The Invisible Man

by Lee Sandlin

I can't explain this, so you'll just have to believe me: last month my brother and sister-in-law asked my wife and me to adopt one of their cats. Maybe that doesn't sound like much to you. Maybe you think it happens all the time—somebody decides they have too many cats and somebody else absorbs the surplus. But there was one little anomaly in this situation. We live in Ravenswood, and they live in a small town an hour's drive from Seattle.

Why didn't they look for a respectable, cat-needy household in their own neighborhood—even in their own time zone? That's what I can't explain. It was just one of those things: as Johnny Carson once said, "If you buy the premise, you'll buy the bit." They thought it made sense to ship a cat two thousand miles, and I ended up in a live-action version of a Magritte painting. Life works out that way sometimes—my life in particular.

Anyway, on a weekday morning in March, my brother dropped the cat off at the United terminal in Seattle. The cat was traveling by a direct flight, to eliminate the chance of a missed connection; and, at the advice of more than one vet, she wasn't tranquilized—doped cats, we learned, sometimes forget to curl up when they're cold, not a good thing when they may spend hours in unheated baggage areas. Around noon I called United in Chicago to find out where I was supposed to pick up the cat.

This is where we came to a problem. I don't drive. By that I don't mean what most people mean: "I have a car, but I try not to use it." Neither my wife nor I have ever had a car nor even a driver's license. It's the way we do our bit for the ecosystem. We sometimes try to make it sound like a big sacrifice, but the truth is that in Chicago, being without a car can be a blessing. After all, we lived in Lakeview for fifteen years, and we didn't spend a single second of that time looking for a parking space.

But when you're dependent on the RTA to get everywhere, a slight ambiguity in directions can turn into a major logistical hassle. That's what happened this time. The guy at the airline was vague about where I had to go.

He didn't think he was being vague; he simply took for granted that I would be driving. I've learned over the years that the noncarless don't bother cultivating precision about distances. Offhandedly, he dispensed the information that the cat wouldn't be at the terminal, but would be taken to the freight office, and I should show up there an hour and a half after the plane landed. Then he started to hang up.

"Where's the freight office?" I asked loudly.

"Just follow the signs," he said.

"I'm not going to be able to do that," I said. "I'll be taking public transportation."

There followed a pause. I'm used to that pause. I imagine that handicapped people hear it a lot when they ask if a place is wheelchair accessible.

"Go to Irving Park and Mannheim Road," he said at last. "I don't know if there's public transportation."

"I can find out," I said. "What's the exact address?"

"Irving Park and Mannheim Road!" he snapped. "I just told you. That's the only address I have." Then he hung up.

I got out the street maps. The address was at the southeast corner of the big, blank lavender land of O'Hare. There was a little knot of side streets hanging down from the intersection that were all named after airlines, and I assumed that had to be the spot. RTA Information (I'm in constant touch with them—it's one of the few phone numbers I can actually remember) disgorged the news that there was a Pace bus that ran from the O'Hare terminals down Mannheim, and there was indeed a stop at Irving Park. Then one quick check with the airline's flight info number to see if the weather was causing any delays—not so far, the clanging android on the other end informed me—and I was off.

The day was turning foul by the time I was on the O'Hare line. The

forecast had been for lake-effect snow, so as we plunged in and out of the subway tunnels on our way to the northwest I kept expecting the skies to clear. But they didn't: every time we surfaced I was confronted by that same bleak vista of old brownstone blocks swept by long streamers of gusting snow. Snow was racing down all the side streets; it was tumbling in bunched scarves along the alleys. As the sooty brick of factories changed to the yellow brick of bungalows, the snow thickened into a generalized blur of misery. The midafternoon traffic on the Kennedy in both directions was slowing to a crawl. I had figured on taking a cab from the freight office (a luxury I rarely allow myself, but cats are not good subway riders), but now I began to worry about just how expensive it would be to get back into the city at rush hour.

O'Hare was in an uproar. The terminal was packed; before every counter, there were enormous snaking lines of angry travelers surrounded by forlorn flocks of luggage. All the arrival and departure screens had become frantically blinking checkerboards of canceled and delayed flights. But the flight from Seattle was somehow still on time: it was supposed to be arriving in a few minutes, which gave me an hour and a half to get over to the freight office. Unlike everybody else in the place, I was still keeping to a schedule.

I waited for the Pace bus on one of the traffic islands on the lower level. A few other people drifted out to wait with me, all of them dressed in airline overalls. I felt curiously reassured by their presence; I even wondered if any of them were also on their way to my destination. But I didn't ask. Around us the traffic was still moving nicely: swarms of buses and cars were dodging in and out like speeded-up ships in a cartoon harbor. But the weather was awful, and getting worse. The wind was howling through the concrete cave, and in the open air beyond I could see huge swirls of snow tumbling through the gray air and scattering in massed sideways swoops. And there was something else now moving among the curves of concrete and glass: lumbering billows of fog.

The Pace bus was twenty minutes late—but then, being a CTA rider, I never think of buses as having any schedule at all. It skimmed

quickly through the other terminals and took a long curve out of O'Hare. The promised signs for the airlines' cargo and freight areas did begin appearing right around then, directing traffic to upcoming off-ramps. But I wasn't reassured by them. The off-ramps seemed to lead away into nothing. There were no offices, nor warehouses, nor hangars anywhere in sight. There was just a vast, milky, snow-swarming void extending out toward the horizon.

I said to one of the guys in overalls sitting across from me: "This is the way to the United freight office, isn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said casually.

"I'm not seeing it," I said, hoping to sound calm.

"Yeah, yeah," he said again. Then he made a gesture—a kind of vague wave at the blank west. "Out there. Way out there."

"What?" I said astutely.

Then the bus driver said, "Irving Park."

The bus glided out of the curve and up to the intersection. I got off. I knew something was wrong, but there was no telling yet just what. I teetered for a moment next to the traffic light and considered. Both Irving Park and Mannheim Road were jammed in all directions; hundreds of cars and trucks were sluggishly churning their way through the pasty snow. If I'd seen a cab or a bus, I would have flagged it down at once and ridden back to the terminal, but I was out of luck there. Nor could I see anything that might be my goal.

I did a careful 360-degree survey. The northeast corner of the intersection was walled off by a high chain-link fence, and there didn't seem to be anything at all on the other side but fog. Southeast, there was the beginning of a widely spaced line of shabby motels. Southwest, what looked like a huddle of new one-story office buildings. And northwest was the emptiness of O'Hare.

The office buildings were my only bet. The intersection hadn't been designed for pedestrians, so there were no walk signs or crossing zones, but the traffic was moving so slowly I was able to get over to the far side. There

was no sidewalk there, of course—just the highway shoulder crumbling into a snowy ditch. I walked carefully along the shoulder to the first side street—named, just like the map had said, after an airline. It gave me some useless, imponderable hope that I would find the freight office right before me.

Instead I found a surreal little maze of blank walls, locked doors, and dark windows. The offices in this odd district proved to be all nominally O'Hare-related: suppliers of gourmet meals to first-class passengers, brokers in gaskets or seat-cover fabric. But down each empty block I tried, there was no sign of any airline's official presence. There was no sign of life at all: just a desolate tangle of T-intersections and culs-de-sac. No cars moved on the narrow streets; nothing stirred behind the drawn curtains; there was no sound anywhere but the wind. And, needless to say, there were no other pedestrians. Maybe everybody had been sent home early because of the storm; maybe the whole district had just been built and nobody had moved in yet. It certainly looked fake—as though I'd been transported into a table-top layout for children's toys, and at any moment some titanic childish hand would descend clutching a plastic pickup truck.

I gave up. It was obvious the directions had been wrong and I was in trouble. Besides, the snow was so heavy that the maze was quickly becoming impenetrable. If I kept at this, I'd get even more profoundly lost. So I trudged out, down the middle of each street, back to Mannheim Road and its interminable lines of sluggish traffic.

A dilapidated motel stood on the far bank. I darted across—provoking a flurry of honking and hooting—and plunged through its doors. I wondered right away if I'd made another mistake. I couldn't even tell if the place was open. The entranceway was a ruin. The restaurant appeared to have been gutted; huge sheets of plastic were hanging down everywhere in thick translucent arrays. The front desk was deserted, except for an ancient, disassembled vacuum cleaner.

"Can I help you?" somebody said loudly.

I turned. The dingy lobby was heaped with boxes and stacks of building supplies. In their midst there was an old man in a thick sweater sit-

ting in a broken-down easy chair. Before him was a TV set bright with images of snowbound traffic.

"A phone?" I asked.

He waved at the far wall, where, between towers of shabby plastic chairs, a pay phone lurked.

There was no phone book, so I called up directory assistance. It took three tries: I simply could not get the operators to understand me—because my mouth was frozen and I was slurring my words, or because of the racket of the TV, or because the phone line was drowning in static, or all three. But at last I got United's 800 line, where a ticket agent made out what I was asking and bounced my call over to the freight number.

I said, "I'm trying to pick up a cat at O'Hare. I don't know where the hell I'm supposed to go."

"You go to the freight office," the woman said soothingly, her voice floating in from some weatherless empyrean. "The cat will be there an hour and a half—"

"Yeah, look, I've got a handle on that part already. But somebody down there told me the freight office is at Irving Park and Mannheim. I'm there. There is no goddamn freight office."

"Hold on," she said.

"No problem," I said, and turned to look behind me. The old man was still staring at the swarms of stalled cars and engulfed side streets. "Do not go out unless it is an absolute emergency," the set said.

United came back on the line. "From the terminals, go to Irving Park and Mannheim," she said.

"I am already there," I said. "And ..."

"Then turn right on Irving Park and go about a mile to North Access Road."

"What?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "These are the directions we have for people who are driving."

"I'm in the middle of a blizzard out here," I said. "And now I've got

to walk a mile to get to the freight office? It's not possible. You're the people who gave me the wrong directions. What do you intend to do about it?"

There was another pause. Then she said, "All I can say is take a cab." She hung up.

I stood for a long moment. I called out, "What are my chances of getting a cab to take me to someplace about a mile from here?"

"Not good," said the man in the easy chair, not looking away from the screen. "Prolly take about an hour to get a cab in this weather. And then prolly he'll be pissed when he finds out where you're going. But hell, I'll call one. Have a seat."

I walked over to the window and inspected the snowstorm. I supposed it was childish that I didn't want to stay there for another hour—but the place was just too much like a low-budget knockoff of The Shining. So what were my other options? A mile to the freight office? I considered. Despite what I'd told United, I didn't think it was impossible. I'd dressed with reasonably good sense, in classic Chicago winter gear, which is to say, two pairs of socks, undershorts, long underwear, jeans, T-shirt, shirt, sweatshirt, thick coat, leather gloves, wool hat—and I had a good, strong pair of waterproof boots. The snow was piling up quickly, but it wasn't too deep to walk yet. And while the winds were strong, the temperature was up near freezing, so the windchill was only ... what, maybe ten below? I'd been in worse.

"I see a cab," I lied. "Don't bother calling one for me." Then I went back outside.

In the blurred distance to the north, the intersection of Irving Park and Mannheim—the only landmark I had—was a teeming shimmer of headlights and taillights. I decided to walk back there and then strike west, so I crossed Mannheim again and began plodding up the snow-buried, erratic shoulder. It was wearing me down, the absence of sidewalks, and more and more I had the disorienting sense that every location was too far away from every other location. Each building and intersection was islanded by a mysterious, useless zone of emptiness that revealed its true size only when you tried to cross it on foot. It was like being in an Einsteinian model of the ex-

panding universe.

I got nearer to Irving Park. The toy-office district proved to have on its north side a wide fringe of parking lots stretching off to the west in gulfs of furious snow. I set out to cross them at once. The winds were fierce, driving up phantom tidal waves of glittering ice, but I marched through them firmly and quickly—almost defiantly. Slowly the view around me shifted, disclosing in the distance ahead a blurred crowd of bare treetops that might have been a forest preserve. To my left a mistrustful multistory office building resembling a Victorian prison grudgingly watched me pass; to my right was a high chain-link fence that separated the lots from the traffic on Irving Park. About a half mile in, I came to an open gate in the fence. I figured it was about time to survey the land again and see if I could spot some sign of this North Access Road.

The afternoon was fading; the headlights of the cars had all come on, illuminating countless cones of swarming white moths. Irving Park to the west was a slow unbroken curve: no access roads anywhere ahead. A few hundred yards on, there were police cars and ambulances clustered in a whirling storm of red and blue lights. I stumbled toward them.

The accident had been a bad one. Two cars were crumpled together on the median in a frozen explosion of flapping metal and spiderwebbed glass. Cops and ambulance drivers were carrying a group of scared children wrapped in blankets toward the ambulances. I didn't see the drivers. A cop was standing idly at the fringe of the scene, and I caught his eye.

"I'm lost," I yelled across to him.

He motioned for me to come over and held out his hands to stop the oncoming traffic—which wasn't moving quickly enough to be dangerous anyway. When I got to the median, he asked amiably, "So where you going, guy?"

"North Access Road," I said. "Supposed to be about a mile from Mannheim."

"No, no," he said. "Who told you that?"

"Does it matter?" I asked wearily. "OK, where is it?"

"Oh, jeez, it's way out that way," he said, waving his arm to the west. "You can't walk it. Are you crazy? It's no mile. Three or four miles at least."

"So," I said. "Any ideas?"

"Dunno," he said. "Maybe one of these guys can give you a lift."

"Fab," I said. My mouth and tongue were once again thickening. I brushed some of the snow out of my beard so I might look a little less like a derelict.

He leaned forward toward an open side window of a police car. "Guy needs to go to North Access Road. You want to give him a lift?"

The young cop inside said unhappily, "No, not really."

"Come on," said my new friend. "You don't want to give him a lift?"

"Not after what I've just seen," the young cop said and rolled up his window.

The older cop straightened and looked at me. "Guy doesn't want to help you," he said. Then he stood silent for a long moment. Once again he waved toward the west and said, "It's about three or four miles that way." Then he got in his car and closed the door. A moment later his car melted back into the eastbound glacier of traffic.

Should I try asking somebody else? Too late: the other police cars and ambulances were packing it in. I stood on the median and watched them all move off to the east in a sluggish caravan.

Soon I was left alone with the two wrecked cars. Streams of snow were gliding through their crushed windshields and heaping up casually in the buckled passenger compartments. I stood blankly, watching snow fill a briefcase left open in a front seat. I had the feeling that by the time the tow trucks arrived, the cars themselves would be overflowing.

I turned and started walking west.

The highway stretched out ahead of me in a grand sweep. Hundreds of cars, thousands of cars, were slowly moving toward me in the eastbound lanes. In the deepening slate-blue air, their headlights gleamed like endless

beaded necklaces of pearl and gold. To my right was the median—a vague, steep-sided, grassy ditch filling up with snow. Beyond it were the westbound lanes thick with taillights like clots of rubies. South was a narrow copse of trees; north was the blank immensity of O'Hare. Nothing changed in this view as I trudged onward, except the white world of snow gradually turning to twilight.

So what more was there to go wrong? I did an inventory. These directions could also be false. The plane had been diverted and the cat was now on her way to Saint Louis. I could slip on the ice and sprain my ankle. I could get so tired I couldn't go on walking. One of the cars in the lane just inches to my left could get impatient and try to cut the line by zapping down the shoulder—who would expect somebody to be walking there? And so on. Then I imagined what my friends would say if I got killed: I kept hearing them retell the story of how I went out to O'Hare to get a cat and instead met my doom wandering down the middle of a highway in a blizzard. I could just hear them saying, "It's how he would have wanted to go ..."

Then for a long time I didn't think about anything at all.

Just to my left, behind the countless windshields, faint faces underlit by dashboard glow kept turning to look at me as I passed. Their expressions each time were amazed, or angry, or almost amused. I knew by now I was so shaggy with snow and ice I looked like a yeti—the Abominable Snowman of O'Hare. But the strange thing was, I wouldn't have wanted to change places with any of them. After all, this had been my own choice and I would stick to it—not just today, but ever since I had sworn back in high school that I would make that individual, useless gesture: to spend my life as a pedestrian, moving against the eternal tide of traffic.

I had lost all sense of how long I'd been walking. The land ahead readjusted itself slowly, like a sleeper growing more comfortable. Far away, at the end of an imperceptibly gentle slope in the curving road, there finally appeared the green gleam of a traffic light. The sight somehow didn't cheer me as much as I thought it would. Mostly it made me aware of how exhausted I was, and how far I had left to cross. I vaguely wondered if any-

body else had ever done this before, and whether they had made it. Had anyone walked along this road since it had been built? Had somebody a thousand years ago walked here through a snowstorm in the gathering darkness, away from the forests that ringed the lake and toward the prairie to the west—thinking all the while how little chance he had of making it to the lights he saw glittering on a distant ridge?

The important point, then and now, was to keep moving. The traffic light crept toward me. In the widening distance beyond it, I could now make out wastes of parking-lot asphalt, and past them a row of huge hulking buildings like a mountain range. I tried not to get distracted by them and concentrated instead on not stumbling: my path along the median shoulder was growing ever more doubtful in the thickening sheets of snowy ice. After a long while I looked up again: the traffic light was actually within reach. I now could see that the big buildings were all boldly emblazoned with the names of airlines—though not United, of course.

Still, I had a new surge of energy when I stood at last at the light. I started up the access road to see what I'd find there. I didn't feel hopeful; I was perfectly prepared to believe that the freight office was another five miles ahead. Nor did I have any faith that, if I found it, the cat would be waiting for me. But I did feel a slight, mysterious, but undeniable satisfaction. Maybe it was only that I'd accomplished a grand and useless stunt. But it was almost as though I had struck a blow for those of us who don't drive: I had secretly recaptured a bit of territory from the dictatorship of the internal combustion engine.

The access road wound up ahead of me into the night like a canal through a dark terrain of grimy slush. For the first time, I began to be nervous about the traffic. There were no cars here, but now and then a big truck would bellow out from around a distant curve and come hurtling past with no hint the driver had seen me. I tried to keep off the roadway as much as possible, but that meant hacking my way through the snowdrifts, and I was getting so beat I preferred to take my chances.

At least this new zone was well lit: everywhere there were huge banks

of floodlights illuminating the prairies of asphalt beyond the high chain-link fences. The big buildings slowly slipped past, like remotely drifting landscapes of cumulus. I passed Lufthansa and Air France and others that didn't register with me. I still hadn't seen United, but that was OK, because I couldn't figure out how I would get into it if I had. The fences had no gates; the entrances, if there were any, seemed to be from some other road than the one I was on.

I felt a deep, impersonal exasperation. Had there ever been a time when people had occupied this land in a sane way? Had it gone from a wilderness of grass directly to a fenced and labyrinthine no-man's-land of asphalt, with no intermediate stage where people walked here on their own two feet? I've heard all my life that cities are dangerous and dehumanizing environments, but I'd never before been anywhere that had so little sense of human scale—that was so plainly built to some other standard than that dictated by the human body. If I ever got done with this, I was going to spend my whole life within walking range of an el station.

The road took another curve. I paused for shelter in the first building I'd come to that actually fronted on the road. It was another airline freight office—with an open vestibule and nothing beyond it but locked doors. I barely took it in. No phone, no sign of occupancy. What a surprise. So: back out into the storm again, and around the corner.

The United building was a couple of hundred yards farther up.

Its parking lot was empty, but there were lights on in the office. I could see somebody moving inside. There was no fence blocking my way. I became aware as I walked that my knees were trembling and my heart was racing. I stood for a long moment before the glass doors, beating snow off my coat and out of my beard, calming my breathing, and gathering up my dignity. Then I stepped inside.

The guy at the counter looked up and said, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah," I said thickly. "I'm here—"

At that moment a baggage handler walked out of the back room with a cat carrier. He said to the guy at the counter, "Look what just came."

I pointed: "—to pick up that."

They set the carrier on the counter. Inside was a small, watchful, living cat.

"Great," I said. Then I cleared my throat. "But you know, I do have a bit of a complaint."

The guy at the counter laughed. "We're not responsible for the weather. The plane was more than an hour late getting in."

"No," I said. "That's not exactly it. They said the freight office was at Irving Park and Mannheim. I had to walk from there."

"Oh, well, suburbanites," he said. "708ers. What do you expect? They're useless at giving directions."

I sank into a chair beside the counter and took several long breaths.

"Listen," he said. "Promise me you'll write a letter to complain about this."

"I'll start working on it tonight," I said. "Would you mind calling me a cab?"

"Yeah, sure," he said. Then he paused. "Well, hold on, now. You realize in this weather at rush hour, a cab back to the city could cost you thirty or forty bucks."

I waved my arm weakly. "What else am I supposed to do? I'm done walking for the day."

"I can see that," he said. He considered. "Well, I'll tell you what I'd do if it was me. It'd cost about the same. And you won't have to worry about watching the meter."

"I ..." Whatever I was going to say trailed off helplessly. "Whatever. Just go ahead," I said at last.

"I'll call for you," he said and picked up the phone and dialed. "Yeah, United freight office to the city," he said. "No, not the terminal. The freight office. Take Mannheim to Irving Park, take a right, go down like four miles, take another right, and come up North Access Road. You can't miss it ... Jesus God, of course you can get it in here! I got trucks ten times that size coming in all the time!" He looked at me and shook his head in amaze-

ment. “OK, fifteen minutes,” he said into the phone, and hung up.

Fifteen minutes later, I saw gliding up the access road, through the foggy darkness, a white stretch limousine. I took the cat carrier and walked down to meet it.

The driver opened the door for me. He said, “You understand that this could take a while. I’m going to have to use side streets. The traffic’s an absolute nightmare.”

“Man,” I told him, “you don’t know how little I care.”

He laughed and said, “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll get you home.”

I slumped back into the seat as the limo moved off into the dark. With a kind of abstract disbelief I inspected my surroundings: lavish, plushly carpeted, softly illuminated by hidden lines of mood lighting. Did I want to turn on the TV? Should I see whether there were any goodies in that little fridge, or in the bar? The truth was, I was barely able to shuck free of my coat. I stretched out my legs and idly wondered whether I had it in me to take off my boots.

All around me the immense traffic jam slid slowly through the night, like ice floes on a frozen sea. I saw in my mind’s eye the faces of the drivers, underlit by pale dashboard glow: raging at the storm, despairing over missed dinners or meetings or shows they forgot to set the VCR for, cursing out the moron in the car ahead, anxiously peering through the foggy, snow-spattered windshields to see if they were getting anywhere near the next intersection. That was the life I’d excluded myself from, when I had decided not to drive—but had I gotten something better in exchange?

In Shakespeare, Timon of Athens goes from being fabulously rich to a penniless hermit and back again—but his swerves of fortune teach him nothing, because, as another character tells him, “The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends.” That was me: an hour ago, I was desperate, miserable, about as far down the transportation totem pole as it was possible to get—a shaggy figure looming out of the murk, stumbling down a road nobody else would be stupid or stubborn enough to

follow. And now I was the most luxuriantly comfortable traveler on the road. Once again I had somehow missed out on that middle zone of humanity.

The cat carrier rested on the seat beside me; the cat observed me through the wire grate with cautious curiosity. Her day had been just as strange as mine: lonely hours in vast echoing warehouses; endless, terrifying shrieks of jet engines; strange rushes and throbs of pressurized air; and now this impossibly serene ride through the humming darkness. But she was waiting it all out placidly. I ought to learn something from that. If she had no complaints about how the day had gone, maybe I could admit that I didn't either.

"Dear United," I began dictating to myself. "Thanks for the lovely afternoon ..."