

The Road to Hell

By Gary Power

'It's a gullorrious Friday afternoon and it seems everyone is taking to the roads for the big drive home. The M25 is busy but moving, a few hold ups around junction 6 so why don't you let the radio take the strain and listen to the relaxing vibes on...'

Anthony Lerrom, disgraced MP, now media star picked up his mobile phone while recklessly cutting across three motorway lanes and maneuvering his brand new BMW Z4, 3 litre sports car into the fast lane of the world's biggest ring road. With his attention away from the traffic he selected the number of his agent and mentor, media publicist, Rex Splifford.

'Yeah...yeah...breaking up a bit. Traffic's slow. Just going past Clacket Lane Services. Should be in Brighton about 5'ish. Phone the station and say I left late from a kid's charity or something like that, something that makes me sound good. You know I'm worth it Remy. If you don't, just think of your ten percent.' he added smugly and tossed the phone onto the passenger seat without waiting for an answer.

'Now let's get this show on the road.' he said to himself while scanning the three lanes ahead. Rock music erupted from the speakers as he slipped in a CD, put on his Pince-Nez sunglasses and pushed his foot to the floor. Thirty grand's worth of finely tuned metal surged satisfyingly ahead. Drivers watched incredulously as he moved from lane to lane, cutting in tightly on other cars without indicating or giving space. He laughed at their reactions at the same time making snide remarks about their sad lives and pathetic cars.

Anthony Lerrom was heading for yet another lucrative radio interview. No doubt there would be the usual questions about his various indiscretions-mainly his three-in-a-bed escapades so eloquently revealed for a hefty five figure sum by kiss and tell bimchette Rebecca Fleece.

'Bitch' he snapped as he used the slow lane to accelerate past a couple of lorries before swerving wildly back to the fast lane. Then he laughed at the irony of it all. It was the best thing that had ever happened to him, a blessing in disguise-and the sex had been mind-blowing. His political career had not brought the power and money

that he had so desperately yearned for, and public awareness of over-inflated expenses had seriously curtailed his life style. Most politicians were the same with their mistresses and deviant practices; corruption in all of its guises was endemic. The difference was, he got caught out. There'd be a bit of mileage in bringing others down though. He'd use that if the coffers began to dry up. And then there was always the book. He'd find a way of getting back at all those so called colleagues who'd dropped him like a brick at the mere sniff of controversy.

'Bastards!' he growled. Then he smiled and admired himself in the rear view mirror while reflecting on life post-politics. He didn't see the balding, round-faced and slightly goofy man looking back, he saw more of a Keanu Reeves with maturity, a sort of people's Neo.

Now he appeared on quiz shows and media programs for extortionate fees. He'd even made the c-list as a guest on Parky; the one that comes on first as a prelude to bigger celebrities; that made him laugh out loud. Good old media publicist Rex Splifford had turned public perception of Lerrom from utter scumbag to likeable rogue. He turned up the music and rocked his head to and fro. A pounding, heavy metal beat blended perfectly with his manic driving. He changed gears and lanes like a rally driver. So people flashed and sounded their horns; so what? By the time they'd cursed his superior driving ability he'd left them for dust.

A subtle change in direction brought stark sunlight straight into his eyes. No problem. He flipped down his visor and turned his head away. Someone else sounded their horn as his car veered across the lane lines; the intrusive sound lasted for several seconds. He looked and saw an infuriated man in a sad little family car surrounded by his wife and several overactive children. His wife was shouting at the children and turning her anger on her husband. Now the man was looking to vent his own frustration on Lerrom by hurling abuse at him. He'd pulled alongside and seemed to be gesticulating threats of extreme violence to certain parts of his anatomy; not the sort of behaviour to be displaying in front of his kids thought Lerrom-have to teach him a lesson. He wagged his finger and swerved back into the middle lane almost taking the front end of his car off. The man braked sharply and nearly lost control. Anthony watched with amusement as the boring family shrieked with terror.

'Losers.' he mouthed and then pressed metal to the floor. The family man and his pitiful car, that was no doubt bought on absurdly overpriced credit, soon became a mere speck in his rear view mirror.

He turned the cd up another notch. 'Born toooo beeeee wild...' he howled as he thumped the steering wheel in time to the booming base line.

The day was glorious and so was his life. The cloudless sky lifted his spirits. Doof, doof, doof went the music as he reminisced on how his life had changed so drastically. He'd been in a mind-numbing marriage with two spoilt and bleating kids. He'd been mortgaged up to his eyeballs and was endlessly knocked down by his parliamentary peers as he tried to carve some kind of career in what had to be the most unscrupulous profession in the world. Now he had meaningless sex with air headed beauties and made mountains of money catering to the public's inexhaustible demand for dirt. He was paid huge sums for talking about his colourful life and being a 'character'. Now he was on his way to a radio interview with Brighton's premier radio station. He had a nice little room lined up in the Hotel Pelirocco, a themed hotel on the seafront where he was meeting a couple of women from a previous evening's liaison in a dingy Soho bar.

Life just didn't get better than this.

But time was getting on, traffic was slowing and he was getting impatient. He still had a fair distance to go and the interview was going to be a pain in the backside but it would be paying for a night of drunken debauchery; he just couldn't be too late. Now was the time to up the ante. He scanned the road ahead and saw three lanes filled with traffic; but there was plenty of opportunity if he became a little more ruthless.

'Time to rock and roll.' he said and swerved wildly into the fast lane. He overtook three cars, switched back to the middle lane, made a bit more ground there but found himself struggling to get back into the fast lane. They'd probably seen his tactics and closed ranks. No problem. Into the slow lane and make a bit more headway then the master stroke. He accelerated onto the hard shoulder for at least a ten car lead and then took a sharp, weaving turn across several cars and three lanes manoeuvring himself back into the fast lane.

Nothing in front of him now.

He whooped with joy and turned the music up even more. The next few miles were driving bliss- a hundred and ten miles an hour of heavy metal heaven.

Then came the next hurdle. Several lorries spread across the whole motorway loomed ahead.

'Shit.' he growled. But he was on a roll; adrenaline was pumping and his pulse was racing. Some flashy driving would soon put them behind him. He cut and swerved his

way through the lumbering convoy and in doing so received an even louder volley of abuse and headlight flashing. Getting through was harder than he'd expected. To add insult the cars that he'd previously overtaken were making ground on him. He moved back onto the hard shoulder, a bit risky with all the motorway cameras around but hey, that would just make another lucrative story. He'd launch a scathing attack on speed cameras and maybe criticize traffic wardens for good measure. 'The bad boy just got badder.' he growled as he throttled his way through the HGV jungle.

A fleeting glance of clearer lanes in the distance raised his hopes. He cut in between two lorries leaving literally inches between them then did the same in the next lane. A whole chorus of claxon horns blitzed his ears but Lerrom was riding on an adrenaline high. He was moving from one slick manoeuvre to another and could almost taste the freedom of open road. One more outing onto the hard shoulder should do it but a juggernaut anticipated his actions and blocked his path preventing him from overtaking. 'Bastard' he snapped. 'So you want to play games eh?'

He slammed on his brakes, cut to the rear of the lorry and saw his chance. A diagonal dash in front of a petrol tanker in the middle lane would see him clear. There was just enough room.

But he didn't see the motorbike.

He didn't see the damned motorbike.

There was a clash of metal and an enormous crash. The bike slewed sideways into the tanker and the rider disappeared under its wheels. The juggernaut tried to move away but a tyre blew and sent it careering in the path of the tanker. Anthony braked again and backed away from the two huge vehicles but caught sight in his rear view mirror of another lorry closing in at breakneck speed. It was obviously out of control having tried to avoid the mangled body of the motorcyclist. Behind it cars were ramming into each other. Everyone was trying to avoid crashing but a massive pile up was inevitable and Lerrom was in the thick of it.

To his horror the petrol tanker suddenly rolled over. *They don't explode*, he thought as he watched it tumbling across the tarmac like a dinky toy. *They're made that way. They just crash, they don't explode*, he told himself.

But this one did. It exploded in the biggest ball of fire that he'd ever seen. For a moment there was a blistering blaze of colour and light and the most appalling cacophony of sound. That was it, he thought. His time had come. Flames surrounded him and raised the temperature to an unbearable degree. Bits of wreckage flew by the

windows but by some miracle he avoided collision. The car entered a bilging black cloud of burning oil and suddenly Lerrom found himself plunged into complete darkness. For a few heart-stopping seconds he was driving blind and then, with plumes of smoke curling away like massive curtains he emerged from the conflagration onto three clear lanes of unfettered motorway.

He didn't stop. In fact he went faster; he just couldn't get away quick enough.

He looked in his rear view mirror and saw an image of complete and utter devastation. It was like driving away from an apocalyptic explosion. Nothing could survive that, he thought. Then again, there wouldn't be anyone to point the finger of blame at him.

Soon he'd be on the radio though. People would be asking questions. He needed a story and had to think quickly. He'd get to the radio station a hero for surviving such an awful catastrophe. Some mad bloke on a motorbike overtook him and cut straight into the path of the tanker he'd say. He, of course, had been driving sensibly. Who wouldn't with a car like his? He even tried to flash the motorbike to slow down, he'd add. Maybe he'd get choked up and shed a few tears-show a human side. He'd say he had a premonition that it was going to happen and tried to warn people, Splifford would back him up on that one, especially if it meant more money. That would be a blinding story, one for the chat shows. That would probably get him on Richard and Judy; they love heroic people with death-defying stories.

'Jesus!' he shouted-he was so damned lucky. Even God wanted him to stay alive. His heart was pounding and his body drenched in sweat. He took several deep breaths and shook his head. A guardian angel was definitely at his shoulder, and hey, there were two gorgeous fillies waiting for him in his own little fantasy room in Brighton. He'd become the man who dodged death, he mused. That would double his appearance fee at least.

He glanced briefly in his rear view mirror again and saw a hellish cloud of smoke spreading across the clear blue sky. 'Poor bastards.' he muttered as he thought of the people that had perished in the pile up. He was inconsolable for almost a minute. He closed his eyes and shook his head, then he pulled a beer from the glove compartment and opened it on the dash mounted opener that he'd had fitted just under the fascia. Such was his compassion that he even raised the bottle to those now departed.

It wasn't long before a traffic bulletin announced the complete closure of the M25 at a location close to Clacket lane services. The crash was worse than he'd imagined.

Estimated figures were of up to 50 dead and countless casualties. There'd even been multiple collisions on the opposite lanes. After a prolonged hiss of static the report continued: 'Disgraced MP Anthony Lerrom has been killed in the M25 pile up.' said a gritty voice, 'There have been unsubstantiated claims that his reckless driving was one of the main causes of what is being reported as the worst motorway pile up ever...' and then the report fizzled out. Anthony stabbed the presets of his radio but all he got was deafening static.

'I'm not bloody well dead!' he shrieked in disbelief. As he carried on with his journey it occurred to him just how deserted the M25 was. There was no traffic in either direction. And that wasn't all. The light outside had taken on a surreal, pinkish hue; it was as though he'd driven into an episode of the Twilight Zone. He drove on a bit further at a more sedate pace while he tried to work things out. 'Rex!' he said to himself, 'He'll know what's going on.' But all he got on his mobile was the same rasping hiss that had come from the radio. It was as though the outside world had ceased to exist.

He stopped and, leaving the engine running, got out.

There was nothing. No sound, no breeze. Just a perfect stillness and an eerie silence. 'What the *fuck* is going on?' he said.

He lit a cigarette and tried to work it out. The westbound lanes were empty, that made sense, but nothing in the opposite direction? That just couldn't be.

The UK's busiest ring road? Friday afternoon?

He flicked the barely smoked cigarette into the air and got back into his car. With the roar of his engine he turned at speed and drove the wrong way up the motorway back towards the pile up. The CD player still worked - that was some consolation, and he could see a bilging, cauliflower cloud of smoke in the distance. For some reason that made him feel better. His heart sank as he got closer to the carnage though. All he could see was a battleground of burnt out cars and dead bodies. A few of the victims had actually made their way out of the inferno. Smouldering bodies littered the tarmac.

He stopped for a moment and, breathing deeply and slowly, tried to muster the courage to get even closer. He'd caused the carnage. In his heart he knew that he had but in his head he was still in denial. He looked away and started to panic. His hands began to shake and he began to sweat profusely - he was having a panic attack and his instincts were telling him to get as far away as he could get as quickly as possible.

Some tiny part of him (the last tiny vestige of civilized human part) told him to stay and help - to face up to the consequences of his actions.

The tiny part lost.

Without further thought he jumped back into his car, shoved it into gear and put his accelerator foot to the floor. The BMW lurched forwards and stalled. 'Bastard car!' he snapped and tried again. This time the engine didn't even turn over. The windscreen was sprayed with phlegm as he vehemently declared that his beloved car was in fact a 'useless pile of shit'. And when, after several attempts, he finally conceded that the engine was simply not going to start he proceeded to get out and stomp on his mobile phone in a fit of vented fury.

For a while he just stood in seething silence and glared into space. When finally his frustration started to ebb it dawned on him that, despite the devastation, there was a curious serenity about the situation. There were no emergency services present. No wail of sirens or people in fluorescent jackets running about like you see on TV. There weren't even any survivors crawling from the mangled wrecks. He looked closer and thought he saw a solitary figure sitting on a crash barrier. Shading his eyes he took a closer look. A man was staring back at him. He could see him with surprising clarity despite the distance. The man was smiling at him, in fact he was almost gloating. He was perched on the barrier and hunched over like a big black crow. His clothes looked seriously dated, like a 40's demob suit.

Things were getting just a little too weird now.

'Bugger this for a lark.' said Lerrom and he turned back to his car...except it wasn't there anymore.

'What the Hell?' his words drifted into silence as he looked around. It was nowhere to be seen. His beloved babe magnet had disappeared into thin air. He felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as his mind tried desperately to find a rational explanation.

There wasn't one. Unless going mad was a rational explanation.

He could be dreaming. That was a possibility. But when he pinched his skin. When he rubbed his eyes and slapped his face the sensation of pain was all too real. He took a deep breath and shouted at the man.

'What's going on!' he screamed. 'What the fuck is happening around here?'

The man made a gesture. He was beckoning Lerrom over and had that, 'I know something you don't,' look on his face. Lerrom couldn't stand people being more smug than him-that really pissed him off.

'Tosser.' he muttered. What else could he do but go and see what the freak had to say though? There was no other option. But as he got closer he became aware of the gut-wrenching stench of barbecued people. He wretched and pushed a handkerchief to his face. Charred corpses were scattered all around. There were women and children barely recognisable as humans. Clothes were burnt from flesh and flesh from bone. Some were stuck in poses of panic and desperation others were holding each other in final affirmation of love. One poor soul had managed to crawl onto the hard shoulder before curling up to die in foetal position. His body was still smoking. A mobile phone was melted into his hand and pressed against the charcoaled remains of his ear. 'Wouldn't want to have been on the receiving end of that call' thought Anthony.

Lerrom felt sick. He *was* sick. He leaned forwards, grabbed his knees and wretched up whatever was in his stomach. When he finally stopped he heard the man tutting. That made him even more angry. He looked up and glared through blood shot eyes and hurled a volley of abuse towards his smug onlooker. The man merely chuckled. Lerrom clutched his fists and moved closer but something in the man's eyes stopped him.

'Reckon you should be worried and not angry.' said the man calmly, then he looked at the unrecognisable mess of burnt out cars and lorries. 'Ain't never seen anything like this in all my 65 years here.'

'Who are you?' demanded Lerrom, and then, when the man didn't answer he took a deep breath and asked more calmly, '...what's happening here?' There was an almost pathetic tone in his voice now.

'You're half-dead.' said the man, 'and m' name's Shadrac Wilmsey. You might've read about me if you'd been around half a century ago.' Lerrom just stared back at him; there was no answer to that. 'The world's goin' on without you, but it ain't lettin' you go jus' yet.'

Lerrom sat on the tarmac and put his head into his hands. He *was* going mad. Maybe it was the drugs he'd taken recently; some kind of hallucinatory after effect

'You killed a lot of people,' said Shadrac, 'an' believe me they're really pissed at you.'

Lerrom looked up. 'So tell me something that'll cheer me up.' he said. The man laughed loudly at that.

'Suffering and torment is all you got waitin' for ya. Those people that you killed; they'll be back for you in a few hours, when they're a little more settled in the afterlife. They have to finish things here before they can move on. They got scores to settle. Wouldn't want to be you son.'

Suddenly Lerrom was filled with panic. He saw the burned bodies and twisted metal, the black clouds and reddened sky, and he found himself gazing into a vision of Hell. He looked at the bizarre man, with his soul-searching eyes and chilling grin, and suddenly he couldn't take anymore. Something inside him snapped. He leapt to his feet and just stood there screaming until his lungs were raw. He tried to run away but the further he got the more difficult it became to move. It was like trawling his body through a sea of thick syrup. Eventually it became impossible; something was stopping him from leaving. Exhausted, he returned to Shadrac and just glared at him.

'Oh, and there ain't no escape.' cackled the old man.

'So why are you here?' he demanded.

'Pretty much for the same reasons as you. I caused an accident. Only killed a couple of people though. I sorted it out with them when they came back for me. Wasn't really my fault. A burst tyre sent me careering into their car and they left the road. Course it was just a small road here in '54', not a motorway. I'll have to hang around here for a couple o' hundred years probably, 'til I've paid my penance that is.'

'So what's going to happen to me?' asked Lerrom.

'You really want to know?'

'Just tell me you stupid old fuck.' he snapped back.

'Okay, seein's you asked so nicely. You'll be torn limb from limb. You'll have your eyes pushed into the back of your head and your tongue ripped from your mouth...wanna hear more?'

'Hah! That can't happen,' said Lerrom, '...not if I'm already dead.' He was really losing it now. He laughed as though he'd caught Shadrac out but his mirth was borderline hysteria and there was a wild look in his eyes.

'*Half* dead.' replied the man, 'that's a whole lot different: you still feel pain, worse really cause you can't be killed again so you suffer longer. Believe me, I've heard men tougher than you screamin' for their mothers for hours. I have to walk away sometimes. If people knew what was gonna happen to them, then I reckon they'd

drive like saints for as long as they could drive.’ He shook his head and gently rubbed the stubble on his chin, ‘Reckon this must be one of the worst crashes ever.’

Lerrom suddenly realised he’d heard the man before. He recognised the gritty tone of his voice. It had been on the radio.

‘That was you.’ he said. ‘You were the one that said I’d been killed in the crash.’

‘So you heard it.’ he said, almost surprised. ‘Yeah that was me tryin’ to make contact with the real world. Guess I can do it after all. Hah!’ he uttered and he rubbed his hands together like a gleeful child.

‘How did you know my name?’

‘How couldn’t I? You were driving like a man possessed for ages. I’d been watching you and waiting for the inevitable. Us ghosts see know everything y’know.’

Lerrom shook his head and looked around. Light was fading; night was approaching fast.

Shadrac saw the fear in his eyes..

‘That’s when they come...’ he said. ‘...at night.’

‘You’re enjoying this aren’t you?’

‘Not really; but it passes the time for me. Wish I could help if truth be told. Nobody deserves what’s gonna happen to you. Not even if they have caused the deaths of so many. Women and children too. S’ppose you didn’t want to do that. But you should have been a bit more considerate. Shouldn’ t take all your frustrations out in a fast car. Bit of thought would have changed the fate of a lot of good people.’

Lerrom heard a strange sound. A sort of distant hum that was dark and ominous.

‘That’s them.’ said the man. ‘Quicker than usual. Reckon you must have killed more than I initially thought.’

Night was falling quickly now. There was a blood red swell on the horizon and a cold drizzle in the air..

‘Think I’ll take my distance. Not sure I can watch this one.’

‘Don’t you care?’ pleaded Lerrom, ‘Can’t you help me?’

Now there was desperation in his voice. He was sobbing as he spoke.

‘Truth?’ said the man. Lerrom looked back through begging, tear-filled eyes.

‘Yeah. That’s why I’ve got to get away. I’ll say one thing though. If you get a chance to be really sorry... ‘cause sometimes us half-deads do...then think on it.’

He climbed over the central reservation onto the opposite motorway and ambled off into the distance moving quickly despite his slow pace. Eventually his body became a silhouette that shimmered briefly and then disappeared completely.

For a while Anthony just sat on the tarmac and sobbed with his head bowed into his hands. He couldn't run or hide. All he could do was wait. Wait for whatever Shadrac had warned him of. But he felt so alone...and so utterly terrified.

The resonant drone of impending doom was growing louder in his ears. He looked up but all he could see was a darkened battleground of wrecked vehicles.

Then he saw the eyes; like tiny red beacons of light burning in the darkness. They were just beyond the crash site, but they were getting closer. Lerrom scabbled backwards. He got to his feet and put as much distance between himself and the approaching hordes as he could but as he'd found out before, trying to escape was futile. Exhausted by his attempts he collapsed onto the ground. The drone grew louder. The glaring eyes became brighter. And then he saw their bodies clambering over the wreckage. At first he thought they were silhouetted against the sky but as they got closer he saw just how terribly burned and disfigured they were. He saw their burnt faces and their angry seething expressions. There were men and women. There were children and even babies crawling towards him.

'No.' he said and he shut his eyes tightly. 'Please God no.' he begged. He put his hands together and prayed for forgiveness, 'When I open my eyes,' he stuttered, 'please...please let them be gone. I'll be nice to people. I'll...I'll drive sensibly. I'll give money to charity and...and go to church...occasionally.'

The droning stopped.

He breathed slowly.

He breathed deeply.

'Please God please God please God...'he muttered again and again, 'Please God let them be gone.'

And then he opened his eyes.

But they were still there.

Close enough for him to reach out and touch. Close enough for him to smell the fetid stench of death that he'd forced upon them. Close enough for him to see the livid flesh that had been stripped from their battered bodies. He saw hundreds of eyes glowing like candles. He saw stark white teeth glaring at him from behind charred and

burnt lips. He saw impassioned expressions of rage and fury that struck fear into his heart.

Together they screamed in anger and reached out towards him. They lunged and lurched forwards until he was buried beneath a scrabbling mound of living corpses. He felt them scratching and tearing at his flesh and he screamed the scream of a man who was going to suffer for eternity.

And then as the world became a black and terrible place he heard a familiar voice.

'It's a gullorrious Friday afternoon and it seems that everyone's taking to the roads...' said the man on the radio. And it was a glorious day. Anthony Lerrom, disgraced MP shook his head and looked at the cloudless sky and remembered that he was heading towards Brighton for a radio interview and a night of debauchery with a couple of busty wannabees.

He'd been day-dreaming; but what a daydream. He was still shaking with fear. He'd popped some pills in a Soho nightclub the previous night. Must have been something weird in them, he thought. He had vague recollection of...of a huge crash...and a strange man...and horrendously burned bodies attacking him. The feeling of *deja-vu* was so intense. He made a quick call to Rex Splifford on his mobile much to the disdain of other drivers, then he tossed the phone onto the passenger seat and put his foot to the floor. Just fleetingly he thought he saw a curiously dressed man perched on the crash barrier that separated the opposing lanes of the motorway.

'If you get a chance to be really sorry...then act on it.' said a voice in his head.

Where on earth did that come from, he wondered?

He even slowed his speed a little and started behaving like a considerate driver. Then he laughed to himself. The day was great and so was he, and it was only going to get better.

Just a stupid dream, he thought. And the strange man with his portentous warning was nothing more than a mental apparition.

He put his foot down again. He weaved in and out of the traffic. He used the hard shoulder to overtake other vehicles. People flashed their headlights at him and sounded their horns. He dismissed them all as idiots. He saw lorries ahead but they wouldn't stop him. He saw a chance to get through and accelerated hard. He was going to make it. Just the petrol tanker now. His heart pounded with excitement as adrenalin flooded through his body.

Then he saw the motorbike.

The Road to Hell © Gary Power

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