

Friction

by

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It starts with a text.

Be there in forty.

Optimistic for a Friday rush hour, but I'm on my way to meet my girl for dinner; maybe Manchester will give me a break.

#

Queuing through the sets of lights at White City. The drive so far has been quick; I got lucky with my lane choices, even luckier with the green lights, but now I'm stuck for a while. I have the blowers on hot and all of the windows down, trying to stop the engine overheating as it idles. The temperature in the car builds as I sit there; it must be twenty-five degrees outside, another five or so inside. No music; this is my time to refuse any information other than the flow of traffic around me. I spent the whole day taking in data, and now it's time to stop. I loosen my tie another couple of inches. The lights change and I put the car in gear as the drivers on my right race on to the next red light.

#

This isn't good. Looks like everyone wants to turn onto Mancunian Way; the queue is back past the BMW dealership with the show cars all painted up like the England World Cup squad. The lights turn green and I see a spot open up alongside, so I indicate and thrash the Saab's tired engine to get us both into it without causing a row. I'm at the roundabout over the motorway about ten minutes sooner than anyone wanting to turn onto it, and I keep going, ignoring the horns and swearing directed at those pushing into the queue on my left.

#

It takes me three light changes to turn right onto Whitworth Street, but that's cool, as two trains cross the Deansgate bridge while I'm sat underneath it, which always gives me a buzz. I have to wait while a taxi pulls a u-turn back towards Deansgate, the driver raising a finger to me in acknowledgement. Finally time for some music; I've been in the car about half an hour now, and I'm getting tired and fed up. I try Radio 1 then Radio 2. Key 103 does nothing to offend me on my third try, so I stick with it while a Paramore track plays out.

Crawling along, I can see the early drinkers enjoying the air along the locks, winding down post-work in their own way. Wish I had that kind of cash.

I move my crappy car along.

#

The junction of Whitworth Street and Oxford Road is heaving. So many people. The queue for the cashpoint at Sainsbury's is back to the shop door; it's going to be a big night. The lights change and I pull forward, but the guy driving the van approaching on my right jumps the red light and ploughs into the front of my car, pushing me sideways into a taxi.

I can taste the metal in the air as it screams, the three vehicles pushing for the same space at the same time. Ouch.

The flatbed van's a rental, and it stops at an angle to the front of my car, the passenger window level with my radiator. The window is wound down and a Staffordshire Terrier has its chestnut face pushed out, looking down at me as my vision settles. The dog's the least threatening organism in the cab.

I look left and make eye contact with the cabbie, giving him the thumbs up: you okay? He nods. I grab my phone.

'Emergency services. Which service do you require?'

'Police, please.'

'One moment.'

'Police. How can we assist you?'

'I've been in a crash at the junction of Oxford Road and Whitworth Street.'

'Okay, we'll have someone with you soon. Do you need an ambulance?'

The van's driver is out on the road, heading my way, and his partner is climbing out of the cab after him. The dog stays put.

'No, but the junction's completely blocked and the guy who hit me looks mad as hell. You need to get here now.'

'Like I said, sir, we're on our way.'

'Okay, thanks.' I hang up. The van driver looks at the mashed portion of the two vehicles, and then beckons to me to get out of the car. He's big - covered in flabby, faded muscles and homemade tattoos. This isn't going to go well.

I pull my tie off completely and open my door.

#

The van driver is all chest and shoulders, head pushed forward like his dog, trying to intimidate me. I look back across at the taxi driver, but even with his mates arriving from the rank stretching back down Whitworth Street, he wants no part of this aside from the insurance payout. Thanks.

'You fuckin' prick,' the man spits from his contorted face. 'You fuckin' donkey. You think I'm paying for this? You're fuckin' paying for this. You're paying my fuckin' deposit, you fuckin' prick.'

I name him The Mouth.

Pockets of crowd have formed on all four corners of the junction, and the windows of the Cornerhouse bar are filled with spectators. Above the bar, perched on a frame bolted into the red-brick fascia, is a traffic camera. It's pointing down at the junction, and it has a clear view of both the accident and the traffic lights. Relief.

I keep my stance square, not backing away or leaning in. I think I can take this guy. He's big and he's mean, but his body language betrays his lack of skill. He's a bully, and he's used to backing people down. I think I want him to start on me.

His partner from the van - maybe his son - is a little guy, all skinny and his joints too prevalent. He's scowling like he means it, but I know he'll fold the second I score a hit on The Mouth. I just need to stop The Mouth scoring on me.

'You think you can 'ave me? You think you're fuckin' 'ard?' This guy loves to talk. I look him straight in the eye.

'You're on camera, mate,' the taxi driver calls over, pointing up at the camera I've already spotted. 'Not telling you what to do, but you might want to think on.'

The Mouth takes a look, sees the truth of it. I can tell how badly he wants to hit me. There must be some sense in there, though, as he turns from me, spitting on the floor, shoving his passenger back towards the van and avoiding meeting the gaze of any onlookers.

The taxi driver gives me a mock-tired smile, shaking his head in relief. Not sure how much danger he thought he was in, but he did me a favour, so I don't hold a grudge.

My back is stiff. Not cool.

#

Another text.

Going to be late. Call when I can.

I don't want to share the details of where I am or what I'm doing. I don't want her to worry.

Things are sorted faster than I expected. Once the police arrive, witnesses are jumping up like it's my surprise party, and The Mouth is breath tested and arrested. He's a sliver over the limit, but it's enough, and he's gone. His lad looks terrified; he's no idea what to do or how he should behave. I don't care.

I call my insurance company and they send a pickup to collect the car while I'm talking to the police. The guy who loads my car onto his truck looks and sounds like Peter Kay, and is the cheeriest person I've spoken to in weeks. I grab my jacket and tie, my laptop case and a couple of CDs from the Saab and he hoists it. I know I won't be seeing it again. He offers to drive me where I need to be.

'Nah, I'm good thanks.'

'You sure? You don't want to get home? Get in the bath with a beer? Hey? Hey?'

'Thanks, but I'll get a drink in town. Got somewhere to be.'

'Don't say I didn't offer.' The hydraulic flatbed drops into position and he's ready to go. The taxi's drivable, and with my heap out of the way, there's nothing stopping

him clearing out either.

'Are you sure you're okay, sir?' One of the policemen asks. 'We can get an ambulance here quick, get you checked out.'

'I'm sore, but I'm walking.' I'm not trying to sound brave, just being honest. 'I reckon they'll be busy enough tonight. Nothing wrong with me that a beer and a massage won't fix.'

'Sounds like a plan, sir. Hope your evening picks up.'

'Thanks, officer.'

I loop my tie back over my head and pull my jacket on. It's warm, but it's too much to carry. I sling my laptop bag over my shoulder, drop the CDs into the front pocket. A nod to the policeman and I'm off.

#

I criss-cross the blocks, heading towards Piccadilly Gardens, cutting through Chinatown. Bus after bus roars by, packed with people heading home, listening to iPods, chatter, thoughts. Arterials are jammed solid, cross streets free-flowing but busy with cars, windows down and music escaping. I can feel the edges of the paving slabs through my shoes, and I'm happy - regardless of the circumstances - to be out of the car and walking.

I cross the canal and enter Chinatown proper. The air is cleaner here - less traffic. The pavements and roads are narrow, but it feels less congested - no one's rushing to get by me. People sit on benches and talk and smoke. I slow my pace, my mind.

#

A stag party is leaving a strip club, starting early, and one eager beaver steps back into me as I pass.

He's straight in my face.

'-where ya fuckin' goin'!'

I look over my shoulder, see a friendly hand placed on his. This isn't going to happen unless I provoke it, so I choose not to. I've no chance of winning here.

I read somewhere that people can smell fear - a pheromone we pump out when we're bricking it. Maybe it goes further than that. Maybe they can smell when I just don't fucking need this.

I hear a bottle smash on the floor behind me, hear his shouts getting quieter. I give him no reason to follow, and turn out of sight.

#

I grab a Coke from a newsagents. I don't want to arrive at dinner too thirsty; I want to order in my own time and not be waiting on a table or drinks. I drink and walk, feeling the strap of my bag wearing me down, feeling the rumble of tram wheels as two pass me at the same time, the drivers waving to each other.

The drink helps. Gives me a boost and tickles the headache that's threatening. Sharpens my mind and spirit, helping the grasping memories of aggression lose their hold and fall away. Seventy pence; I'm low maintenance.

#

I cross the bus bays into Piccadilly Gardens, which are heaving. Every bench is taken. Kids run through the fountains as they surge and recede, relatives taking pictures on their phones, the sun bleaching their photographs as it lights the plumes of water, making the jets glow.

Drinkers sit out, coffee and lager and wine, sunglasses on and smiling.

Two mismatched teams play football, keeping it fast and fun, but too often losing the ball and having to apologise to those couples and small groups sharing the patch of grass. Smoke and steam vent from the windows of a noodle bar, carrying the scent of beef, chilli and garlic, and I'm hungry.

Buses and trams orbit the space, but no one here's in any rush to be any other place. Safe and sun-warmed and surrounded by the city, old and new buildings, rough-patched roofs and multi-story video displays.

I cross the footbridge over the fountain, and I find a clean spot of step on the Victoria monument.

One last text.

I'm here. Usual spot.

I place my bag between my feet and lean back onto my hands. I love this place. One street away, a tide of people hurry to catch their trains home, looking for someone to get in their way, someone they can empty their anger into - anger at still being in this country, this job, this body, this life. I've every reason to be angry right now, but I'm not. I'm here, and I'm surrounded by hundreds of people looking for nothing but peace and fun and to not get in my face.

Squinting against the sun, I see her - my girl - approaching.

She drops shopping bags at her feet, looking me over, concerned. I smile, but it's a weak effort - the pain in my back and shoulders polluting my relief in finally reaching her.

'I shopped,' she says.

'I see.'

'You've been a while.'

'Someone hit the car.'

Her face changes. Her eyes darken with worry. 'Are you okay?'

'Kind of. Going to be stiff for a day or two. The car's totalled.'

'That bad?'

'No, but it's old and not worth much. They towed it. We'll get something else.'

She bends forward and cups my cheek in her hand, looking for damage.

'I'm fine,' I insist.

'Really?'

'Really. Come on' - I grab my bag and stand up - 'let's go to dinner.'

'No,' she says, collecting her bags in one hand, resting the other around my waist.
'Let's go home.'
'You sure?'
'Yes. You've had a rough day.'
I let her guide me, enjoying the feel of her hand on my back, the sun on my face.
'No,' I say, pulling her closer. 'Today wasn't so bad.'

The end