

Congestion. Ninety minutes. The worst for a while on this busy street in the capital. Frustrated wavy lines of groaning city drivers locked in an inescapable traffic jam as exhausts belched out fumes. Despite the immobile lanes, Ted's thoughts drifted from simmering impatience to an ex-boss, ex-mate and a disruptive life changing day.

The day his daily commute to the job ended.

Ted, the willing employee tolerating a soul crushing drive from North Kent every day to work in London's dense metropolis - and always punctual.

"Sorry, Ted, we have to let you go."

Those words spoken by Phil many days ago still so fresh, difficult to forget. Moments never thinning with time; perplexed over that moment as his once best buddy - who gave him a leg up with a job - decided one day to give Ted the boot.

The humiliation as he ambled out of the office with heavy feet.

And to top it off, Nigel - total dickhead - shouted "Bye Theodore."

"What a pr-pr-pr-prick! Why did my friend do that? Why is Ni-Ni-Nigel still there?" The words slipped through Ted's lips as he shook in anger recalling the final moments at his job, the day Phil rejected his services. A good buddy forced to favour business over a long friendship. Close friends since school.

What was it? The career shattering moment when the job vanished on those words.

"Sorry Ted, we have to let many staff go. We have to hand out redundancies Ted as the excess IT staff is costing the firm." Phil's words as clear as though uttered yesterday.

"Hah. Like Nigel was EVER a firm asset. I fixed shit. Even did those awful extra hours on weekends and that is the big thanks I get." Ted shouted at angry wide eyes in the rear-view mirror.

*Was that when the madness started?* Ted pondered.

Or was it the day he shrieked at poor worried wife?

A strained voice, claims bellowed out driven by a deeper angst that the world itself sought to ruin him. Ted mulled over those embittered rants that afternoon, tugging his hair, sweaty hands clenched into fists.

Ted recalled sore words while wifey covered her ears. "Is there a God? Oh yeah, and he is one mean motherfucker, and I am on his shit list, he wants to fuck up my life now, my turn, well fuck you!"

The face of a patient but tortured woman in Ted's life that day lingered for a moment. The good wife hoping it ended soon. Her unease as she gripped the sides of a sore head. He recalled those incessant fast stomps from one wall to another, manic pacing as Ted threw fists at thin air.

Ted slapped his cheek.

Snapped out of stewing over his rants at home, he maintained focus on the lines of steel and chugging engines snaking nowhere. A wave of putrid fumes spat at the open window; Ted wound it up despite searing heat on an otherwise sunny and feel-good day.

"I will not lose it, I am going through a rough patch, nothing I can't handle, nothing I can't solve."

He clutched the wheel as the endless delay of gridlock hell ensued. Worse, Ted's old excuse for a laptop atop the front passenger seat hit the frozen wastelands of blue screen hell again. Ted clutched his hair. Progression now futile on last-minute interview preparation. Ted's thoughts focused on the role duties: same stuff, IT experience needed, another corporate machine driven IT manager role. Computer jargon, great for Ted as a whizz at programming and those dull networking device setups that draw yawns from most folks.

"It's okay...all fine," Ted gasped as the bright blue screen mocked him, "Stored in the cloud, saved, no problem. Relax, wait till there, restart the laptop, reopen the docs, quick read over, nail the interview, go home, have a coffee, start over."

This journey, too familiar since the boot from the firm. Same road, different destination. Ted hoped the numbers game theory worked; after several failed interviews, one job opportunity blossoms. Experienced yet falling at the last hurdle. On each agency call, the bad news: Not this one Ted but further opportunities will rise.

*Why? Something I said? Did not say?*

*Why do they smile at me and reject me the next day?*

Ted dwelled on the job interview as each passing second contributed to arriving late. Lateness had disrupted a couple of interviews but Ted knew he'd left Kent much earlier this time. The traffic delays stabbed at Ted as he squealed. "Why today, the only way, the quickest way, why?"

Phone ring, that B-flat headache inducing ring of decibels.

Ted grabbed it. "Hello," a raised voice built from frustration at the roadblock.

"Hello. Could I speak with Theodore Wallis regarding a PPI enquiry last week?"

Ted yelled. "Fuck you. I never asked. And don't call again asshole!"

He slam-dunked his phone into an open laptop case which bounced out-of-reach under the passenger seat. With weary twitching eyelids closed, hands behind back, he gripped and twisted a wrist as though to wring out excess dripping sweat and stress.

"Theodore, Theodore, thanks Mum for that."

Weary eyes snapped open. No change. No vehicles budged an inch for a while. This daily torture wrapped Ted in chains spurring on unbearable anxiety. Every trip to an interview met with the same problem sucking up valuable time. Ted spun on his sore buttocks to check for any way out. All intersecting streets blocked; queues of drivers trapped in a painful standstill. So many resigned to quit had switched off their engines.

And sirens. Oh yeah. Ted yearned to batter his ear drums with shrill sounds as they pierced the chassis. An ambulance tried to force a path through tight lanes. The occasional whirl of blades from helicopters flying low said it - a long wait. The ambulance slipped through a narrow gap as drivers moved somewhat.

Ted shook his sweat beaded head. "So, behold the reason for the mighty hold up. Wondered why it was so bad."

Every second sought to grind withering patience further. Ted splayed his arms wide to stretch tired limbs then relaxed them. The heat graduated to unbearable levels. Summer in the city is great, oh yeah; not in a car with a failed air conditioner to conjure up a nightmare journey. Ted rummaged around the passenger area for the phone, a painful reach under the seat for it before clarity of thought spoke to him.

*Remove your belt first numb nuts.*

Ted wondered about the origin of the words

If they traversed through his sponge of their own accord.

“Was that the madness again? Why the voices?” He whispered.

Ted’s frantic palm sought the phone which hid in the back somewhere. He brayed and gave up. His open wallet lay on the floor too: inside a photo of Ted with his wife happy and full of glee on a Caribbean trip. No pressure, just relaxation, plus Ted once afforded it. He clung to the photo; it reminded of how things could be better. A brief warming sensation travelled through his body like the soothe of hot cocoa.

A note in the case - crumpled piece of paper showed a reminder: Time to visit Phil.

Ted’s daily habit, he liked to scribble reminders, so absent minded. “Ah. Phil. After the interview. Sort this out once and for all...Phil, buddy, hah.”

Ted grunted in disgust of the memory of his friend’s betrayal and slid back into the seat. Ahead, the traffic jam continued to freeze the lanes. Never ending congestion. City dwellers able to pace around on foot slid between vehicles and onto their destinations. That is the freedom Ted wished for as the swell of sweat bubbled on his forehead.

Disembarking and abandoning the vehicle - a more rational plan by the second. Lots of folks unable to get home or meet a schedule, time wasting that crept under Ted’s skin.

Something drew lots of pedestrians into a dense crowd in the narrow spaces a few yards up front. “What is the chaos about? Why does an accident fuck up everyone?” Ted shouted. The voyeur in him wanted to leap from the seat, escape the gridlock, to exit the damn car.

*What do you care, you're a bum now, signing on, and late for an interview very soon...*

Ted picked up the words, a scornful tone.

Eye pupils slid left to right, nope, no-one close by.

He swung around, the twisted belt strained. No-one. Ted wiped his face. "I'm losing it, fuck it. No please, not today, not the madness."

With a hard tug on the door handle, Ted then kicked the door open and jumped out. Bliss instantly filled a tortured psyche; the fresher cooler air doused the heat in a refreshing stream despite the stench of fumes.

"You're not planning on leaving your car Mister?" A voice from behind called.

Ted turned, eyeballs strained, teeth bared and unaware of a quite harried appearance. "Checking, what is up, will be back." Ted made his way forward.

*Hey, numb nuts, get back in the fucking car.*

Ted's neck twisted around, nostrils flared, a guttural roar bellowed. "What did you call me fucker?!"

The taxi driver, head poked out, squinting. "You WHAA?"

Ted approached him, whites of his eyes clear. "What? What? I just told you..."

The stunned driver flinched, one hand ready to close the window.

"I am going, to see what is going on, one minute, I will be back in my car." Ted's voice strained against the yell. At a brisk pace, he headed towards the crowd leaving a startled taxi driver to mumble *asshole* back.

Ted stopped. A confused gaze back and forth blended with an odd urge to check the boot.

A laugh broke through the beeps and frustrated driver chattering. Aimed in Ted's

direction. Mockery. Out of thin air.

He sent several weary drivers an enraged face hoping to catch the culprit, a stare that regarded the drivers with a curled lip and wrinkled nose like at the sight of feces for a few moments. Confused, some through dusty windscreens returned squinty eyes before he walked on.

“Why am I hearing voices, laughing, why?” Ted muttered.

Police officers tried to disperse the expanding crowd as the ambulance punched through the tight spaces. Ted stood there.

“Shit,” Ted tapped his pockets, phone tossed and bounced into a neat hiding spot under the seats. He never failed to call home if late for an interview.

Ted shuffled past bystanders. Some police officers prevented anyone approaching the twisted hulk of smoky metal that used to be a car, rolled over onto its topside. A damaged truck with steam flowing out of its radiator told the story of this headlong collision. Ambulance workers rushed to the smoking steel. Wisps of coolant tickled Ted’s nostrils.

“He tried to jump the red light.” An elderly woman spoke as she leant against her bonnet, another voyeur.

“Well, tough. Shouldn’t have done that. Look, we all have to suffer by his inconvenience.”

The woman squinted and returned a soft head shake at Ted’s words. “The guy is probably dead, or at least dying. Show respect.”

A body pulled out on a stretcher lit up Ted’s day briefly - Nigel, face ashen.

Ted overheard a voice from one of the ambulance staff say he breathed but shallow. Ted lost control of any morals. The giggles erupted, short bursts at first but soon in a series of intimidating expulsions of hysterics. “Hahaha...hahaha...I know that asshole...hahaha...oh...can’t stop myself.”

“Are you a freak sir?” The woman squealed.

Ted swivelled on his heels and headed back, a hand clamped mouth allowed a muffled merciless laugh to slip through.

Splat.

Ted ceased his laughter.

The greasy remains of a burger wrap slid down from waist to lower leg before a final slippery descent to the road. A laugh ensued. Ted spotted the obvious guilty one, a kid in the back of a car chuckled as his apathetic parents showed zero concern.

All clogged up vehicles rolled forward, slow-moving.

Ted rushed to his door, slammed it shut and fired up the engine. The rear view caught sight of the taxi driver as he frowned and complained with lip movement that suggested sore words along bated breath, fingers tapped the dashboard. Ted clenched his jaw and drove forward.

Moments later, as soon as a respite from the jam arrived, the flow stopped.

A frustrated Ted hammered the wheel. "Aghrrrr."

Kids in a car opposite started a screaming ritual. Whatever ignited their loud behaviour, who knows? One yelled out an open window, words plain incomprehensible, somewhere between nah-nah-nahnah and gibberish. Perhaps at Ted taking a greasy burger but he ignored the potential mockery. Kids, that's all.

*Just kids, kids are nothing, not your concern today Teddy.*

Ted's eyes darted left to right before twisting his neck to scout around the interior. "Who the fuck? No. No. Not the madness, not that."

He stretched an arm with intent on finding the phone.

Voila!

Ted clasped the tossed phone wedged under his seat.

He checked the phone clock.

Twenty minutes to the interview.

He wanted to arrive early, this plan grew more futile by the second. Ted pondered on a radical if a reasonable solution: abandon the car and walk. The employer's premises only ten minutes away. A serious consideration, it swelled and begged Ted to act against the horrendous jam.

The voice spoke again.

*You can't abandon your motor. Say fuck it and go.*

"Why? Why can't I do that?" Ted muttered, "Or, maybe, maybe I shouldn't, and...talking to myself again."

Thin rivers of sweat slithered down his forehead. He stank. Ted smelled bad odour billow from sweaty armpits as a cheese-like stink festered in the heat.

"Great, hope interviewer is not a woman," Ted murmured.

Movement again.

"Ah, thank you, thank you."

Traffic diverted to one lane; the diversion circumvented lanes away from the congested accident scene. Slow pace but faster despite vehicles forced to syphon into a bottleneck.

A sharp halt.

Ted so close to bumper to bumper with the car in front as he hit the brakes; it seemed the flow reached a consistent series of starts and stops at last though, some progress.

But matters grew worse ahead of the diversion - road works. The diversion around the accident only met with the next roadblock. Ted closed his eyes for a moment, wished for the final obstruction as the clanks of construction rung. Fingernails scraping a blackboard

would upset Ted less. As the lane of vehicles crept along, beeps and croaking machinery drew nearer. Another reason to lock up the city roads and add strength to the sour cocktail of gridlock misery: time for the council to dig up roads.

“You must be yanking my fucking chain. You guys familiar with noise barriers by the way, fuck,” Ted shouted, “Not even rush hour yet, I have a fucking interview, a fucking interview.”

*Looks like you are fucked!*

Ted searched for the voice origin. “Can’t be me, I, the, the, just the heat.”

*Yeah, it’s you.*

Cyclists drifted through the narrow gap between the lanes, free of the burden of a trapped hulk of metal.

“Yeah, good idea. Sure. That is what I should have done,” Ted’s gaze moved to a speed camera, he grinned, “Next time, I get a train into London and then use the tube. Useless today.”

He checked the time.

Ten minutes and then late.

“Shit.”

Ted grabbed his phone and with a heavy sigh, he punched up the recruitment agency number.

Engaged.

“Damn it.” Ted tried again, and again - each call met an engaged line. Sun rays cooked the interior. He opened the window hoping the air brushed his damp cheeks.

A roar zipped past, a motorcycle weaved its way through the gaps.

Ted grimaced, antagonised by anyone faster than this lane of traffic. A few more

roared past, fumes drifted into Ted's car. He punched the button to close the window again after a coughing fit.

"Shit. Shit."

He pulled at his sweat drenched hair, sodden from rising heat and anxiety. Damp armpits had graduated to a stale smell. Ted's deodorant failure exacerbated the day's pain. Ted scrambled around for a can of spray normally rolling around beneath the passenger seat. A habit he indulged on the way to work upon realising how rancid armpits disturb the day in Summer heat. That detestable musky sweat, not the sweat of pheromones during sex with the wife but that caustic odour that worsens by the minute.

No can, no odour killer.

Movement. With more haste, the single diverted lane of vehicles moved on with the promise of potential consistency. One hand tight on the wheel, Ted rang the agency again.

A response.

"Hello. Could I speak to Gemma please?"

"Gemma is out of the office for an hour, can I help?" A young woman's voice answered.

"Okay, okay, this is Ted. I have an interview today..."

"Sorry, did you say Ted? Theo-"

Another motorcycle sped past and drowned the conversation as the one lane fanned out into three lanes. Impatient drivers hit the pedals. Ted sped up, some haste at last.

"Yes." Ted replied.

"Everything okay?"

*Nope, Ted's gonna miss his interview, no job again, hahahahaha.*

Ted paused. The voices. The frequency of that scornful rough tone.

“Sorry Ted, not sure I heard you right.”

Ted’s blood ran cold. *How did she hear that?*

“No, hi, sorry, look I am stuck in traffic, quite stressed, massive gridlock and looks like I will be a little late for an interview,” the vehicles picked up more speed, clocked at 20mph, hope now stronger, “sorry.”

“Erm...that is fine. To confirm your name, are you Theo...”

Silence. The call dropped.

“Hello...hello...”

Ted called again. Engaged.

“Okay, keep my cool, she has the message.”

He hit the brake. A screeching halt.

Gridlock again.

Ted ground his teeth as a hysterical fit ensued. “No, no, no,” he thumped the dashboard, “no, no way.”

He tried to breathe slower. Ted drew long breaths, and released, one after the other as slippery palms squeezed the rubber wheel. For a few relieving seconds, he’d forgot about the jam.

*Told you, you’re fucked for that interview.*

Ted rocked back and forth aggressively, the car vibrated. “Who is that? What do you want? Why are you in my head?”

*I am you dummy; you talk to yourself. I am your guide, you will need me...Bet you can’t remember...what you did...*

Ted's concentration drifted, eyes narrowed, head flinched a little. "Wha...what do you mean?"

A phone ringtone.

The wife's ringtone.

Ahead, no movement. Traffic winding through the city towers with no end. Lines of steel and tyre locked in a tight battle to reach needy destinations.

"Honey." Her voice tinged with concern.

"Yes. Hi. Look, stuck in traffic here. God knows when I will make the interview. I am late now. Nothing I can," Ted sniffed, a beaten man, "do now, can't get a job, missed this interview..."

Her voice cracked. "Ted, what interview?"

Ted, face puffy, sniffed. "What do you mean, what interview? The computer job, a new firm, on the way there and I am late and..."

"Ted, you told me you had that interview last week. You didn't get the role. So you have another interview?"

Ted stalled. Puzzled thoughts. A sinking defeat brewed. "No, no other job interview. Just this one. What do, what do you mean last week? This is the only one..."

The call dropped. Again.

"Honey, argghh, nooo, argghh!"

He called back. Continuous ring.

"Fuckers." He hurled the phone, this time it bounced off the armrest console and into an out-of-reach place in the back.

Movement. The slither of cars gained a few feet or so, stopped, crept along again, then full stop.

"I am going to an interview. That is where I am going."

*No way. Been there, failed that. I would be more concerned with what's in the boot.*

"Shut up. Shut up." Ted yelled as the traffic sped up - 20, 25, 30 mph.

"Yes, yes." Ted tapped away on the steering as the slither gained speed.

Ahead, the criss-cross grid of a wide box junction. A steady speed kept its pace. Ted's car whirred along.

Shudder. Grumble. Rattle.

Ted's car sputtered and rumbled - then the engine cut off.

He turned the key. No revs, continuous whines.

*It's just not your day, is it? Or should I say ours since I am stuck in this crap too?*

Car horns sounded off as angry drivers behind now forced to change lane. The lanes of vehicles up front slowed as another jam built up ahead worsened by Ted's car blocking progression in his lane.

Head buried in shaky hands, Ted chortled. He lifted a head that weighed like a sack of potatoes and broke into a hysterical fit, time to resign to the absurdity unfolding. "I can't...can't...win today."

Ahead, gridlock again.

Cars and buses littered the box junction as any sign of movement returned to a distant dream away. Ted took in a deep breath. He opened the door and disembarked.

"Hey, hey, oh no way, not you again." The voice of the poor taxi driver yet again stuck behind Ted, his head poked out the window, "this is a joke, I'm being mugged off here."

Ted smiled back at him, a slow smile at first which grew into a beaming cheshire cat grin. "Sorry driver. I am a beaten man, beaten by everything."

“You trying to leave your car again.” The taxi driver rattled by Ted’s smirk pointed a shaky feisty finger at Ted.

Ted continued to smile back.

*Ignore that prick. But do check the boot.*

Ted’s gaze slid towards the boot.

He turned a key in its lock.

Click.

It flipped up a few inches. Ted opened it oblivious to the taxi driver and the subsequent stream of traffic having to manoeuvre around Ted’s faulty car.

And as he peered down at the bruised face of a trembling man tied and gagged there, a memory returned, he recalled how. Phil, friend and the boss who fired Ted and placed him in a world of shit quivered and lay there. His breath bursting in and out. Phil’s white knuckles tried to pull on the rope that bound his arms and legs tight but too weary and dry of energy after hours in an airless muggy boot. Little fight now possible as whimpers found no exit, pleads muffled by the gag.

In that moment, Ted remembered.

The madness, how it blinds his focus, how its darkened mist clouds memory.

Those slices of inner darkness that go haywire.

“Yes,” Ted apprised himself gazing down at tortured Phil writhing, “The madness, me being my usual forgetful self but phew, I’m back. Now Phil, told you, no screams, no kicking. I will have to punch the shit out of you again, okay.” A malicious smirk as Phil glared up at his captor. “We got to talk. Somewhere. I have requests. And I’d best like your response.”

Phil chewed on the gag as he tried to squeal.

Ted slammed the boot shut as Phil’s continued muffled cries for help failed to pass

the gag. He returned to the driver's seat. The congested lanes edged onwards and resumed a slow pace.

He tried the ignition.

The hum of the engine as it fired delivered pure elation. "Thanks car, thanks for not leaving me here." Ted sighed as he stared into deep-set eyes that glared back with a fresh confidence in the rear-view mirror.

*Remember now, we want to teach this guy a lesson. You visited your friend and punched the shit out of him till he lost consciousness. As he caused you pain. But we will teach him a lesson or two further if our demands are not met. Fire you! Fire YOU! He'd best regret that. Let's drive off, see if we can get out of this jam. And find somewhere for some private time with...Phil.*

"Yep," Ted nodded at the mirror, "That's the plan. Sorry, I get these mind blanks. Forgot in all this mess why I am here today. Do shout my way if I suffer memory loss again. Can't help it. Just don't know when it will hit me. Sorry."

*No problem Ted. I am your guide.*

Ted's chugging motor moved on. The gridlock eased to allow the traffic to progress.

Ted relaxed, the rapture drew a smile.

The day unwound at last.