

Signs

Jacob sighed as he entered yet another construction zone. It had been a long day of driving already, and he was still over a hundred miles from home. Construction work had slowed him down several times, and this would mean yet another delay. What made it more frustrating was that half the time he hadn't seen any actual construction. There had been orange and black construction signs, reduced speed limits, warnings that speeding fines were doubled in the construction zone, and maybe an occasional orange cone by the side of the roadway. Jacob along with all the other drivers would slow down and plod along for mile after mile, watching out for workmen, backhoes, graders, or other signs of construction, but without seeing anything. Then, out of the blue, there would be an orange and black sign "END CONSTRUCTION." Whoever put those signs up obviously had never read the story about the boy who cried wolf, Jacob thought.

This construction zone promised to be another false alarm. Mile after mile of reduced speed limit, with no indication of any actual construction. Then a new sign appeared. "MERGE LEFT" the sign commanded.

Jacob dutifully signaled his lane change and merged into the left hand lane. So did most of the other drivers. A few Doubting Thomases stayed in the right hand lane, waiting to see for themselves why they should merge left.

"CONSTRUCTION AHEAD. MERGE LEFT." This new sign seemed more definite to Jacob, but it didn't make any difference to the drivers in the right hand lane. Not one of them changed lanes when they saw this sign. Now traffic in the left lane began to slow down, no doubt because traffic up ahead in this now congested lane was beginning to encounter actual construction. Traffic in the right lane zipped heedlessly by. Jacob found himself getting irritated by these drivers. He'd seen it before. No matter how many signs warned of a lane closure, some drivers would stay in the condemned lane as long as possible, and count on finding someone who would let them merge into the open lane at the last minute. In effect, they were jumping ahead of all the drivers who obeyed the signs by getting into the correct lane when they were told to.

"The problem is," Jacob thought, "that the drivers who obey the signs are the courteous drivers. The drivers who stay in the other lane are jerks, but when their lane ends they can count on one of the courteous drivers letting them cut in. Didn't they ever learn the 'no budging' rule? I learned that in kindergarten, for Christ's sake! If only the drivers in the left lane wouldn't let them cut in. Make them stop dead until all the cars they passed have gone by. But of course, they won't do that because they're the courteous drivers. They're getting screwed because they obey the law." Jacob found himself getting more and more upset as he thought about this. Then he saw two new signs, signs he'd never seen before.

"DO NOT PASS ON RIGHT" the first sign said.

"SLOW DOWN AND MERGE LEFT" the second sign said.

"Good." Jacob thought. "Maybe there will be a policeman up ahead giving tickets to everyone who is passing on the right." He watched expectantly, but there were no policemen. Drivers in the right lane didn't slow down, they didn't stop passing on the right, and they didn't merge left. They kept pressing onward, trying to pass as many cars as possible before they would be forced to merge left. As they began climbing a long hill, one more sign appeared.

"RIGHT LANE EXIT ONLY."

A few drivers in the right lane merged left, but most of them ignored this sign too, not wanting to merge into the slow lane until they absolutely had to. As they crested the hill the left lane split from the right lane, crossed the median, and then joined the oncoming traffic in a temporary two-way stretch through the construction zone. The separation happened so quickly that drivers in the right lane missed their last opportunity to merge left before they knew what had happened. The right lane continued straight for several hundred yards and then, as promised, it became an exit ramp. Traffic in that lane slowed momentarily as drivers approached the exit, then picked back up when they realized they didn't have a choice and would have to take the exit.

Jacob smiled when he realized what was happening. He had mistakenly taken that exit once himself, years ago, while trying to find a gas station. That exit led to a limited access highway, and the next exit along that highway wasn't for twenty miles. And when drivers turned around at that exit and drove back to this highway, they would discover the construction meant there was a long line of cars on the entrance ramp, waiting to merge with the people who had moved to the left lane when the signs told them to. Jacob's smile turned to a broad grin when he drew level with the right hand lane's exit ramp and saw one last sign:

"WE TOLD YOU TO MERGE LEFT."

Obviously this story is an exercise in wishful thinking, prompted by multiple experiences with jerks who whizzed past everyone who obeyed the merge signs and then cut in ahead of them. Maybe someday there *will* be a policeman giving tickets for failure to obey the traffic signs. Or maybe someday there will at least be a policeman who stops drivers in the condemned lane and forces them to wait until everyone they've passed has driven by. But in the meantime, don't be that guy. Don't be the jerk who ignores merge signs until the lane actually ends.