

## Traffic by Taylor Dayton

“Look, I’m lucky just to be considered here. I really need to make this interview on time,” Mason exclaimed, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel of her Civic and looking exasperated.

“So you’ve said, what, thirty times now?” her friend, Derek, replied, pressing his forehead against the window of the passenger side. The effort did not help to reduce the sweltering heat of the car. Even with the AC set to max, the fifteen-hour drive had been miserable. Mason and Derek had been splitting the travel effort so that Mason could make her last ditch effort to gain acceptance to her first choice university with an interview and Derek could discuss some dual enrollment credit transfer issues he was having with the dean. Unfortunately, the fifteen-hour drive had quickly devolved into an ongoing twenty-hour crawl. While the traffic on the far side of the median was booking along at a decent pace, the traffic on their side had inched forward for the last hour. Mason’s patience had surrendered in the first twenty minutes.

After slamming her hand against the radio dial in a futile effort to find a song that they had not already heard a dozen times, Mason put the car in park and sat back in her seat, huffing irritably and stretching her sore arms. “Might as well get out and walk,” she said sardonically. “We’re never going to get there like this.”

Lifting his head up off the window, Derek craned his neck to improve his view of the line of traffic that stretched endlessly before them. “No sign of a wreck yet. Maybe there’s construction or something.”

“It shouldn’t take this long to scrape somebody off the road. My bet is for construction.”

“I’ll take that bet. The loser has to listen to you complain on the way home.”

“Hey, that’s not fair, mister-I-have-a-migraine-and-can’t-drive.”

Derek moved in his seat restlessly, tugging at his constricting seatbelt. An irate driver somewhere behind them honked the horn of his car. Traffic still was not moving.

“I did have a headache…”

“Yeah, and I have a meeting to be drastically late for. Lay off already.”

The atmosphere of the car became tense. The strained silence was pierced by the blaring horn emanating from the car one lane over and one car back at erratic intervals. After ten minutes of staring grimly over the dashboard at the bumper of the car in front of them, Mason’s attention began to wander.

The two kids in the van adjacent to them seemed oblivious of the traffic jam. They stared intently at a DVD player situated between them. Mason wished she could see what they were watching. It would kill a significant amount of time, even if she couldn’t hear the movie. Sighing, she glanced in the side mirror at the cars behind them. Her view of the car with the screaming horn was clear enough that she could see the driver. The man, dressed in a black suit, was now methodically slamming his head on the horn.

“Hey, Derek. Look at that guy in the Sedan back there.”

Derek leaned over so he could see through the mirror. “Whoa. That’s really weird.”

“No kidding. I mean, I feel like doing that too right now, but –“

The rest of her words were drowned out as the man pressed his head against the horn and held it there.

Derek sat back up and looked at Mason, concerned. “Maybe someone should go see if he’s okay.”

Mason nodded, but did not verbally respond. She was watching the man. He had taken his head off the wheel and was now plying it violently against the driver’s window. It was not long before the window began to crack. The edges, although they did not appear to be very sharp, managed to open an ever-widening gash on the man’s forehead as he continued to slam his head against them. The man appeared unaware of what must have been intense pain, even as blood began trickling down his face. Mason shuddered. She stole a glance at Derek’s own pale face before returning her attention back to the mirror.

By now, other drivers had turned their attention toward the commotion. The two kids in the van beside Mason’s Civic were still oblivious, but the two adults in the front seats were fully aware of the situation. Mason could see the woman in the passenger seat gesturing wildly at the side of the road, but the man in the driver’s seat waved her off and pointed to the rearview mirror. Mason could also see the man in the car behind her. He was wearing a Miskatonic Firehall t-shirt so Mason assumed he must be a fireman of some sort. He opened his door and stepped cautiously from his car. The fireman walked over to the distraught man, tapping on the cracked window. Bits of reinforced glass fell inward, alerting the man inside. He turned his head to look at the fireman who was asking earnestly if he was okay. There was a moment of silence while the fireman waited for a response during which a feeling of intense anxiety washed over Mason. She tensed, watching the scene intently.

The man in the car screamed. The scream was an unnatural, guttural sound. Mason imagined the man's eyes rolling back into his skull as he screamed again. The fireman stepped back from the car with his arms thrown out in front of him, a look of complete and utter shock riddled across his face. The man kicked the door of his Sedan open and climbed out, bits of glass falling to the asphalt. In his right hand he held a tire iron. The fireman forgot to flinch before the tire iron connected with his head. He crumpled to the ground without a word. The man kicked viciously at the body and then turned to the Jeep Cherokee parked beside his Sedan. Mason and Derek had a perfect view through their rearview mirror.

“Mason! We have got to get out of here. He's insane!” Derek said, voice trembling. He began fumbling with his seatbelt.

Mason turned, her face pale with panic. “Where do we go?”

“I don't know. We just need to run.” The seatbelt clicked open. “Come on.”

The man was trying to pry the door of the Jeep Cherokee open with his tire iron. The panicked driver had climbed into and pressed himself up against the passenger seat.

“Right. Run,” Mason clicked her seatbelt open and began easing the car door open as quietly as possible. Derek grabbed her arm and stopped her. His eyes were focused on the car behind them.

“That guy can't get his door open. He's going to get killed.”

Mason turned to look, letting her door close again. Sure enough, the driver was fighting powerlessly against the passenger door. “Derek, if you can get the door open, I can get you some time.”

“I’d make some comment about not liking vigilante justice, but I’m too scared for wit right now.”

“Good because I feel more like throwing up than laughing. Let’s get this over with.” The man began striking the window of the Jeep Cherokee with his tire iron. “Like, now.”

“Okay. Okay. Three, two, one!”

Mason kicked open her door just as the Jeep Cherokee’s window shattered. She noted that the family in the van beside her Civic was making their escape out the driver’s side. Each parent was holding a frightened kid and each began sprinting up the road as soon as they were free of their vehicle. Out of the corner of her eye, Mason saw others backing away slowly from the scene on foot. The fireman was still splayed on the ground.

Slipping past the van, unseen by the man who was intent on smashing the door of the Cherokee to bits, Mason put the Sedan between her and the tire iron before she started yelling.

“Hey! You! Back off!” Mason knew she sounded completely ridiculous, but it was the volume that mattered. The man did not react. More yelling yielded the same result. Reaching down, Mason pulled off her shoe and threw it toward the man. It hit him on the back and fell to the ground. The man stopped slugging the Cherokee and turned to look at her. The dried blood covering his face obscured most of his features, but Mason had a clear view his unfocused grey eyes. They stared at each other for a moment; Mason intently trying to remember just how tragic her last time was on the mile run. Then, the man screamed and ran toward her. In retrospect, she decided that throwing the shoe

ranked among her poorer decisions of the day. Mason bolted, running toward what would be traffic if the cars had been moving. The man pounded after her.

Half a hundred drivers were stunned out of their traffic jam induced stupors that day as they watched the chase. Mason weaved between cars, executing a pitiful amalgamation of sprinting and limping due to her missing shoe. The man was unable to close the distance between them to within striking distance, but he had gotten close a dozen times. His now slightly dented tire iron had come down on the roofs, mirrors, and windows of nearby cars. Each time Mason heard the whistle of the iron bar and felt her hair rustle accordingly, a spurt of adrenaline would propel her out of the maniac's reach. She wondered if Derek had been able to pull the trapped driver out of his Cherokee. Not that it mattered much that the maniac was a good half a mile down the road. She realized that she should really be wondering about whether the doctors at the nearest ER would be able to piece her skull back together once the tire iron connected with it.

Breathing hard, Mason glanced over her shoulder. The man was no longer in sight. Considering the possibility that she had lost him among the sea of cars, Mason pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. She dialed 911, stepping onto the grassy median to get a better view of the cars. Her assailant was not among them.

“Hello,” the operator said in an even tone, “What is the nature your emergency?”

Breathless, Mason gasped out, “Assault... or... car related. It's sort of a combination of the two. Regardless, we need an ambulance and police at --”

The tire iron spun past her head and stuck in the grass a yard away. Mason jumped backward reflexively, dropping her cell phone in the process. The man slunk out from behind a van, lurching forward toward her. Mason backed away as the man

advanced. There were no stationary cars to hide behind now that she was across the median.

He shrieked as he came forward. Mason stumbled, barely keeping her feet under her as she crossed into the northbound lane. Traffic whipped by with horns blaring and drivers cursing. The side mirror of a passing Camero clipped her elbow. Her arm fell uselessly to her side. The man was still coming. He had retrieved his tire iron and was advancing steadily. Mason struggled to keep her eyes clear of tears so that she could get a clear view of both the cars and the maniac. She got across both lanes only to run up against the cement wall lined that side of the freeway. There was nowhere to go. Nowhere left to run. The man stalked forward, grinning wildly and shrieking incoherently. Mason flinched, closing her eyes as he raised the tire iron.

A horn and screeching tires were the only sounds she heard as a fourteen wheeler slid by, unable to stop. She smelled burning rubber and saw the smoke from the rapidly degrading tires. When it passed, she opened her eyes. The man was gone.