



# THE INTRICATE INTERSTATE

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Spending time with my family this holiday season, I reflected back on a scary experience we had many years ago. It was in the 1990s, and the family was on vacation outside the United States in a place with very similar traffic control devices. I was in the passenger seat helping to navigate in the pre-GPS era.

We were approaching a new city on an undivided two-lane (one per direction) freeway. There was a work zone, it was dark, and there were no pavement markings. There was a cluster of guide signs for some exits, none of which we wanted, so when a roadway diverged off to the right, we kept left. A few seconds later, we reached the end of the work zone, and there were pavement markings.

We were driving down a two-lane roadway, but the edge line to our right was yellow. It took me just a split second to realize that we were driving the wrong way on a freeway. I screamed to the driver "pull over, get off the road, now!" Not ten seconds later, two cars came flying over the crest of a hill in the lane we were in. That could have been the end of the story. Thankfully, seeing that yellow line on the right was quick and decisive confirmation that something was very wrong. It turned out that where the road branched off to the right, it was not an exit, but the beginning of the divided highway.

Two days later, we were on that same road in the daylight. In the work zone, there was a crane lifting a massive "KEEP RIGHT" sign into place at the point where we made our mistake.

Two lessons from this humbling experience. First, be sure temporary traffic control devices are adequate especially in a situation where a divided highway begins. Second, never underestimate the power of the subtle communication of traffic control devices, because it might just save your family's life one day.