

Bill Rea ? Inconvenient breakdowns

As many of you might know, my wife and I make the drive to and from Muskoka a couple of times per year. These are occasions we generally look forward to, but there is one potential problem that is always in the back of my mind ? it ain't easy being a constant worrier.

I'm always mindful of what might happen if the car breaks down, and we're stuck somewhere in the middle of nowhere. The thought occurred to me again Friday morning. Beth and I had spent all day Thursday in the north (yes, I actually took a day off). But since I had to be at work first thing Friday morning, that meant we had to be on the road by 6 a.m. I was up at 5, Beth rose not long after, and we were able to get ourselves pulled together and the car loaded with several minutes to spare. We heard the 6 a.m. news on the road heading home.

The problem was one of the headlights on my car went out of commission. Now granted, this wasn't the most serious thing that could have happened, and indeed, I got the matter fixed in the course of the day. It's not the first time that particular problem has cropped up on me. There was a time when headlights on my car quit with a certain amount of regularity, and I would find out the hard way that police officers didn't like it. There was one time I was driving home late at night and I learned that both headlights were on the bum. Since I couldn't drive without them, I had to turn around, sleep in the office and spend the better part of the following morning sorting the mess out. I was not a pleasant person to be around that day.

But dealing with Friday's woes, I still had to reflect that things could have been worse. For example, the engine could have blown. That actually once happened to me.

Neither Beth or I are mechanically inclined, meaning if something went seriously wrong with the car, there would be very little either of us would be able to do about it. I'm not even sure I would be able to change a tire.

There have been worse things happen to us. One January evening about seven years ago, Beth and I were driving home from Muskoka when the car we were in was totaled.

It was a Thursday night at about 8 p.m., if memory serves. We had just passed what is commonly known as 'The Split' on Highway 400, the area where the 400 merges with Highway 11. The road was clear and I was accelerating past a big truck when one of those orange and black pylons that we've all seen at the side of the road was suddenly lying on the highway right in front of me. With less than a split second to react, I remember thinking that all I could really do was hope whatever it was (I had not even had time to identify what it was yet ? that came later) was soft. It wasn't. In fact, it was full of rocks.

I later learned the truck I had been passing had just departed from a construction site and had somehow snagged this pylon, dragging it some distance before dropping it right in front of me.

It is no fun being out at night on a dark super-highway with a car that has suddenly been rendered immobile. Fortunately, traffic was quite light, considering the hour. I remember telling Beth to get out of the car and to get over to the paved shoulder. We were both a little shaken up. The car's airbags had deployed, leaving a smell that resembled something burning. I figured that car was not a good place to be under the circumstances.

We were fortunate that an OPP officer was about a minute behind us, so he was able to take charge of the scene.

'Is the vehicle drivable?' he yelled at me.

'I don't think so,' I shouted back

By this point, he had all his police car lights going, and other travellers of the night were aware there was a situation. He also told us to get well clear of our vehicle, lest some driver who was not aware of the situation crashed into it and turned it into a projectile ? something I should have thought of.

The officer was a pro and he clearly knew his job. Good thing too, because I didn't have a clue what to do next. I was standing on a through lane of Highway 400, north of Barrie, with my wife, wondering how in blazes we were going to get home.

The officer was able to get a tow truck to the scene in a matter of minutes, and much to his astonishment, the driver of the big truck that dropped the pylon returned to the scene and owned up to what he suspected had happened. The tow truck driver assured me that since the air bags had deployed, and since my car was more than 10 years old (it had been part of my inheritance when my mother had died about four years earlier), the powers that be at the insurance company were almost certainly going to write it off.

We also spent more than an hour in the local OPP station. It wasn't the most pleasant place to be, after the ordeal Beth and I had gone through. On the other hand, my taxes go to pay the OPP to carry out certain functions, and being hospitable innkeepers is not on that list.

I did have a couple of things going for me, however, including a CAA membership card in my wallet, which helped get us a rental car to get home. The police and the tow truck driver both played roles in that, but owing to my state of mind, I don't remember how

it all came together. I just know we somehow got home.

Beth and I had planned on getting home at a reasonable hour that night. Since we hadn't eaten before heading south, we planned to bring in Chinese for our home-coming feast. In light of all that had gone on, when we finally got home, I recall eating two pieces of toast, pouring myself a good stiff drink and going to bed fighting down the inclination to cry myself to sleep.

But the fact is we were lucky. What if there hadn't been that cop there so soon? There could have been a hell of a lot of carnage. And there were a lot of other, more remote places where such an incident could have taken place.

In my line of work, I have been to a lot of accident scenes ? too many. Even when the crashes are relatively minor, and by that I mean damage to vehicles, but not to human bodies, there is still a terrible consequence, and I have seen many cases of very frightened children and freaked out adults.

But the good news is they usually all end up getting home, even if it isn't always easy

