

## RED KITE

I've got a few rules for life. I'm sure you do, too. Mostly they're just small things to do with politeness and common sense. Putting the lids back on jars when you've used them. Closing cupboard doors so Muggins here doesn't bang her head on them. If you're a man, you should always give up your seat for a woman, carry a condom in your wallet, and put the toilet seat back down afterwards. Small things, I know, but they're important.

And those small things extend to driving, which is something I do a lot of, because I'm a care worker. I spend a lot of time in my little car, visiting people who can't do things for themselves any more, driving from nursing home to care home, from my house to someone else's house, and generally all over town. You can probably tell just by taking a look inside my car. It's full of paper coffee cups, sweet wrappers and crumpled magazines. I spend so much of my life in the car that I think of it as a kind of castle. A little home on wheels. Like any home, it has rules. Don't wipe your hands on the seats. Don't smoke. Only the driver may eat or drink in the car, and then just when she has no time for lunch. And please if you're my passenger, don't comment on the mess. I am going to clear it out, as soon as I get a moment.

That's just inside. Outside the car, there are other rules, things that I won't tolerate from other drivers. Don't cut me up. Don't bip your horn at me. Don't take my space, don't park in no-park zones and don't give me the finger if you don't like my driving. Sounds negative, doesn't it? A big list of don'ts. I suppose so but that's what rules are. Besides, I have one "do." My biggest rule of all is a positive. When I stop to let you pass, do thank me. Flash your lights, raise your hand, say the actual words "thank you" – doesn't matter. If I give way to you, thank me.

One day I was running a little late for an appointment, which was my bad, but my rules apply to me as well as others, and one of those rules is don't rush. No matter how urgent the situation is, nothing is ever made better by rushing. It doesn't matter if the house is on fire or if one of my old ladies is trying to kill me because she's convinced I'm trying to rob her; my motto is always don't be hasty. And so it was that morning, as I found myself driving to work a few minutes after I had intended to set out. The traffic wasn't good for the time of day, and it seemed like everybody in town bar me was in a rush.

Despite this, I kept to the rules, and drove at a sensible but not ridiculously slow speed. I'm no tortoise: when I was stuck behind a bus for a minute or two, I reckoned I could make it up later on an empty stretch of road. Even on this occasion, when there were new road works going on and I was forced to take a diversion into a different part of town, I resolved to keep a calm head and drive sensibly. When I saw a large red car hurtling up a hill with parked cars on either side of the road, I thought, there's no point in being obstructive here. Even though I had right of way going down the hill, I put my foot on the brake pedal, let him go by and waited for a "thank you."

Of course, there wasn't one. Even though I didn't have to stop, even though I was in a hurry myself, and even though there's such a thing as common courtesy, the driver of the red car didn't thank me. Not a wave, not a flash, nothing. I tried not to let it annoy me, but it did. All the way to work, all I could think was *how rude*. I had a lot to do that morning – one of the relief staff hadn't come in, because she'd chosen to go on a three-day bender instead – so being busy pushed out of my mind after that, and I thought no more about it. I'm not the obsessive type, after all.

A few days passed and I found myself on the same stretch of road again. This was hardly surprising: the roadworks, while temporary, were clearly going to continue for a few more weeks, and so the diversion became my regular route to work. I was early today, so my drive up the hill with the parked cars was leisurely and even pleasant – until the red SUV appeared again. I was sorely tempted to try and out-rev him, but I was going uphill and, to be honest, I don't have it in me to be a road hog, so once again I stopped to let him charge past. Once again, he didn't thank me (I say "he", even though I didn't get a good look at the driver, who was wearing sunglasses and a hooded top over a baseball cap) and once again I spent the rest of the day fuming over his completely unnecessary lack of consideration.

The next day was the same. I saw him coming, I slowed down instinctively, he slid past without so much as a nod. But this time, I was ready. Instead of fuming when I got home, I took out a Post-It note, wrote RED CAR on it and stuck it onto the inside of my windscreen.

The morning after, then, I was prepared as I drove up the hill. I read once about some ancient Greek who had been sent to hell only his punishment wasn't to burn in eternal flame but instead to roll a huge boulder up a hill, which would then roll down as soon as he got to the top. This never struck me as much of a penance: until now, that is, as yet again I found myself driving up the same hill, a glutton for punishment.

I glanced at the Post-It note: RED CAR. I was primed.

The car came down the hill faster than a skier. I steeled myself to keep going. It was, to be fair, no chicken run. A large Volvo estate that was normally parked on the hill was absent today and I could see there was just enough space for both of us to pass if we drove at sensible speeds. There was of course a chance that the driver of the red car was high on crack or insane, but I felt it was worth a shot. I climbed the hill at a clip – not too fast, but not too slow either – and concentrated on nothing but driving straight up, making sure I didn't waste a glance on the red car which was still racing down the road.

He made no concessions to my speedier approach, neither slowing down nor speeding up. At the last minute, seeing that he was not going to change course, I swerved into the space vacated by the Volvo. The red car sped past, apparently oblivious to my actions.

I drove to work, furious.

That day was Friday, so I didn't drive up the hill for three more days.

Monday came, and with it the face-off. I accelerated up the hill, saw the Volvo was there, and slowed just in time to let the red car pass. No acknowledgment.

Tuesday the Volvo was absent, and so was a yellow van normally parked opposite. I sped past him, he sped past me. No sign that he had seen me.

I arrived at work and Jill, my co-worker, saw the stress in my face. Jill smokes and never combs her hair, but she's a good listener.

"Trouble at home?" she asked.

I shook my head and told her everything.

"That sort of thing drives me crazy," she said.  
"I don't know what to do," I said, relieved to have someone on my side.  
"I do," she said.  
I looked at her.  
"What?" I asked.  
She smiled.  
"Throw something."  
"What, at him? While I'm driving?"  
"Yes," she said, "And yes."

I must have looked shocked, because Jill went on:  
"Years ago," she said, "There was a kid who cycled down our street on his way to school. And always on the pavement."  
"I hate that," I said. I did, too: it was on my list.  
"Every day," said Jill. "And always in my direction. He never got off the pavement, never got out of my way. Every day."  
"So what happened?" I asked. "You threw a brick at him?"  
Jill shook her head. "You can get into trouble for that kind of thing," she said.  
"Besides, I might have missed."  
She let out a throaty cackle.  
"I didn't throw a brick," she said. "I threw a bucket of glitter."  
"What?" I said.  
"You can get it in any shop that sells party stuff," Jill said. "Little tubs. You tear off the lid, it's full of glitter. I threw the whole thing in his face. He nearly fell off, then he got control of his bike again and wobbled off down the street, covered in glitter."  
Jill lit a cigarette.  
"I never saw the little git again," she said.  
I gave her a stern look.  
"Jill, that's really bad," I said.  
"Is it?" she asked.  
I wanted to say, *you know it is*, but the words didn't come.

So there I was driving up the same hill, with the same traffic and the same parked cars, wondering how long these roadworks were going to be there, when the same car came down the hill. I didn't have a bucket of glitter, because that wasn't my style, but I did have something just as good. I'd made it myself and I was quite proud of my handiwork. It was a piece of white card on which I'd written in large colourful (and, I hoped, friendly) capitals:

ROAD HOG!!!

I'd shown it to Jill and she'd been reasonably enthusiastic (I think she was hoping that I'd go for the glitter option).

"What are you going to do with it, though?" she asked.

"Easy," I said. "As soon as I know he's going to rev past me down the hill, I'll pick it up and put it in the window."

She frowned. "Front or side?" she asked.

"Does it matter?" I replied.

"Of course it does!" Jill cried. "It needs to have the maximum impact."

I thought about this.

“Front,” I said.

“You’ll need two-sided tape,” said Jill.

“I knew that,” I said, and made a mental note to buy some two-sided tape.

The other car drew near. I reached for my sign and fumbled it because the sign was on the passenger seat, slightly out of my reach. I grabbed it, picked it up and was about to stick in place when suddenly the other car’s side window slid down and to my surprise, a yo-yo shot out, reached the end of its string millimetres from my driver’s side window, and then reeled itself back in, all before I could put my sign in place.

I was so shocked that I nearly swerved into a parked van. I carried on up the hill for a while, and then pulled over to calm down.

“Right,” I said to myself, “Nobody yo-yos me and gets away with it. This is war.”

I went home and I sat down and I meditated. Meditation is a skill, and I’m pretty good at it. It’s great if you want to clear your mind. I mean, really clear it. Sometimes when I meditate it’s like I’m flying. I’m sitting in the lotus position and I’m hovering above the clouds and my eyes are shut but I can see. I can see everything around me and below me and above me, everything.

On this occasion, I was meditating for a reason. I needed a plan.

Two hours later, I uncrossed my stiff legs, massaged my thighs and slowly stood. I had my plan.

The next morning I didn’t get in my car at all. I walked up the hill to the roadworks and stood at the bus stop. I was on a reconnaissance mission: I wanted to find out about this bastard.

I stood there and sure enough, right on time, he drove down the hill. Maybe he was surprised that I wasn’t there, maybe he didn’t care. Either way, he threw that car down the hill, but this time I was watching. I saw his expressionless face, his grey eyes, his grimly-set jaw. Now I felt I was coming to know him. This was a man who could not be swayed from his chosen path. This was not a man who could be negotiated with. You either faced him down or gave in.

And I wasn’t going to give in.

It was a sunny day. I’d been online half the night, researching out of the box thinking techniques and I thought I’d found something. In Brazil, I’d read, where parking offences are rife and where the police are short of resources, the traffic wardens don’t waste money clamping offenders – they just whitewash their windscreens. Simple, effective and very annoying.

I didn’t have a bucket: I had something even better: a power squirter. Filled with quick-drying whitewash, it could be fired at any vehicle, moving or not, and splatter the screen in a manner not conducive to driving. True, there was a risk that the car might crash afterwards, but I figured that this particular driver was carrying on without regard for other road users anyway. The whitewash would at least force him to pull over. It would also cause him to realise what kind of person he was dealing with.

I loaded up the squirter and got into the car.

A few minutes later, I was approaching what I'd come to think of as "our hill." Traffic was light compared to previous days, which I put down to other drivers changing their routes: I could have done the same but I was committed to the fight. I was a gladiator, stepping into the arena, and I couldn't back down now.

As I got nearer to the hill, I saw the cause of the light traffic: the roadworks were gone. The temporary traffic lights, the road signs... everything was back to normal. I felt robbed of my showdown. I removed the squirter from my lap and put it on the passenger seat.

But then I saw him. He was coming down the hill just as fast as he had done before, faster possibly.

Hurriedly I wound down my window and hoisted the squirter into my arms.

Driving with one hand, I aimed the squirter at the other car.

The car sped towards me.

I slowed down and took aim.

And then:

And then hawks flew from his car. Ten or twenty hawks. Thirty. Dozens of hawks. They filled the air. They flew at me. I dropped the squirter and tried to defend myself.

The hawks flew into my car. They flapped about in the cramped space. They shrieked and tore at the upholstery. Their wings beat against the windscreen. A pair of claws scratched my face. I closed my eyes and braked. Behind me someone honked angrily. I opened my eyes again. There was nothing in the car. I looked in the rear view mirror. An angry line of cars behind me.

I started my engine and drove to work.

I never saw the red car again.