

Over the Back Fence
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Circular logic
By Alva Wood

Around here, there's no mistaking the sure signs of spring.

Flickers start drilling holes into the walls and attics of houses. It doesn't matter whether the siding is wood, vinyl, or metal. In fact, flickers prefer metal siding. It makes more noise.

Dogs romp around chewing up the first few optimistic green shoots of grass. Fifteen minutes later, they throw up. Then they do it again.

Crocuses and snowdrops poke up through the earth. They arrive kind of like a dinner bell, warning the deer that the main course will be served shortly. All the deer uncles and aunts and cousins troop down from the hills so that they can nip off tulips at ground level just before they burst into bloom.

While they're visiting, the deer stick around long enough to nibble any fresh growth on cedar hedges as an appetizer, and the new shoots on roses for dessert. If the roses are actually in bud, that's as good as whipped cream with a cherry on top.

But the surest sign of spring is potholes. With orange or pink circles of road-marking paint drawn around them.

Freddie Fallis runs training programs for his junior staff.

"You gotta catch potholes early," he lectures them, standing in the middle of a gravel parking lot.

"It's like pneumonia," he says. "If you leave pneumonia until it's fully developed into a massive chest infection and raging fever, it's much harder to treat than if you catch it while it's still just a hacking cough."

He grabs a can of road-marking spray paint. "Over here!" he calls his initiates. "See how this patch of ground has started to swell?"

They nod.

Freddie explains. "That's because the winter frost has gotten down under the surface. And as it thaws, it expands and pushes the surface out."

"Why does it do that?" asks Eugenie Chacon, a bright young immigrant from Brazil who hasn't quite understood yet that municipal employees should do what they're told and not ask questions.

Freddie doesn't know. But he's not going to admit that. "It's like pregnancy," he explains. "You never see a pregnancy sucking inwards, do you?"

Fortunately, Eugenie doesn't pursue the analogy.

"When frost penetrates asphalt paving," Freddie continues, "the blacktop heaves and cracks into little blocks. Soon, those blocks will scatter all over the road, and come bouncing up underneath cars. Drivers get really upset about that," he adds.

"That's like giving birth," he says, inspired by his own metaphor. "Mother Earth's belly deflates right afterward. And so you get a deeper hole that can smash suspensions and wreck tires."

Everyone is paying rapt attention.

"It's our responsibility to provide adequate warning to motorists, so that they can avoid costly damage to their vehicles," Freddie says.

"Now I want you to watch closely," he instructs.

Freddie leans over the bulge in the parking lot. With a single smooth sweep of his arm from the shoulder he sprays a line of color in a big ring around the frost heave.

"That's how you do it," he explains. He stands back, admiring his handiwork. "Now, you see, there's a clear indication to motorists to avoid this weak spot."

He turns to his novices. "Okay," he says, "who wants to try it next?"

Dutifully, the beginners line up to try their hand at drawing rings on the ground.

But Eugenie isn't quite satisfied. "Why don't you just fix the holes?" she asks. "Like maybe, you know, throw in some cold mix and run a compactor over it a few times?"

Freddie sighs. "We don't have any budget for road repairs," he replies. "We already used it all for snow

removal.”

“But...” Eugenie begins.

“Besides,” says Freddie, crushing her question before she can formulate it, “if we just fixed holes without marking them, how would motorists know there was something there to avoid?”

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