nice. And the city is festive. The fine folk of the Flower City are just so damn happy that they are not up to their frigid fannies in hoary fluff, that Festivals are called for, and are fervidly flocked to.

Summer abounds with such Festivals: the Lilac Festival, the Corn Hill Festival, the Park Avenue Festival, the East End Festival, it seems like there is one each fortnight in a different part of the city throughout the summer. Major streets are closed off, and a preponderance of artists and craftspeople set up tent villages to ply their wares, musicians play, foodists feed the meandering public, and good nature abounds under the warm summer sun (unless it rains)(which is often does).

Anyway, as I was saaaaaaying, “Upstate” was perceived as kind of a phony term. It was too broad and overused. Hell, even some folk from Poughkeepsie, which is almost south of Connecticut, deign to label themselves as Upstate NY’ers, so how cool could it be? We Westerners didn’t want to be associated with that almost-urban rabble.

Albany is Upstate, and that’s fine. They can be whatever they want; they’re the freakin’ capital, after all. “Upstate” is actually a nice way of simply declaring (proudly) that you are NOT from the metropolitan New York City region. “Upstate” implies grass, and trees, and, very likely, farms. Most of New York State really is very pleasant country. Way Upstate, like in the Adirondacks, where the Olympic host city of Lake Placid is located, is delightful.



Western NY’ers do get to one-up the other Upstaters, though: we were all Upstate, but only a special few of us were Western. So we had the esoteric thing going for us. Which was nice.

But the Thruway is a bore. Really. Once you’ve done it end to end once, you never really are all that interested in doing it again. Especially once you get an hour or so west of Albany, out by Herkimer, and Canajoharie, and Fultonville. The latter peers up longingly at the Thruway from both sides, and has an eye-catching, red-white-and-blue painted water tower that rises just above road level and proudly boasts booming commerce aplenty, in the vain hope that Thruway traffic will condescend to descend into the town. But F’ville looks like nothing more than a shakily exhaling little burg that is well past its prime (which had been modest to begin with). The water tower is lipstick on grandma, nothing more.

I’m sure it thrived (throve?) back in the pre-Thruway days, when anyone trekking though the upstate void used the little red lines on the map, but with I-90 perched higher than the highest rooftop, like some Roman aqueduct over an infertile valley, the stop-for-a-biters and stop-for-the-nighters of old just sail on by...

The Thruway is a strange road in its own right. I drove it many times during my stint as University of Rochester men’s track coach. It just lulls you into a mental fog. The mile markers pass by, and you keep doing subtraction in your head, and dividing miles by 60, and estimating arrival time, because there is just *nothing* to capture your attention. The wildlife refuge between Syracuse and Rochester is like goddamn Siberia: long, totally flat, empty, mostly marshy grasslands, with totally uneventful trees. I love trees, but these are just blah. If somebody came out one night and cut them all down, I doubt I ever would have even noticed. I would’ve said, “Nah, there weren’t any damn trees here. I woulda noticed ‘em!”

Many roadtrip miles have been spent on long stretches of empty road, but the Thruway is not quite that empty. There *are* trees, and there *are* occasional towns, and there *are* rolling hills. Unlike the long stretch of I-80 through the vast Kansas void, which is fascinating for its sheer unending emptiness, NY’s Thruway has plenty of stuff; it’s just really *boring* stuff.

There are occasional vistas that qualify as good scenery -- deep, grassy valleys, with a winding river through cultivated fields and stereotypical farmhouses – but, for all their niceness, they too are rather ordinary.

Probably the single most striking scenery on the Thruway is Exit 29. Not what Exit 29 leads to – sleepy little farm country villages like Ames and Palatine Bridge, and Ephratah – but Exit 29 itself. High atop a long hill, the exit ramp loops away from the south side of the roadway. The highway was cut just around the summit of the hill, and the exit ramps themselves were carved into the summit. But it’s the way it’s carved that grabs you.

The summit of the hill is fertile ground, and the grass that covers it is thick and lush and deeply green. As you approach it, you notice curved gaps in the green surface. As you begin to pass it, it strikes you: the half-cloverleaf roadways are a full forty feet below the level of the grass, and the canyons that were excavated for those roadways are steep, shiny, and almost jet black. They are like tall corridors of magnificent anthracite. The rich blackness is unbroken from roadway to surface grass, and the walls are so steep that they are almost purely vertical. The curl of the cloverleaf leads one ramp off into some unseen destiny, while, a few hundred yards away, vehicles emerge from a similar canyon as they approach the Thruway.

In winter, the contrast is even more vivid, as a three-foot-thick snowy mantle tops the wet black walls, and frozen streams of runoff drape icicles five feet wide, three feet thick, and forty feet long down those walls to the canyon floor.

Exit 29 beckons to you, calls you to come drive it. It was always tempting to do so, but I never did. If I had ever taken the time out of my ride and gone through the toll booth rigmarole, I would have driven through it several times, u-turning as necessary, rolling torpidly along at six miles per hour, and craning my neck to stare up at the steep ebony walls, while traffic would backlog behind me, accompanying my tour with horn music and enthusiastic vocals: *C'mon, a-hole, it's a Goddamn exit ramp! It ain't the Grand Frickin' Canyon, ya retard!!*

But I never did that little detour; I was always in too much of a hurry to get east, or back to The Flower City. I always told myself, *sometime, when I'm not in such a rush...* But it never happened.

And no matter how many times I traveled the Thruway, the ostrich ranch always surprised me. Yes, ostriches. A fenced-in corral with ostriches prancing about in it, just off the side of the highway near Farmington or Phelps or one of those other little places just east of Rochester. How weird is that??? Yet, it never stuck with me. The Thruway Fog had already sunk in, I guess. You'd think I'd be saying to everyone I met, "Did you see those frikkin' *ostriches*? WTF are *ostriches* doing in *New York*???" But no. Never once mentioned them to anybody until just now. Ostriches. Fuckin' A. Or B. Or K. Yeah: Fuckin' K.

Which brings up a question: what is your "any key"? You know, when the 'puter prompts you to "press any key to continue", which do you choose? Do you have a particular key that you depend on? I gave it a lot of thought (this is the type of thing that the Thruway gives you leisure to do).

Homer Simpson's answer to this is, of course, "which one's the 'any' key?" But what key do *you* press? I mean it: which one?

Me? I hit K. Every damn time, without fail. K. I choose K. Fuckin' K.

It's a good key. A damn good key. It has not failed me yet, so I'm sticking with proven performance.

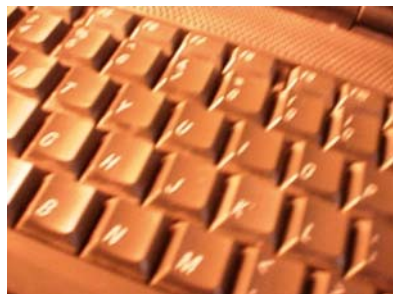
Perhaps I could branch out sometime and try another key, like J or Q, or one of the others that get little use. But I'm wary of them. Maybe there is a reason why they get such sparse attention. Maybe they are inherently unreliable, and that's why we use them so infrequently in our daily language.

K seems to get plenty of use, especially being such a prominent closer of so many profane words: where would "fuck", "suck", "cock", "dick", and "prick" be without K? Not to mention "kinky." Damn, I mentioned it. And, think about this for a second: which finger plips the K key on your keyboard, huh? Huh huh? The right bird! Something poignant there. Damn poignant.

So, it would seem that K is King. But not so, fishface! In the official rankings of letter frequency, K ranks a dismal 22nd, getting only 0.8% of all English letter usage. Twenty-fucking-second! Not even 1 out of every 100 letters. They obviously didn't poll South Boston on this. Even V appears more often than K does. **V!** Makes me wonder if Roman numerals count. Only J, X, Q, and Z are used less than K.

But, hey, coupled up with O, K is OK with everybody. In most Internet chat situations, K has replaced OK, the O proving to be superfluous.

In all, K is a rather exciting letter. Its hard sound gets it noticed, though it generously shares that



sound with C, a letter which apparently is having a tough time finding its own identity. C is either K or S, especially when it starts a word. Those aforementioned words, along with countless others, all end in CK. Why do we need the C? K can handle it on its own. C just takes a free ride and gets in on all the fun words. Witness "yak", which is pronounced the same as "yack." But I guess we gotta have C in there, or they wouldn't be "four letter words."

K goes humble too, letting N get all the credit in words like "knife", "knowledge", "knickers" and "knockers."

The only time C is really needed is when it teams with H.

The CH sound is unique. So we do need C, but it's grossly overrated. How it earned a spot in that coveted top three is beyond me.

So, I would NEVER press C as my any key. Even though it checks in at #12 in the rankings (partly because of its parasitic leeching), I just don't trust that would know which way to send me.

Somehow, I would not even consider a vowel.

Or a punctuation mark. *Definitely* not the question mark!

The more logical thinkers among you probably would smugly campaign for the Space Bar, just 'cuz it's big. Well, I've thought about that one too. Given my propensity for things connected with the words "Space" and "Bar", one think it would be a natural choice.

However, the Space Bar is a "bar", not a "key", and the imperative clearly indicates: "Press any **key** to continue." So that's out.

Numbers? Nah, too hard to reach all the way up there. Plus, you're a true geek if you reach for a number when there are letters to be had.

[Just for the rekord, that digression konsisted of 634 words and 2698 karakters, and, though several words that inklude K were deliberately used, only 6% of the words in that sektion actually inkorporated the 11th letter of the alphabet. And even with 18 references to the letter K itself, and 13 uses of the key word "key", K still only chalked up 2.2% of all the karakters utilized. K is kool. I even have one – and a kapital one at that – in my surname. So lick me.]

Anywaaaaayyy.....

The thing that really perplexed me about the NY Thruway is that they sometimes **close it!!** It is the only major highway at all between western NY cities, but when it snows a lot – and it snows a lot a lot – they sometimes shut the damn thing down. *Sorry, ya can't use this big, flat, straight, wide road to get home. Try those snaky, curvy, icy, hilly, slippery, treacherous, unlit backroads as alternate routes. And have a lovely evening.*

One time, coming back to Rochester from a track meet in Boston late one winter night, we got caught in a major league snow squall on a long barren stretch of the Thruway. It was horizontal snow. Total white-out. The Thruway was coated completely – no sight of pavement or lines. We tried crawling along at snail speed, but the only things that the headlights illuminated were fat flying flakes of fluff. ["F" ranks 16th.] Pulling over was not an option; we all wanted to get home. Besides, we figured, if we pulled over, and were lucky enough to deduce exactly where the side of the road was – there were no lights or guard rails or curbs to go by -- the next car or truck to come along would probably just slam right into us anyway, since they wouldn't even see our flashers until it was too late.

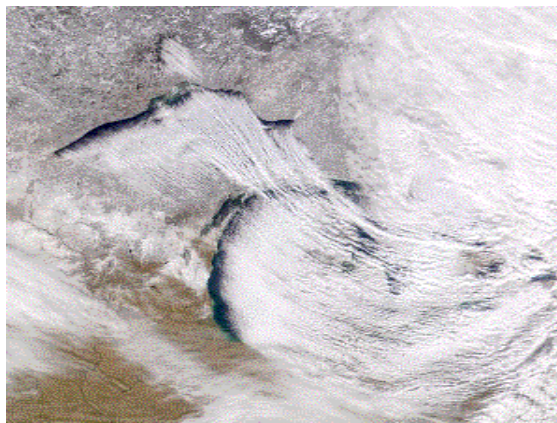
Then it occurred to me that the problem was not insufficient light, but too much light. So, without announcing my theory to my passengers, I shut off my headlights and only left on the yellow parking lights. Holy Mother of Snowy Egrets, what a difference! It was like infrared headlights. The yellow did not light up the snow, but cast a low glow ahead into the night, just enough to make plain where the slightly elevated roadbed was. Now confident in my course, I quickened the pace. My passengers (the UR 4x400 relay team), who had all been in back watching *Good Will Hunting* on my VCP, looked up, bemused. "Uhhh, Coach, can you see anything?" they queried. My deep-voiced reply of, "I see all" either comforted them or worried them enough to keep them quiet.

The storms in western New York really blow. In both ways. Lake effect snow is a very odd thing. The cold Canadian air gathers moisture as it zooms across Lake Ontario, and when it collides with land, it becomes a wave of gray that billows skyward and inland for a couple dozen miles. The gray becomes light, dry snow, and it seems to fall almost daily from November through April.

It's a lot like brushing snow off your porch with a broom. You push it hard with a mighty swipe and the snow billows up to the side, then lightly settles back down to earth. Then your next swipe is along a different path, though it may be at a different angle too, and it could be that the second brushing just settles down right on top of the first. Maybe it will, maybe it won't. The winds across Lake Ontario and Lake Erie are like that broom.

The first winter I spent in Rochester made me wonder. It wasn't too bad at all. It was actually surprisingly mild. After a six-day period of almost non-stop flurries in early January, things just turned really mellow. Our outdoor track was totally clear by early February, and the temps got so mild that a couple of my freshman mid-distance runners actually ran a repeat-400 workout *shirtless* on February 15th.

I raved to my colleagues about how overrated these Rochester winters were, and



thumbed my nose at my most detested season.

March arrived and I anticipated an easy slide into the Spring Season, following, of course, our last indoor meet, which would be in Boston, my hometown. I was psyched: fly into Beantown, stay for three nights at a cushy Marriott, bring a few coaches to the Uno's where I used to bartend and get a few free libations from everybody's favorite barkeep, Thayer, serve as tour leader for my team's free day and night out on the town, and make our conference title defense in front of familiar faces. Nights out with friends in the good old watering holes, a couple of very enjoyable days of competition, and almost-plush accommodations, all on school money. Ahhh, yes, what a great way it would be to end my first indoor season here.

BUT, in a precision attack, Old Man Winter dumped two feet of snow on Rochester International Airport the morning that we were scheduled to leave. The timing of the snow was critical: had it started three hours later, or had the winds abated a few hours sooner, the necessary flights could have escaped RIA and been winging the Yellowjackets to Boston in time to compete.

The cold front from the northwest, the sweeping winds off the lake, and the moist air from the south all locked horns at about 3 a.m. and would grapple ferociously through the morning. As the stalwart and dapperly-attired UR trackies boarded the team bus in the pre-dawn hours, it was apparent that flight 2274 would not be lifting off at its scheduled 6:10 time. Still, optimism was prevailing: the storm would subside around noon, if the meteorological mavens at The Weather Channel could be believed, and we would surely arrive at our destination by early evening at the latest, still comfortably ahead of the meet's Friday afternoon start.

With sideways waves of snow leaving the appointed plane all but invisible through the terminal window, and with airport lighting flickering under the storm's wrath, the 'Jackets hunkered down for some time-killing. A pool was circulated, and predictions gathered on the actual liftoff time. Matt Powers' "4:25 p.m." prognostication was initially scoffed at, but when the announcement came that the airport was closed, his pessimism began to look like prescience.

Some studied. Some meandered casually around on a self-guided airport tour. Many (head coach included) rolled up winter coats as pillows, or used them as blankets, and curled up on the floor, making the most of the opportunity to catch up on that precious commodity, sleep.



They were all well dressed, as befits such a team trip, right down to the shoes. It had been a saddening sight to see the early arrivers from the women's team, in nice dresses and dressy heeled shoes and nylons, struggling toward the bus through several inches of snow, their feet frozen, and their freshly done-up hair matted by the pelting snow.

There were some diversions, however, to pass the time. A group of high school cheerleaders was also planning to depart that morning, and were clustered in warmups nearby. To break their own boredom, and to brighten the overall atmosphere, they doffed warmups and performed their routines in uniform for all of us fellow strandeers. They were loud and boisterous, but after about twenty minutes, they decided (as we had already), that enough was enough.

There was a 50-minute wait in line at McDonald's, but since nobody had anything to do, they waited. The staff – probably short-handed anyway due to the storm – must have loved that. I can't even picture myself, expecting a calm, quiet, Thursday morning shift, and getting slammed like that the whole day. Oh, I'd be cheerful as all hell.

What galled me the most, ate away at me throughout the day, was the fact that I couldn't even pass the time in THE BAR!!! It was open, sure, and crowded too. But, being Mr. Role Model, I could only stroll by and look longingly at those tall, cold, golden beverages. I salivated shamelessly. That was the day's biggest challenge.

By 10:00, with Nanook Of The North conditions still raging, we knew that a Thursday departure was not to be, and we were rebooked on the same flight for Friday morning. Phone calls were made to the University to come and retrieve the unfortunate athletes, but bad news came in response: Rochester had been declared a State of Emergency, and non-essential driving was prohibited. The 24" of snow that fell in that seven-hour span had choked roadways with cars, busses, and trucks that could not negotiate the drifting and piling snow. Vehicles of all kinds had skidded or driven blindly off the sides of highways and exit ramps, burrowing themselves into snowbanks that held them captive.

The NY State Thruway was closed.

Of course, warm, dry and at least reasonably comfortable in our airport confines, we were oblivious to all of that, only learning of it much later. Our concern was: where's our ride home? The rest of Rochester was struggling with biting arctic winds, bone-chilling temperatures, and swirling and mounting snow; we were simply bored.

The snow stopped around eleven o'clock, and a bright sunny afternoon was developing, but the winds would not subside. Plows could be seen working futilely on the runways, pushing aside substantial volumes of snow, only to have the light fluff blow right back across the cleared swath. Prospects for open runways began to look bleaker.

Meanwhile, furious digging was being done at campus, in an effort to extract the two school vans from their drifted cocoons. The winds had packed a mattress of snow tightly *under* the vehicles, and even if they could be freed, they faced impassable routes, as the bus stuck sideways in the middle of Library Road symbolized.

After a few more hours, two of my 400-meter runners, Jon and Chad, opted to brave the elements, and ran back through the piled snow and minus-fifteen degree wind chills. In a great show of team spirit, Jon returned with a car – despite the city-wide travel ban -- and began a shuttle back to the University.

After his second return, our Director of Sports and Recreation arrived with one of the vans. We happily piled 18 or so of the remaining 27 into it, and soon realized why our ride had been so long in coming. The roads were an obstacle course. Between navigating among the snow-covered islands that were abandoned vehicles, and steadfastly mushing onward to avoid getting stuck ourselves in the foot-deep slop, the five-minute ride to campus quadrupled.

The worst complicator were the RTC busses. With virtually nobody in them, they lacked the weight necessary to get any traction at all. Almost every major road was fully or partially blocked by a bus spinning its wheels and fish-tailing across the lanes. We zagged our way across the city's lesser roads, constantly finding yet another bus stuck, and having to reroute ourselves again, all the while dodging drifted snow, and slick patches where other vehicles had spun the snow down to glare ice.

Blue Man brought me back for one final swing through RIA, and the team was rescued, ready to try it all again the next morning. I got back to #515 at 8:30 p.m., sixteen hours after I had left. I had to shovel myself a parking spot. Oh, yay.

With Plan B firmly in place, we awoke for our early-morning bus ride once again on Friday. This time, however, we coaches soon learned that our flight had been cancelled. Plans C and D were hastily concocted, and thrown into place. Flights could be had out of Buffalo in time to make the meet's 2:00 opening event, but our luggage was still at Rochester Airport. We boarded the bus to retrieve it, while administrators made frenzied phone calls to find us transport to Buffalo.

Soon after we returned with our luggage, we learned that there would be no ride. The Thruway was *still* closed, the State of Emergency was still in effect, and busses were not being allowed to leave their bays.

With our hands in the air and our eyes turned in frustration to the brilliant clear blue sky, but with the knowledge that we had tried everything we could, we punted, and went our separate ways. Spring Break had begun.

I guess I have to take the blame. By crowing about the gentle winter, I jinxed it, put the whammy on it, opened my big mouth too soon, and that capricious vixen Mother Nature slammed my words back in my face.

The freak nature of the storm can be shown also in the Weather Channel's post-storm list of snowfall amounts. Buffalo (an hour to the west): 5 inches. Syracuse (an hour-and-a-half to the east): 4 inches. Rochester: 24 inches. Go figure.

As Mark Knopfler sang, sometimes you're the Louisville Slugger, sometimes you're the ball, sometimes you're the windshield, sometimes you're the bug.



Views from the windows of RIA, and from Apartment 515.

One year, Buffalo got walloped with 36" of snow – that's *three feet*, y'all – on Thanksgiving Day. Then they got another 20 or so inches the next day. They had nearly five feet of snow already, and it was still autumn! Winter was three weeks away!

That same weekend, Rochester was partly sunny, with a very slight dusting of flurries one night. Go figure, eh?