

# Traffic

by Adrian Ludens

## I. Doreen

*This used to be a decent part of town,* Doreen thought.

She crossed her arms protectively over her purse and glanced furtively at the other people who were waiting at the bus station. She took a deep breath, tried to relax, but couldn't. Doreen abruptly pawed through her purse, clutched at her sunglasses, and jabbed them onto her face. This helped soothe her mood. No one could see where she was looking now. Anyone who might be planning to mug her would be wise to think twice; she might be looking right at them, already on her guard. Emboldened, Doreen let her eyes wander suspiciously over the group. Across from where she stood was a tall man. Doreen could tell by his prissy haircut that he was queer. On her left, two Chinese girls were chattering back and forth in what sounded to Doreen like gibberish. "Learn to speak American," Doreen muttered under her breath.

Doreen cast a sidelong glance at pale girl with dyed black hair and enough junk in her face to set off an airport metal detector. A black youth in a Timberwolves jersey ambled up to the bus stop. Doreen wondered if he was carrying a gun.

*The cream of the crop here today,* Doreen thought snidely.

She started violently as a grizzled homeless man jostled past her.

"He nearly knocked me over!" Doreen shrilled, scanning the group for a sympathetic face. A man she hadn't noticed before was smiling at her. He was white, he was well dressed, and he was Doreen's new best friend.

"Are you all right?" he asked amiably.

"I'm fine. I just wish people like that would find someplace else to go and leave decent people alone," Doreen fumed.

"My grandmother used to say that God created everyone equal," the stranger gently reprimanded.

Doreen's face flushed and her lips tightened. "Take a look around. Some people are just a waste of oxygen."

The man's eyes took on a faraway look. "There may be something to what you say," he murmured.

The rumble of the transit bus shook the man from his reverie and he held out his arm like an usher. "Ladies first," he smiled.

Doreen elbowed past him toward the front of the group. She wanted to pick whom she sat next to. Tires squealed piercingly from just up the street, and Doreen and the others angling for position at the curb turned to see the cause. An angry chorus of honking horns followed a black Jetta that shot through the intersection against the light.

The well dressed man suddenly spoke in Doreen's ear. "God is giving me a chance to make the world a better place!" he hissed excitedly.

She uttered a stifled cry as he roughly shoved her from behind. She toppled forward, arms flailing, into the street. Doreen looked up in time to see the enormous front tire of the metro transit bus bearing down on her. Doreen heard a harsh cracking

sound, but before she could even feel any pain, her vision rapidly dimmed, then went black.

It took several moments for anyone to notice Doreen's body under the bus. Everyone was still watching the black Jetta careening recklessly down the street and out of sight.

## II. Trent

Yellow turned to red as Trent slid his rusty station wagon through the intersection. Beer in one hand, he checked his rearview mirror guiltily. No police car to be seen, but there was a black Jetta coming up fast.

As they cleared the intersection, the Jetta abruptly changed lanes and sped past on Trent's left. The traffic in that lane had slowed and Trent anticipated being cut off by the Jetta. He eased his foot off the accelerator and lightly tapped his breaks. Sure enough, the Jetta's driver yanked the steering wheel to the right in another abrupt lane change. Trent cursed as beer spilled from the can onto his hand.

Ahead, the Jetta shot forward, rapidly eating up the space between it and the vehicles further up the street. Trent pressed the palm of his free hand into the steering wheel, sounding the horn in a long shriek. The driver of the black Jetta shot him a look in the rearview mirror. Trent saw the man's arm beginning to rise to flip him off.

"Jerk!" was all Trent could exclaim before 'Jetta guy' was served up a healthy dose of instant karma. A loud crack pierced the air. Shards of debris sprayed from the front passenger side of the Jetta as its headlight and turn signal shattered. The Jetta bucked to the left, narrowly avoiding sideswiping a station wagon in the next lane. The Jetta had clipped a Sunfire that had slowed to turn.

The Jetta's driver accelerated again. Trent sped up in hopes of getting the license number, when an old ranch couple in a dirty extended cab truck changed lanes, blocking his line of vision. Trent considered passing them in an attempt to catch the Jetta, but then saw the old man raise a cell phone to his ear.

"They got his plates," Trent thought and grinned. He had lost sight of the Jetta but it didn't matter. Trent turned around in a parking lot and retraced his path until he got back to where the Sunfire's driver had pulled over.

A police cruiser rolled up. Trent hurriedly scattered yesterday's newspaper over the beer cans lying on the floor up front. Then he guiltily pawed around the back seat for his discarded windbreaker, which he used to cover the mostly empty cardboard box the beer had been sold in. Trent waited as the Sunfire's driver made his statement. Then the cop turned and started walking over. Trent got out of his car to meet him.

"You saw what happened?" the patrolman asked.

"Sure did. I noticed a black Jetta driving practically right up my tail pipe back at the light. He was speeding and weaving in and out of traffic. Really driving recklessly. He cut me off and I..."

*I what?* he asked himself. *Honked and made the driver of the Jetta take his eyes off the road? Provoked the other driver into an act of road rage and caused a traffic*

*accident in the bargain? And then there's the pile of dead soldiers on the floor of the front seat...*

"And I said to myself, 'That nut is going to hit somebody.' And that's just what happened," Trent finished innocently. Well, not exactly, but close enough. The officer wouldn't want Trent to complicate matters with unnecessary details.

"Someone already called 911 and reported the license plate, so we'll get him," the patrolman said. The radio in his squad car was squawking. He hurried toward it, sending a look back over his shoulder at Trent. "Appreciate you stopping," the officer said hurriedly. "Have a nice day."

"No problem officer," Trent said as he got back into his own car. He felt good about his role in all of this. "No problem at all," he repeated, watching the police cruiser turn up the street, lights flashing.

As he sat in his car, Trent became aware of an ambulance siren sounding in the distance, and shook his head peevishly. Another accident.

"Why aren't there more responsible drivers like me?" Trent asked the pile of empties on the floor. He rummaged his hand around the floor of the back seat until he found what he wanted. Trent cracked open a fresh can of beer with relish, slurped the foam from the top, and put his station wagon in gear.

### III.

#### Danny

Danny felt like he was going to lose control of his bowels right there in the driver's seat.

His plumbing cramped painfully.

"Danny! What the hell has gotten into you?" Sandra exclaimed from the passenger seat.

"I think I got the runs," Danny replied scornfully. "Just chill out."

"Well just pull over somewhere!" his girlfriend replied, sounding exasperated and a little scared.

"Get off my case!" Danny growled. She was really starting to tick him off. "I already told you, we'll pull over at the truck stop east of town."

Danny gripped the steering wheel tightly.

The light ahead was already yellow. Danny stomped down on the gas pedal and shot the Jetta through the intersection against the now red light. Horns honked angrily but Danny paid no attention. The only thing that concerned him was not voiding his bowels right here in the car.

He hadn't been expecting Sandra to pick him up when his plane landed. She had assured him that she had to work, which suited Danny just fine. His plan had been to take a taxi directly from the airport to the appointed drop-off location by himself. Mr. Rinaldo had chosen Crow's Truck Stop, just off the Interstate near an exit Danny knew. Inside the men's room, Danny would expel his hidden cargo -a sizable packet of liquid heroin- retrieve it from the toilet bowl and present it to one of Rinaldo's associates. Then all accounts would be settled and Danny could move on with his life, stronger and wiser from this ordeal. If he failed to present the packet, however, Danny knew he was in for

some vicious punishment at the hands of Rinaldo's men. They might not even let him live if he failed them.

Sandra had thrown him a curve ball when she showed up at the airport, waving and smiling. "Did I surprise you, baby?" she had asked, beaming up into his face.

She had surprised him all right, but it was the cramps invading his bowels that were really throwing a monkey wrench into his plans. Danny grimaced with discomfort as he ran another red, whipping around a rusty station wagon in order to clear the intersection more quickly.

Sandra, shrill and petulant, upbraided him for running another light. Traffic in this lane was moving even slower than the station wagon, and Danny jerked the car back into the outside lane. The driver of the station wagon angrily sounded his horn in a long droning blast. For Danny, furious over his predicament, this was the final straw. Glaring, he found the honking motorist in his rearview mirror, then raised his right arm, middle finger extending upward.

Sandra started to yell something that was drowned out by a sharp cracking sound. Danny thought it sounded like someone had taken a swing at a snare drum with a baseball bat- and broken right through. The steering wheel jerked in his hands and he held on out of instinct rather than any actual assessment of the situation.

"What the hell was that?" he asked Sandra.

"Pull over!" she wailed, her mascara starting to go all Tammy Faye down her cheeks. "You just hit someone!"

"Some person or just another car?" Danny wanted to know.

"Another car! You have to pull over!" Sandra sobbed. "You're scaring me Danny! Pull over right now!"

"Just calm down and shut up!" Danny replied. He gritted his teeth and his knuckles were white as they gripped the steering wheel.

"I am very sick right now Sandra. Do you understand that?" Danny spoke as if he were talking to a two year old. "I'm not stopping until I get to the truck stop and if you don't shut up, I'll toss you right out of the car!"

Sandra hugged herself and rocked in her seat, weeping silently - or at least silently enough.

Danny fought back the pain of the cramping as he spun the wheel and turned the Jetta onto the Interstate. Clammy droplets of sweat slid from his forehead into his eyes, making them burn, blurring his vision. Yet another driver leaned on his horn when Danny swerved too close while dragging one forearm across his forehead.

The two and a half miles to Crow's seemed to spool out into an eternity. Danny prayed to God that he would make it in time. He tossed out pleas to Buddha, Allah and the Virgin Mary as the neon flashing light of the truck stop wavered like a mirage in the mid afternoon heat.

Danny was deciding between Zoroaster and Zeus for his next petition when the exit he needed suddenly sprang up on their right. The Jetta shot up the off ramp and Danny turned into Crow's parking lot, mentally thanking all the gods for their mercy.

"Stay here," he commanded Sandra, who ignored him. Danny threw the car door open and leaped out. He sprinted into the truck stop, leaving the Jetta's driver's side door hanging open. The Jetta and the gaping retiree gassing up his motor home at pump three bore a striking resemblance.

Danny hurried through the convenience store portion of the truck stop's interior with mincing, jerky steps. He nearly collided with a beefy trucker with a sunburned face and Elvis sideburns on his way into the men's room.

The trucker stepped aside with a smirk when he saw Danny's condition and Danny ducked into the first stall he reached. His precious cargo was creeping out -of its own volition. Danny yanked at his jeans, pulling them down and sitting in one desperate motion.

Danny groaned with exertion. Now that he was safely ensconced in the toilet stall, Danny couldn't seem to convince his muscles to relax. He tightened his muscles and pushed. The small plastic package that was his salvation slid from his protesting rectum. A sharp pain sliced through Danny as the packet dropped into the bowl.

"Christ, I think something tore," he muttered. Danny spun the roll of toilet paper and dabbed the white squares gingerly. He looked at the paper fearfully and was relieved to see only a little dark spot of blood. Danny closed his eyes and exhaled deeply. The worst of it was over. He just had to fish the packet from the toilet bowl and present it to Rinaldo's guy, who should arrive any second. Danny still had to worry about the hit and run, and he still had to explain away his behavior to Sandra; but at least Mr. Rinaldo would be off his back and out of his life. Danny stood and pulled up his pants.

He jumped at the sudden gurgling noise that erupted behind him. Danny spun around, pants still open at the zipper, and stared at the toilet. The bowl was empty. The blinking red eye of the automatic flush sensor winked at him mischievously.

Danny stood there gaping. His mind tried to deny what his eyes were seeing. The packet of liquid heroin was gone. Danny felt sick and helpless. He was on the verge of frustrated tears when he heard the men's room door open and close. The sound of footfalls approached and stopped in front of the stall Danny's stall. Sneaking a look under the door, Danny could only see a pair of polished black shoes. Rinaldo's goon? The police?

Danny reached out a trembling hand, threw open the latch and opened the stall door to face whoever stood on the other side.

*Adrian Ludens lives and works in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Late at night when the rest of his family is asleep, Adrian can be found at the computer writing stories like this one. For information on where to find more of his short fiction, visit [www.myspace.com/adrianludens](http://www.myspace.com/adrianludens)*