
GO WITH THE FLOW

by Ben Jeapes

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‘Why, ‘To Gran?’ I asked.

The professor had been about to pass me a cup of coffee. His book, the cause of the interview at his house, lay on the table between us.

‘I beg your pardon?’ he said.

‘Why is your book dedicated, ‘To Gran?’ I said. I was deliberately keeping my voice casual but the matter had been bothering me all afternoon.

We’d got on well in this interview, gathering material for a feature profile I was producing, and he had really opened up. We had gone through his career, from undergrad to PhD whose work in fluid dynamics was being applied by the European government to social mechanisms, with astounding success. He had commented on the rumours that the 2036 Nobel was apparently sewn up. For background, we had even talked about his home life, his wife and children (to whom the book wasn’t dedicated).

But ...

The book that started it all off, in its paper version, was six hundred pages of small font and equations. Five pages of acknowledgements, in an even smaller font. A massive bibliography that needed a magnifying glass. A twenty page foreword by a bigwig from Princeton. And the title! Go With The Flow: A Sociological Extrapolation Of The Effects And Applications of Transient Pressure Propagation On Human Populations . Concision was not the author’s style.

And yet, ‘To Gran’.

‘No sugar, wasn’t it?’ the professor said, putting the cup down in front of me.

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘Gran,’ he said. ‘Well, she looked after me a lot when I was a boy. My parents were constantly breaking up and she was the one secure thing I had. She had her own children quite late in life and one of them was killed in a car crash, so she really, really doted on me. In some ways she was the archetypal granny – a frail old battleaxe. She’s not with us any more, died in the ‘teens when I was a student-’

‘That would be a dedication for your autobiography,’ I interrupted, ‘or your first novel. But a scholarly work like this? It just ... it just jars.’

‘Does it?’ he said. He looked thoughtfully at the recorder, then leaned forward and turned it off.

* * *

I suppose it started (he said) when I’d been dumped on Gran suddenly so that Mum and Dad could Sort Things Out again over the half term break. This was happening more and more by the time I was ten but Gran never minded having me.

I was in the living room doing a jigsaw, which was the highest tech form of entertainment in her household, when I heard the phone ring and her singsong ‘Hello’ as she answered it. Then:

‘... well, I did ask for the week off so I could look after my grandson ...’

‘... oh, the poor dear, broken right through? In plaster ...’

‘... well, dry slope skiing isn’t really for our generation ...’

‘... well, I could cover for her, but my grandson ...’

‘... take him with me? Are you sure that’s wise?’

One of Gran’s few faults was the failure to realise her voice carried. And I was only ten feet away from her, through the wall.

‘... hang on, let me write it down ...’

I heard her say goodbye and hang up, and then she popped her head around the door and beamed at me. ‘Do you want to come for a drive, dear?’ she said.

* * *

Gran lived in one of those little greenbelt villages within the M25 – a small, secluded place that you wouldn’t have thought was only a few miles from the country’s capital.

‘Can you read a map, dear?’ she said as we got into her Mini, parked (as it always was) outside her garage. The one time I’d opened the garage doors and peeked in, I’d seen it packed full of boxes and junk that came right up to the entrance. The next moment I was wrestling with an Ordnance Survey map about the same size as me and with a mind of its own, until she showed me how to fold it down so that I was only looking at the relevant bit. ‘You can navigate.’

I couldn’t navigate to save my life but I now see that involving me this way, keeping me occupied, was her way of taking my mind off the actual drive and what we were doing. Gran had me navigate her – as if she didn’t know the way perfectly well herself – to the suburbs of Esher.

‘There’s an A-Z in the glove compartment, dear,’ she said. ‘Could you get it out for me?’

Now she had me navigate to a small side road that led into a larger road, packed with rush hour traffic crawling slowly to the far-off motorway. Gran came to the junction, indicating left, and I thought she would wait for a break in the traffic. Then

she put her foot down, tyres screeched and she swung out into the traffic stream. Horns blared and the car behind us, a swish black Rover, flashed its lights angrily.

‘Gra-an!’ I protested. I had an ability to split the word into an indefinite number of syllables, depending on my degree of agitation.

‘Oh, sorry, dear. I thought he was slowing down for us,’ she said. She reached out and for the first time I noticed that she had a kitchen timer mounted on her dashboard: one of those stopwatch types with a digital display that count down the time and beep at the end. It was set for twenty seven minutes. I shook my head, a mature ten-year-old exasperated at the vagueness of the senior generation, and settled back into my seat, fully expecting to become very familiar with the rear of the car in front of us over the next half hour or so.

It was getting away from us. I realised after a minute that Gran was actually moving slower than this rush hour crawl of traffic. I peeked at the speedometer. The needle pointed to just below 20.

‘Gra-a-an!’

‘Don’t want to cause an accident, dear,’ she said, not taking her eyes off the road.

The next twenty six minutes were hell on earth. The road ahead was wide open and empty: behind us there must have been a tailback all the way into London, and I could feel the hostility and hatred emanating from it and roasting the back of my head. And the few times there was enough space in the oncoming lane for a car behind to try and overtake us, Gran would speed up slightly so that overtaking wasn’t possible.

At last, at long last, the kitchen timer pinged.

‘Oh, good, just in time for tea,’ she said. She dropped a gear, speeded up to 50 and headed back home without once asking me for directions.

* * *

A couple of hours later I was sitting in one corner of the living room doing some homework (numbers fascinated me even then and I’d brought some stuff home from school) while Gran had the news on. After the national stories came the local stuff, which included a pile-up caused by some dickweed who had been doing 70 with one hand on the wheel and the other on his carphone, and had made the wrong choice as to which hand to free up so he could use the gear stick.

‘The idiot,’ Gran said, not looking up from her knitting. She had a way of always speaking in the same tone of voice but somehow modulating it anywhere between warm gooey honey (which she used for me) and rock-hard ice (like now). ‘The idiot.’

Neither of us looked at the picture on the mantelpiece. A man and a boy: my grandfather and my Uncle Edward, both dead before I was born thanks to a not dissimilar road-usage attitude from a not dissimilar individual.

Then there was the screeching of tyres outside on the driveway; the sound of a powerful engine throbbing into silence and a car door slamming.

‘Speaking of whom, your father’s here, dear,’ Gran said, still knitting and still in the same tone of voice. She and Dad had never seen eye to eye: his mobile phone had gone off during my Christening and he still hadn’t forgiven her for throwing it in the font.

Yeah, Dad’s here, I thought glumly. That showed me who had won the great Sorting Things Out contest back home.

The bell rang, and kept ringing.

‘Go and let him in, dear.’

Yes, Dad had definitely won. ‘Our Kev!’ he shouted when he saw me, rubbing his hands together, grinning all over his face. The same look as when he’d made some extra big deal at work and was expecting Mum to come up with the conjugal goods by means of celebration. He was a big man – big physically, big in personality – and always left me feeling small, even for a boy of ten. ‘How’s my man?’ He threw a couple of mock punches that left me rubbing my shoulder resentfully and bulldozed past me into the living room.

‘Hello, Darren,’ Gran said, still not looking up from her knitting. His smile became more fixed.

‘Hello, Margaret,’ he said. ‘Almost hit your car again. Why don’t you put it in the garage?’

‘No one else almost hits it, Darren. Maybe you’re driving too fast. How was the motorway?’

‘Eh? Oh. All right. Yeah, it was all right, for once. Doing over ninety all the way here.’

‘Oh, good.’

‘Right!’ Dad was rubbing his hands together as he turned to me. ‘You ready to come back home, Kev?’

‘Yes, Dad.’

‘Hey, you’re allowed to smile,’ he said with a grin. Another mock punch, this time making me wince. ‘Well, get upstairs and get your things, then. What’s that you’ve got there?’

‘Sums.’

‘Sums?’ He picked up the textbook and pulled a face. ‘Which of these circles has the same area as this square.’ Jesus H.! Don’t make it easy, do they?’

‘I’ve been stuck on that one for ages,’ I said.

‘Well, get home and we’ll look it up in Encarta.’

‘I don’t want to look it up,’ I said, ‘I want to work it out.’

‘Numbers are for nerds,’ he said. It was bad enough for him that his only child wore glasses. He was still smiling but there was a warning in his eyes too. ‘Numbers are for the little people in Computing, not Management like my Kev’s going to be. You’ll have your own people to worry about numbers-’

Dad had built up his business from nothing. And never let anyone forget it.

‘What’s the area of a circle, Kevin?’ Gran said. She had yet to look up. Then she chanted the little rhyme she’d taught me. ‘If you want a hole repaired, use the formula ...’

‘Pi-r-squared,’ I said.

‘And what’s the area of a square?’

Easy. ‘One side, squared.’

‘So, they’re both something squared, aren’t they?’

After a moment, light dawned. ‘Right!’ I grabbed my ruler-

-but Dad was still holding the book and he wasn’t going to let it go. ‘Upstairs, get your things, now,’ he said.

‘You see, dear, a lot of things are defined by numbers,’ Gran said. ‘Some simple, some more complicated, if you just take the trouble to learn them. If you’ve got the brains to learn them. If it occurs to you that they’re worth learning.’

‘Now,’ Dad said quietly, and he propelled me out of the room with a hand in the small of my back.

* * *

When we got home, more to get me out of the way than to make me clean I was sent upstairs to have a bath before bedtime. I had a towel round my waist as I turned the taps on, and then I leapt out onto the landing in one surprised bound as a vibration like a concrete mixer rocked the bathroom.

‘Dad!’

Dad appeared at the foot of the stairs.

‘What is- oh, Christ.’ He came up the stairs two at a time and went into the bathroom, where he turned on the hot tap at the basin. The noise subsided.

‘What was that?’

‘Just waterhammer, Kev. Started while you were away.’

‘What’s waterhammer?’ I said. It sounded silly. Water was soft. It sloshed. It didn’t hammer.

Dad looked annoyed but he could never bear to show ignorance in front of me.

‘It’s ...’ He gestured vaguely. ‘A small block in the pipes, Kev, means that not all the water gets through, and some of it flows back, and that knocks more back, and so

you get water vibrating all around the pipes and that reminds me, Louise! I thought I told you to get the plumber?’

Blaming it on Mum had safely diverted the topic away from the scientific principles of fluid dynamics. My heart sank as Dad strode out to confront Mum.

‘I was going to, dear, but-’ she said.

‘But, but, but,’ Dad shouted. ‘Christ on a bike, I have to do everything round here.’

‘I’ll call him now-’

‘No, I’ll call him-’

‘I can do it, Darren-’

‘You’ll just get it wrong, you silly cow-’

‘Darren-’

Slap. There went the reconciliation.

A moment’s quiet, and then I silently mouthed the inevitable mantra as Dad spoke it out loud.

‘Now look what you made me do.’

* * *

The professor was looking at me as if what he had said explained everything.

‘You’ve mentioned your grandmother,’ I said, ‘and you’ve mentioned waterhammer, but ...’

‘It’s not obvious?’

‘Um, no,’ I confessed.

He raised his eyebrows, poured us both another coffee, and continued.

* * *

We were all going off to the Chessington World of Adventure in a proud display of what a normal family we were.

Mum and I had got used to the rhythm of Dad’s driving on the M25. You sat still in a traffic jam until the car in front of you started to move, then you accelerated to cruising speed and abruptly braked as the car in front unaccountably continued to crawl. This had been going on for half an hour, punctuated by Dad’s ‘Jesus fucking Christ’ or some variation on the same theologically contentious theme every time he had to slow down.

Finally we began to move. Properly, smoothly, not lurching. The jam was ebbing; the traffic was getting up to all of 40 mph.

‘Oh, now that pisses me off. That really pisses me off,’ Dad said, when we finally saw what had caused this particular blockage. An ambulance and police car were

gathered around a crumpled car on the hard shoulder of the eastbound lane. We were heading west, and our own jam had been caused by nothing less than all the cars in front of us slowing down to have a gawp. 'All those fucking vultures eyeballing the wreck and they cause a jam behind them and they don't fuckin' care.'

He slammed his foot down and the car shot forward again, this time almost making 70 before the brakes came on once more and Dad was flashing his lights at the car ahead. 'Move!' he bellowed.

'He's going as fast as he can, Darren,' Mum said, which was the bravest thing she'd said all day.

'He's going as fast as he can,' Dad mimicked. 'Christ, you sound like your mother. Hear that, Kev? When you get a girl, check out her mum first 'cos that's who she's going to turn into.'

I wasn't listening. Something had clicked in my mind: the thought of all those cars ahead of us slowing down, which meant we had to slow down, which meant the ones behind us had to slow down ... One small effect ahead sending forces of action and reaction rippling up and down the lines of traffic, magnifying as it went, flowing back down the motorway and trickling out at the junctions and up onto the side roads. A light tap on the brakes at the right place in the right time and you could surely bring the motorway system to a halt. Or speed it up again.

I was seeing the world in a whole new way. I'd never heard of transient pressure propagation or boundary conditions of a system, but I was picturing them as clear as day. Numbers. Like Gran said, defined by numbers. I was dazzled.

'Waterhammer,' I murmured.

'Oh, Jesus, the boy's off again,' Dad said. 'Dreaming- Look out, you moron! Christ almighty, put some people behind a wheel ...'

* * *

'So,' I said, 'your grandmother put the idea of numbers affecting the real world into your head?'

'Check.'

'And the traffic jam made you see how it could work?'

'Check,' he said again. 'Numbers, in the form of fluid dynamics. I mean, I was only 10 so I can't say it all fell into place there and then, but I realise it was a defining moment. A light on the road to ... well, Chessington.'

So that was it. The explanation of 'To Gran' was a bit of an anti-climax, but it had been a long shot. My journalist's instincts weren't always right.

'Well, thank you-' I started to say.

‘There’s more,’ he said. ‘I mean, it’s all very well using the principles of waterhammer in a system but how do you get the system hammering in the first place?’

* * *

A month later I was back with Gran again and this time it was for keeps. I’d missed out on the details of what started it: I was getting good at simply filtering out the raised voices as the ultimatum du jour from Mum collapsed. So it was quite a surprise when a weeping Mum burst into my room, yanked me from the computer and dragged me out to the car. Dad had already gone off on his post-eruption trip to the pub so she was able to get me out of the house without obstruction.

Dad turned up at Gran’s soon after us. He did his usual trick of not taking his finger off the door bell until he got an answer.

Gran went out to open the door and I heard the voices in the hall.

‘My wife here, Margaret?’

‘My daughter and grandson are, here, Darren, yes.’

‘Right.’

The door to the living room flew open and Dad stood there, glaring at Mum in her chair in the corner.

‘You stupid cow, you don’t go off without telling me!’

‘And what stupid cow would that be, Darren?’ said a mild voice behind him. He didn’t look round.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘all I said was-’

‘Darren,’ said the voice again, ‘my daughter has come to visit me and you will kindly not block me out of my own living room in my own home.’

Dad subsided. Slightly. He stood to one side to let Gran come into the room, and bowed a fraction of an inch.

‘Margaret,’ he said with forced courtesy, ‘may I speak to my wife in private?’

Gran held his gaze for a moment, then shrugged. ‘If you will.’ She took Mum’s hand gently. ‘Darren wants to talk to you, dear,’ she said quietly. ‘Come into the hall, and don’t worry, I’ll be right here in the next room. Be brave.’

Mum went out like a sheep to the slaughter and Dad shut the door behind them. Raised voices started coming through the wall almost at once, and Gran put her arms round me and held me tight.

The voices were getting louder, until:

‘You’re not fucking leaving me, you’re my wife!’ Dad shouted.

‘Darren-’ Mum said.

‘You’re coming home now!’

'I'm staying, Dar-'

Slap. And that was when Gran made her move. She let go of me and slowly, deliberately went back out into the hall. Mum's quiet weeping got louder as she opened the door.

'Now look what you made me do!'

'Look what you made me do,' Gran said quietly. 'The cry of pathetic bullies who've run out of excuses.'

'Margaret, if I'm not taking my wife-'

'My daughter,' Gran said.

'-then I'm taking my son.'

'My daughter's staying here,' Gran said, 'and so is Kevin. The poor dear deserves better than you.'

'Oh, right.' I found the courage to peek round the door. Dad was towering over Gran, standing six inches away so that he looked right down at her, and she wasn't in the least fazed. 'Let's see what the courts say, eh? A prozac addict and an old lady looking after a ten-year-old boy.'

'Courts side with the mother,' Gran said,

'Not with my lawyers, Margaret.' Then Dad saw me. 'At last, someone who isn't snivelling and whining. C'mere, Kev. I'm taking you home.'

I was rooted to the spot.

Dad's smile fixed. 'Come here, Kevin.'

My mouth moved.

'What's that? Speak up.'

'You hit Mum,' I whispered. Mum herself was leaning against the wall, still sobbing, and hadn't joined in the conversation since the slap.

'My hand slipped, didn't it? Come on, Kev!' He engaged wheedle mode. 'Look, I'll get tickets for Wembley and we'll-'

It took several tries but I managed to say it. 'I'm staying here.'

For the first time, Dad was surprised. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped, and he took a step forward.

'You are coming with me whether you-'

Gran had also moved a step and was blocking him. The only way he could physically reach me was to push her aside, and they were both doing mental computations as to what the courts would say to a father in a custody case who beats his wife and manhandles little old ladies.

Dad ceded loss of the battle, if not the war. He took a step back.

‘I’m getting Kevin,’ he said quietly, ‘and neither of you cows are going to stop me.’

He left, slamming the door behind him. Then the thud of the car door, the revving of the engine, the screeching of tyres and the sound of the car fading away.

‘Take your mother upstairs, dear,’ Gran said to me. ‘This is an emergency and I’ve got phone calls to make.’

* * *

Mum was lying in bed, prozaced to a higher plane of existence, and I was sitting by her side, stroking her hand and trying hard not to cry. Because Dad hated ‘little boys that blubbed.’ Funny, the way we can still want the respect of people we can come to loathe.

Gran appeared in the doorway. ‘Is Mummy sleeping?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

Gran sighed. ‘Well, I can’t leave you here with her. If we get burgled she’ll never wake up anyway. Come with me.’

She led me downstairs and into the hall, and over to a tall bookcase on the far wall. She reached up and touched a book on the top shelf, beyond my reach. The bookshelf moved aside to reveal a doorway.

I gasped and Gran smiled.

‘It’s just the garage, dear.’

Picture this: sleek, low lines of polished black metal; a turbine whining into action; fins; gull wing doors hissing slowly open ...

That wasn’t what it looked like at all but it’s how I like to remember it. In fact, the car that faced the doors was a Morris Minor. Between it and the doors was the thin screen of junk that faced anyone opening the doors from outside, as I had once done. The ‘junk’ was like a stage set – a veil of boxes and nothing more.

I gazed around while Gran opened the passenger door for me. At the back of the garage was a truly awesome computer bank, monitors glowing with mapped-out road routes and columns of figures scrolling slowly past.

Gran followed my gaze. ‘It links to the Highways Agency’s mainframe, dear,’ she said. ‘I’ll explain everything, but for now, get in and remember your seatbelt.’

We got in and I strapped myself in securely. Gran pressed a button on the dashboard which made the junk screen slide to one side and the garage doors swing open. The car lunged forward, swerved around her Mini parked outside and sped out into the night.

* * *

Now isn't the time, but if you've ever wondered what it would be like to drive a turbo charged Morris Minor, I'm the man to tell you. And the surprises weren't over yet.

'Open the glove compartment, please, dear,' Gran said. I tugged on the little door, and yelped in surprise when a small computer console slid out and a screen popped up. Another glowing road network, with two blobs clearly marked.

'We're the white blob, your father is the red one,' she said. 'I thought this day might come so I took the liberty of bugging his car a couple of weeks back.'

I gaped at her.

'When he left us he stopped off at a pub, so we should be able to catch him up. My colleagues have been keeping him within range.'

A cluster of other white blobs appeared, each with a number attached to it.

'Oh, good. The others are online,' Gran said. She unhitched a microphone from under the steering wheel. 'WH7 to all patrols, target is making for the M25. Essential that he be routed onto a B-road. WH Central, please provide instructions ...'

After a moment another voice spoke. It was another old lady's voice but it spoke like a police dispatcher off The Bill. 'WH3, take B2219 into Banstead, maintain patrol speed. WH12, make best speed to Epsom and await instructions. WH7, make best pursuit and good luck.'

The other WH numbers radioed in their compliance. Old ladies, and old men too: the kind of voice that said I Wear A Hat In My Car.

'Give 'em what for, eh, Mags?' one man's voice boomed.

Gran held her radio up to her mouth. 'This is WH7. Acknowledged, WH Central, and thank you. And thank you, George.'

'You're welcome, Marg- WH7.'

Gran hung up and pressed another button on the dash, and a police siren blared out. I wriggled round to look behind us and only then realised the noise was coming from our own car.

'Gran-' I said.

'Don't worry,' she said.

'The police-'

'-will check their computer and see that it says another car is on the case. They won't interfere. Now, let Gran concentrate, dear.'

We hurtled through darkest Surrey, through red lights and the wrong way round roundabouts; flashing at slower drivers until they were forced to pull over and let us by (and what I wouldn't have given to see their faces when they saw what it was that was overtaking them); always closing the gap that lay between the hunter and its prey. The drama playing itself out on the computer display was fascinating: Dad's red blob in the

middle and the circle that was WH's 3, 8, 9, 12, 16, 18 and 19 tightening around it. And us, WH7, now so close that our blobs were almost touching.

The man's voice came over the radio again. 'Soon have him, Maggie, eh what?'

Was it my imagination or was Gran's voice slightly softer when she answered?

'I think so, George, yes.'

'What you doing later, Mags? How about dinner for two, candles and a chance to show these young 'uns that the old generation can still-'

'George! I mean, WH16, this is an open channel and ... others are listening.'

'Let 'em!' the old codger declared. 'Who cares-'

'Including children,' Gran said firmly.

WH Central spared Gran's further blushes by ordering all cars to maintain silence unless reporting on progress.

Gran turned the siren off and a few minutes later Dad's BMW hove into view ahead of us. I recognised the licence plate.

'He's got to take the next left,' Gran muttered. 'It will be very inconvenient if he doesn't.'

Dad was showing no sign of slowing down or indicating, though since he rarely did either at the best of times it was impossible to guess his intentions. And then we came round a bend and I saw two cars ahead of him, driving abreast and blocking the road: a half-timber Morris Traveller and a Hillman Avenger. Dad braked sharply and I could almost hear the 'Christ almighty' and imagine him thumping the steering wheel. But there was no getting round the two cars and Dad wasn't a man to suffer that kind of speed, so he swerved into the next left turning.

Gran thumped her own wheel. 'Yes!' she said. She unhooked the microphone again. 'Thank you, WH9, WH16. Target is mine: am proceeding alone.'

'Good luck, Ma- WH7. WH16 out and, ahem, see you later, eh?' said George.

'Oh, really, that man,' Gran murmured as she hung up the microphone again, but something told me she was pleased.

Our two cars were alone on the road now. Gran revved up towards the BMW I looked at Dad's approaching car with horror. I'd watched too much James Bond: who knew what else this Morris marvel had under its bonnet? Machine guns, missiles, lasers-

'Don't kill him, Gran!' I blurted.

Gran said nothing. Did the car speed up slightly?

'Gran!' I grabbed at the wheel but I couldn't move it.

'Don't be silly, dear,' Gran said. 'Brace yourself.'

We rammed the back of the car and I felt the belt tighten across me and hold me firmly in my seat. Then, as Dad began to slow, Gran pulled back and accelerated to overtake. I had a brief glimpse of my father's staring face before the Morris slammed into the side of the BMW. And this time there was no rebound: Gran held the wheel over, forcing Dad off the road. He hit the pavement, winged the car on a lamppost and ploughed into the bank.

'Stay here, dear,' Gran said as the car screeched to a halt. She pulled out a bag from beneath her seat and I twisted round in my seat to watch the confrontation as she strode towards the wrecked vehicle. Dad's door opened and he got out, staggering but still intact.

'You fucking lunatic!' he bellowed. 'What the fucking hell are you doing? You'll be hearing from-'

He stopped, peered forward. 'Margaret?'

Gran was fishing about in the bag. She found something and held it out towards him. Dad crumpled at the knees and fell face forward on the ground.

I screamed. '*Dad!* I knew it. Gran had killed him. I tore out of the car and over to where she was crouching over the body. I flung myself at her, sobbing, and tried to haul her off. 'Get off him, get off him-'

'He's all right, darling!' Gran said. 'Look. Help me roll him over.'

I did and saw to my amazement that he was breathing, his eyes were flickering and there was no blood anywhere. Gran held a small aerosol in front of my eyes for my inspection.

'Knockout gas,' she said. 'He'll only be out for a couple of minutes. You didn't think I'd make my daughter a widow, did you?'

She opened the bag again and started to lay things out on the ground with swift precision. A bottle of clear liquid. A tube. An empty whisky bottle. For the first time I noticed she was wearing gloves.

'Though I admit,' she added as she attached one end of the tube to the end of the first bottle, 'it's a tempting thought. Hold this for me, will you?'

She gave me the bottle of liquid. The other end of the tube went into Dad's mouth.

'Gran!'

She winked as she rose to her feet. 'I'm not asking you to poison your father, dear. It'll just solve a little problem and leave him none the worse for wear.'

She took Dad's right hand and wrapped his fingers round the empty whisky bottle, then touched the neck of the bottle to his mouth. She turned towards Dad's car and I let my bottle, the full one, drop slightly.

'Kevin!' she said without turning round. I quickly lifted it back to its former level and watched as she tucked the whisky bottle under the driver's seat. Then she came back to me, plucked the tube from Dad's mouth and relieved me of the clear stuff. 'Let him try to pass a breathalyser test with this little lot inside him!' she said. She packed everything away into her bag and stood up, ticking points off on her fingers.

'Breath ... bottle ... fingerprints ... saliva ...' She turned to me and beamed. 'I think we've done everything, dear, and I don't think the divorce court will be very sympathetic after this little event. Least of all when he starts raving to the police about being forced off the road and knocked out by his mother-in-law. Oh, that reminds me, we'd better call them-'

Then she stopped, head cocked to one side. We could hear police sirens. Real ones. 'Quicker off the mark than I thought, dear,' she said. 'We'd better be off. Get back in the car, now.'

She paused briefly to feel under the BMW's bumper. When she came up to me she handed me a small metal and plastic disc. 'A souvenir, dear,' she said.

I finally, finally found the strength and the breath to say something.

Originally enough, it was, 'Gran-'

The sirens really were close. She put a firm hand on my shoulder 'Come on, dear, we don't want to get involved. I don't believe in telling lies to policemen.'

* * *

The professor stopped abruptly, looking thoughtful.

'You're making it up,' I said, when it became obvious he wasn't going to say anything else.

He grinned.

'I mean,' I said, 'you're telling me your grandmother and her friends were using the waterhammer effect to keep the motorways clear?'

'Clear?' the professor exclaimed. 'If you'd ever driven on a motorway in the 1990s you wouldn't ask that. No, quite the opposite. They were deliberately keeping the motorways, or at least the M25, clogged up with the traffic that would otherwise have driven through their peaceful little villages. They lived in idyllic havens and wanted to keep it that way ... of course, if you've lost your husband and son to fast drivers then holding up the boy racers would be its own reward anyway. There might have been spin-off organisations doing the same thing elsewhere in the country, but I think Gran's people were the originals.'

'Remember, even back in the nineties, and earlier, authorities were already applying fluid dynamics to traffic theory. That was how traffic lights were run, for instance. But Gran and her friends took it that extra bit further. They knew it just takes a little action here and there to send shockwaves all around

the system, and if you use a powerful enough computer and the right chaotic algorithms to plan your moves, you can use those shockwaves to clear the roads, or to block them. That's what that little traffic-calming cruise of hers was all about.'

'But-'

'And then came the personal flyer,' he added, 'and the cars all but vanished from our roads, so of course it's not a problem any more. Not for those of us who still drive everywhere, anyway.'

I was trying to spot a flaw in what he'd said. Any logical catch.

'Where did they get their money from?' I said. 'That equipment must have cost.'

'Life savings. They weren't rich but they weren't exactly poor either.' He looked at his watch. 'Well, it's been unexpectedly pleasant but time is pressing. Are you flying back?'

'Of course,' I said.

'Good luck.'

I sat in the cockpit of my flyer, waiting for permission to join the main southbound airstream at 500 feet. It was jammed solid up there.

A network of agents cruising the nation's highways, driving their cars in certain areas, at certain speeds, for certain times, all calculated by the big computer ...

Ridiculous.

Of course, the kind of individual who thought the entire UK road network was laid out for his personal benefit wasn't going to be compliant. A traffic jam in one place would just make him drive faster elsewhere – maybe even through the villages they were trying to keep clear. Therefore, as well as the regulars there would have to be special operatives, with special equipment, acting against persistent offenders ...

Still ridiculous.

I glanced in annoyance at my watch, then up at the airstream above me. It was packed solid with flyers and traffic clearance was a long time in coming. I could almost believe it was laid on for my own benefit.