

Tallahassee

The British tourists stopped briefly at a rest area near Tallahassee. Mike and Kathy Swales were driving the length of Florida in their rented Lincoln Town Car. They'd started in Miami eight days previously and were now approaching the end of their journey. Like so many foreigners not used to the scale of distances in the U.S., they had underestimated just how much driving would be involved, and the short vacation had been less fun than they'd hoped.

Even with the luxury of the Town Car's air conditioning and power steering, Mike found the driving very arduous. The long monotonous freeways, their featureless miles interrupted only by the occasional Gas-Food-Lodging sign, were a far cry from the sort of driving Mike was used to. The three-mile journey he made every day from the couple's new semi-detached home on the outskirts of York (they could just see the spires of York Minster from the back bedroom window), over the gently undulating country roads that led to the village of Wetherton, was a pleasant and relaxing part of Mike's daily routine. By comparison, the multi-lane highways of Florida - and, Mike assumed, the rest of the U.S. - with their strange passing rules and thundering "big rigs" had made the journey north from the State's largest city a trying ordeal.

It might have been better if Kathy hadn't so steadfastly refused to take on any of the driving responsibilities herself. She'd been adamant that if she was given control of the car (which was probably twice as long in each direction as the Austin Mini she drove at home) she'd probably misjudge a width or a length and hit another car, or even worse, forget to drive on the right and collide with some unfortunate local. Either way she'd get them both killed. Mike had been reluctant to press the point and risk starting a fight. After all, this was supposed to be something of a second honeymoon, and the last thing either of them wanted was a nasty row. He was pleased he'd acquiesced, in spite of the tension in his back and stiffness in his legs caused by driving fatigue. Kathy had been more relaxed than he'd seen her for, well, since she found out, certainly, and the joy which that brought him more than made up for any physical discomfort he was suffering.

Kathy saw the sign first, Mike being too pre-occupied with trying to get the well-equipped car's cruise control to work properly.

"Look - rest area three miles ahead," she said with relief. Kathy was sensitive to Mike's tiredness, in spite of her intransigence over the issue of her taking the wheel. She wanted to help as much as she could to relieve his burden. She'd already suggested staying the night in Tallahassee instead of carrying on through to Pensacola, where they'd arranged to drop the car and meet up with some friends from Mobile, just across the border in Alabama. It was Mike's turn to be stubborn, and he insisted that they finish the journey that day. It was already nearly 5PM, they having set off from Jacksonville much later than planned, but they should still make it to Pensacola by late evening.

"At last!" Mike exclaimed, "My neck's killing me."

Kathy put her left arm out and gently rubbed the nape of his neck.

"My poor baby. Are you sure you don't want to find a motel here and have a good long

rest? We can ring Bob and tell him we'll be a day late. He won't mind, and you could do with the sleep; I know you didn't get much last night again."

"No, don't worry about me love. We don't want to mess up Bob's plans. I'll be fine after a bit of a stretch and a rest. And a pee."

Kathy's neck rub changed to a gentle stroking with the tip of her finger. It didn't ease the ache from the tense muscles in Mike's back and neck, but it felt pleasant. A shiver ran down his spine and he hunched his shoulders suddenly.

"What was that?" his wife asked.

"Dunno; someone must have walked over my grave."

The exit for the rest area was almost upon them. Mike had let his mind wander, letting Kathy's attentions relax him more than was wise on an eight-lane highway. He had two lanes between him and the exit ramp, and one of them was occupied by a truck that appeared to be going for the Number of Wheels on a Road-going Motorized Vehicle World Record. It was very long. At first Mike tried to pass it by accelerating, but in spite of the Town Car's 4.6 liter V-8 engine, it didn't have enough pick-up to get them safely past the enormous truck. He thought he'd made it, but when he signaled to move right, the big-rig appeared to speed up, forcing him to rapidly reverse the maneuver. The only alternative was to go behind the truck. Mike slammed on the brake, and was greeted by a furious honking from the Mazda behind, and some hand signals which he was pretty sure weren't in the DMV driving manual. The truck roared noisily passed him, as did the Mazda on the other side, the driver still mouthing something obscene to Mike as he drew level. At last the way was clear to cross the two lanes, and he hit the exit ramp just in time.

Mike's face was flushed with shame and anger: shame because he should have noticed the Mazda in his rear-view mirror before he braked so sharply, and anger at the bloody idiot in the lorry who wouldn't let him overtake. Kathy handed him a tissue, which he took gratefully and used to mop his face.

"By 'eck, and our London reps complain that the M25 is bad!"

Sometimes during the drive through Florida, Mike had felt like the Dennis Weaver character in the movie *Duel*. This was never truer than now. It was easy to feel victimized in this place. Mike had heard that Americans were a friendly lot, and so many of the individuals that they'd met and talked to had been. But from a distance they could also seem a bit scary: their directness and assertiveness could easily shrivel a diffident Englishman's self confidence. Put a large American (and some of them were very large) in a four-wheel-drive truck, give him a pair of mirror shades, a couple of days' stubble, maybe a shotgun just visible in the back of the truck, fill a highway with a couple of hundred of them, and watch your driving pleasure go down the toilet. Sure, Mike knew he was exaggerating, but it was still easy to feel almost childishly frightened in this society of excesses and extremes.

Pulling into a parking space in the rest area, Mike breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief and

slumped into his padded leather seat. The rest area seemed tranquil: a few cars and just some rest-rooms, a couple of recycling bins, and an overflowing garbage can to break up the otherwise featureless asphalt. He killed the engine, which was only just detectable as a gentle purr anyway. These American cars may be gas-guzzling monsters, he thought, but they guzzle with style. Mike started to relax a bit. It helped just being away from the snaking freeway, with its poisonous fumes billowing from hostile trucks and cars with their unhelpful, short-tempered drivers.

The car was quiet and still, like a comfortable cocoon. Kathy rested her head on Mike's shoulder, and he in turn laid his ear on the crown of her head. He sighed again, but this time more from contentment than relief.

"Better?" she asked.

"Aye. Let's stop here for a bit and see if we can find a coffee shop. No sign of one round here, so we'll have to follow that great American tradition and drive to one."

"Fine. Just get some rest for now, eh?"

He turned and kissed the top of her head. He could smell this morning's shampoo. Not her usual type, but a cheap motel one. Mike gazed out of the car. He could see traffic crawling along a distant overpass. The scorching heat outside made the glinting chrome reflections twinkle in a chaotic manner. It was almost like seeing a distant civilization through a mirage. One could only guess at where the thousands of vehicles with their unseen occupants were heading. He was glad to be inside the comfortable, leather upholstered car. He'd left the a/c on, and its efficiency mocked nature's fierce environment outside. He could almost imagine never opening the car door again, except he really could have done with a cold diet Coke

Kathy shifted her position slightly, as though in her sleep. She could always drop off easily, unlike Mike whose insomnia seemed to be getting worse. Nevertheless he closed his eyes and felt the accumulated tension of the last couple of weeks start to ebb away. He let his mind drift amongst his affectionate thoughts for Kathy. If nothing else, this vacation had arrested *their* drifting. That feeling of being on the same river as Kathy, but in a different boat, that he had for the last year had finally subsided, and been replaced by a new feeling of togetherness. No, not a new feeling, but the old one, back again. For the first time in ages, he felt that they were traveling together, both literally and metaphorically. The unspoken act that had made the difference was Kathy's forgiveness, and the rebirth of her trust in him. That made him love her all the more, and he knew that when they got back to England, their life would be as good as it was before his stupid, clichéd one-night stand with his secretary.

A peace born of love and affection descended on him, and soon he was lulled by the gentle tick-tick-ticking of the cooling car engine into a restful sleep. Soon he was dreaming. There was birdsong: sparrows, simple, plain birds, with their anonymous cheeping. He was in the back yard on a sunny Sunday morning. Not baking Florida sun, but polite English sun, warming the earth rather than toasting it. He was chopping wood, strenuous but soothing at the same time, each stroke of the ax a cathartic gesture.

Something changed. The ax sound was faster, louder, more insistent. There was a muffled voice too. He resurfaced into consciousness quickly, like a man bursting up from a quiet ocean to find a storm of sensations above. The first sense to become focused was his hearing: the sound was now a loud rapping on the driver's window, not the chopping of an ax at all. Then bright sunlight appeared, pink and diffused by his still-closed eye-lids. He opened his eyes, blinking tears out of them and squinting against the incandescent ball that was the late afternoon sun.

A face loomed large in the side window. It was not a friendly face. It was black, and shiny. The eyes were wide and wild, hints of yellow where they should have been white, pupils dilated, fixing him with an animal glare. The mouth worked furiously, but the sounds it made barely distinguishable. Teeth white, lips dark and thick. Face unshaven, a two-inch scar on the right cheek showing up lighter than the surrounding skin.

Mike struggled to make sense of the scene before him, his mind trying to process the information that his senses were sending to it. He heard Kathy's sharp intake of breath, and that snapped him into full consciousness. He instinctively reached out and found her hand, squeezing it as reassuringly as he could. Both their hands were clammy.

The man - or youth; he must have only been 19 or 20 - outside was now yanking on the door handle. Mike silently thanked the Town Car's strange habit of automatically locking the doors once it reaches 15 MPH. At first it had seemed bizarre; now it might be a lifesaver.

"What does he want?" Kathy's voice had a shrill, panicky tone.

"I don't know. Maybe he's in trouble. Should I open the window?"

"No! Let's just go!"

She was right. He looked crazed, fearsome. Mike turned the key in the ignition. Nothing. His heart was squeezed by an iron fist of dread. With relief, he remember he had to push the brake pedal or the American car wouldn't start. But the fear had almost paralyzed him, and most of his energy was being used to stop the bile in the bottom of his throat rising any further. A trickle of urine escaped down his leg as his already strained bladder lost control. He felt a chill over the surface of his face and arms, as the sweat that had broken out all over was evaporated by the blast of cool air from the car's blowers. Now his breathing was labored and his throat dry and constricted. Somewhere, deep inside his subconscious mind, the part which understands things in a manner unfettered by the space and time that bind us, he knew the future. He knew he was going to die.

But his conscious mind was still bent on survival. He made one last effort to lift his petrified foot on to the brake pedal. It started to move just as the driver side window exploded. The clear glass was transformed momentarily into an intricate crystalline web. At the same time the car was filled with a splintering sound: "crack". Fragments of glass flew into the car, showering Mike and Kathy. Their blink reflexes saved their eye balls from being sliced open by the razor edges of glass shards, but many small cuts appeared on their faces. Kathy screamed. Mike simply said "Jesus."

"Shut up lady! Shut the fuck up!"

The attacker's head was now inside the car, so close to Mike's that he could see the individual pores on his nose. His attention, though, was on the barrel of the gun that the black man had used to smash the window. It was pointed at his head, pressing hard into his temple. Mike heard Kathy whimper, and blinked the blood and sweat from his eyes. He was in shock. This was too alien to the whole rest of his life up till then. His brain had split in two: the part that was vividly aware of every detail of the scene, as though he was watching it from an objective viewpoint on a large-screen TV, and the subjective part of him which was experiencing the deepest level of fear he'd ever known, and which was already retreating from the real world. Objective Mike stared at the hand holding the gun against his head, and noted it was shaking rather.

"Where's your pocket-book, fucker?"

Mike didn't know what a pocket book was, but assumed it was money the boy was after. Suddenly Mike's ego stopped its retreat and fought back. His fear turned into a virulent anger. What right had this black bastard to do this? What sort of society allows low-life scum, half-crazed on God-knows what drugs to walk around with guns and terrorize the innocent? Why should normal people always be the prey, the victims, of the crazed and the deranged? The emotions behind these thoughts filled Mike's head, even before the thoughts themselves could be formed. The decision to grab the gun was made before it was even a question in Mike's consciousness. It was a survival instinct, fight for once instead of flight.

Mike's hand had barely started to move when the assailant squeezed the trigger.

Death came quickly and messily, Mike losing consciousness milliseconds after the bullet exploded into his cranium: he didn't even hear the explosion that even the thick padding of the car's interior couldn't deaden, or Kathy's terrified animal scream. He was spared the sight of the gray and red mass which had been the contents of his skull splatter against the windshield and cover his traumatized wife.

The deafening explosion subsided. Time slowed. No interpretation now, just sensory input. Screech of tires. Shouting: "Get in, you stupid motherfucker!" More squealing tires. Then silence, the silence of a woman deafened by close-range gun fire. Eyes wide, but not seeing. Vague feelings of wet, slippery substance on the skin. Sliding down her face, the remains of her dead husband. Taste of iron in the mouth. But safe now, safe in the womb of shock. Just waiting to be re-born into the horror of reality. But for now, just staring, unseeing...