

The Traffic Lights

Steve just laughed. He always laughed when Mitch tried to explain to the frustration he had about the traffic lights.

It didn't matter what time of day or which direction or how heavy or light traffic was, Mitch hit all seven traffic lights in town. Always. Red every time he got to one. It had almost become a local legend. That "guy who can't catch a green light," was a story known to every resident in town, and even once made the regional newspaper, although the columnist wasn't taking it as seriously as Mitch wanted her to. That had just made more people laugh at his plight.

Mitch had gone to the town Council and complained. Loudly, but all to no avail. The traffic department had explained to the Council and the overflowing chamber that the lights worked exactly as designed. Nobody else in town seemed to have an issue with them. Just Mitch in his silver Mercedes who did in fact, manage to catch every light red.

In fact, Mitch had presented video of it, and even the traffic engineers had their own cameras that showed him stopping at every light. Over and over again.

It wasn't that Mitch's life was bad. He had money. More than he spend in three lifetimes. His wife was a former model and Miss State Beauty Pageant Winner. She was smart and successful, turning her early success into a line of products that she sold until investors wanted to buy her company and did. Their kids were star athletes and cheerleaders, presidents of Student bodies and, of course, King and queen of the Homecoming Prom.

No, life was pretty good. Even Mitch's golf scores were in the low 70's.

It was just those damn traffic lights. Every day, every single one. Always red. Always stopping him just a few seconds more than Steve, who always seemed to hit them green.

It drove Mitch batty. Steve, in his crappy 1990's Geo Metro with the dent in the side, bald tires and leaving a trail of oily smoke would fly down the main street, catching every light just right on his way to the office, while Mitch, no matter how he tried, or which time he left or what speed he went, hit every single one of them red. Every single time.

And Steve would just laugh.

For months, even years, each time Mitch would start to complain to anybody, Steve would show up and just laugh at the whole thing. And lately, Mitch had begun to feel angrier about Steve's laugh than the traffic lights themselves.

The more he brooded about it all, the angrier he would get. Steve had nothing to laugh about. His life was terrible. A crappy pile of junk car, a low wage job, no promotions in all the years they had worked at the same office. Mitch had made Vice President in a few short years, but Steve labored to no avail. Steve's wife was... well... homely was being generous. His kids were always in trouble at school and even once with the law. His house was a pile of junk surrounded by a dead lawn and a decaying fence held up more by the wind than its posts.

No, Mitch reasoned, Steve had nothing to laugh about. The more he considered punching him right in the face, the better he felt. The idea of smashing Steve's yellowing teeth into his skull and watching the blood explode from his nose made Mitch calm down. More than anything what Mitch wanted, was to watch Steve, in his crappy car with his ugly wife and terrible kids with him, have to stop at a red light. To be there and witness the frustration they would feel when they finally were forced to bear what he himself had felt all these years.

Yes, that would be it... to beat him to a pulp and then make him get into that car with that family and stop at a red lights!

Even as Steve laughed aloud, Mitch himself began to laugh along. Only he knew why he was really laughing and what was making him cry with pleasure, the idea of his nemesis suffering as he had suffered. At long last getting his comeuppance.

At last the universe would be fair.

Mitch walked back to his office, surprised to find that he was shaking. He wasn't certain why. Perhaps the fantasy had been so real it left his trembling with pleasure?

Annette, his secretary smiled as he entered. "Mr. Sachment is here for your meeting."

For a moment, Mitch froze. Who? He wondered? There was no meeting today, or that he had been sure. In fact, it was why he had tried yet again to find a way to work that would get him through the red lights. It had failed, of course, and his boiling frustration led to Steve's laughter a few moments before.

He shrugged, shook his head and smiled. Okay... I can do a meeting, he told himself.

As he paused, he could hear Steve down the hallway, still laughing loudly. The image of him stopped at the light, bleeding and surrounded by his horrid family, brought him a smile. He confidently moved into his office, firmly closing the door behind himself, blocking out the sound of Steve's laughter.

"It's really quite simple, you know," began Sachmet, without so much as an introduction.

"What is?" asked Mitch, not sure he'd heard correctly.

"The traffic lights. It's just a simple of matter of physics and a little side of faith. Anybody can figure out how to get through them."

Mitch was confused. "Exactly who are you, again? And what is this meeting about?"

"The traffic lights. And I am the guy who can solve all your problems. Like I said, it's really quite easy," replied Sachmet with a casualness that made Mitch uneasy. "After all, that's why you called me."

"I called you?" Asked Mitch, desperately trying to remember such a call. "Did I? When was that?"

"This morning," replied Sachmet. "Don't you remember?"

“Ah, yes...” Mitch said hesitantly, not really recalling the call, but now thinking that he might have remembered it after all. A Billboard that hadn't been there the day before, right? A number... Traffic issues, call Sachmet... dialing while waiting for a red light. Was there a conversation? He couldn't quite remember it.

“It's quite simple,” Sachmet repeated. “But first, I have to ask, does it really bother you so much? To stop for a moment and enjoy the world you have around you?”

“Um... no... not so much,” Mitch softly breathed. “It's the... it's... really, I don't know why it bothers me so. It's just so unfair! It's only me. It's as if the universe hates only me. It's been happening for years and they just... they laugh at me... they make fun of me because I have to stop at all the red lights, while they, while Steve,” he was shouting now, “While that failure Steve gets to go through them like he's the goddamned President or something! It's so unfair that... that... screw up gets to laugh at me! AT ME!!!!!” he shouted, pounding his chest with his finger to drive home the point.

Sachmet smiled gently. “It's okay... calm down a bit. You don't want to have a heart attack do you? Over traffic lights? No... that's not really it, is it?”

Mitch sat down heavily at his desk. His chest was heaving and he was sweating. He was certain that everyone had heard him, but a glance through the window showed him that Annette was on the phone, probably with her boyfriend again. Her husband had no idea that she was cheating on him, and suddenly Mitch wasn't sure if he was madder about her cheating on her husband or that she wasn't cheating with him? After all, he'd hired her more for her looks than her skills.

He started feeling anger burn in his chest again. “It's so unfair,” he muttered furiously. “They all get whatever they want, but me? I can't even get through a damn traffic light.”

Sachmet smiled again. “I understand.”

He stood and moved towards the desk. “Are you certain, though, that all you want is to be able to not stop for a few seconds? To just drive through and not pay attention to what is happening?”

“It’s a start,” Mitch said.

Sachmet reached into his jacket and removed a small piece of paper. “Here,” he said, handing it to Mitch. “This is the answer to your problem. But I must caution you, solving one problem, can lead to all kinds of other... shall we say... issues? Yes... there are all kinds of problems in this world. All kinds of people who deal with every manner of inconveniences and delays. But, to each his own. If you truly want to solve this “problem,” as you call it, then follow those instructions. Now, that will be \$2000 please.”

The paper burned in Mitch’s fingers. He wanted to tear it open and consume it. He barely felt his fingers as the paper flew across the check, writing it for Sachmet and handing it over without ever taking his eyes off of the piece of paper in his other hand.

“Good luck, and Thank you,” Sachmet hissed. “I wish you well in your future.”

Mitch never saw him leave. Heading out of his office, he told Annette he would be back soon. An errand, yes... a quick errand he needed to run to the other side of town. He’d be right back.

The silver Mercedes started almost silently. The gears meshed and the car practically leapt out of the lot. The paper sat on the seat beside him, still unopened.

Mitch drove madly, seeing the first light in the distance he accelerated. As he closed, the light changed to yellow, and then to red. He screeched to a halt, screaming in his anger. His hands pounded the leather cased steering wheel.

As the light changed, he mashed the accelerator, spinning his wheels as he raced towards the next light, which he could see a few hundred feet ahead, blazing green.

As he reached the decision point, the light switched to yellow, and then almost instantly red. The brakes screamed and tires smoked as he fishtailed to a stop. The front of the car just past the white line. In his mind he could hear Steve laughing.

Again and again, he raced towards a green light, only to have it change at the last possible second. With each light, his anger swelled. The air inside

the silver Mercedes turned blue with explicit language. His hands hurt from the pounding. Steve was bent over, tears rolling down his face from laughing so hard.

As he stopped again, hot tears poured down his face. He was shaking and could barely focus when there was a rap on the window.

“Hey, buddy, you okay?” asked a tall, blonde young man. “You don’t look so good.”

Mitch rolled the window down, “No, no... I’m okay. Really, I’m fine. Just a bit of pain in my hands,” he lied.

“Pain” asked the young man? “I know the feeling. Do you need something? I have something. Trust me, it will help. A lot.” The young man held out a small unopened bottle.

“Thanks,” said Mitch, taking it through the window. For a moment, he had no idea what else to do. So he sat for moment, looking at the man who waited quietly.

“Well... okay,” the man said. “Glad I could help. You really should try and relax. Take your time getting home. Somebody’s waiting for you.”

Mitch nodded, not really understanding that it was a statement, not a question.

“Okay. Well... the light’s green now.”

Mitch looked up and saw that it was. He slipped away smoothly, slowly moving up the last hill before turning into his neighborhood. He drove slowly, pulling into his driveway. On the seat beside him, the piece of paper still folded, and the bottle.

He picked up the bottle and looked at it. It was a prescription, with his name printed on it. Take two and relax, it read, oddly. Do not drive or read after taking.

Huh?

Mitch shook his head sharply. The paper was still on the seat. He picked it up and was surprised to discover that it was still hot in his hand. His anger began to boil as he could hear Steve laughing. He could feel Annette

enjoying her affair with someone else. He screamed with frustration and rage.

His other hand began to squeeze the bottle. As he did, he could feel cool waves spread through his hand, up his arm and into his chest and head. The harder he crushed the bottle, the colder he became. His anger pushed aside. When the heat met in his center with the cold, he felt intense pain. Dropping both, he grasped at his chest. His vision went dark.

Mitch awoke, uncertain where he was. He could feel the sheets on his legs. The bright lights hurt his eyes. He could hear soft crying. Beeping noises.

“Where... where am I,” he croaked.

There was a flurry of activity, hands grasping his. “He’s awake!” he heard his wife yell.

In a moment, Doctors were beside his bed, poking and prodding, asking if he could feel this or that. As he finally came fully awake, he asked what everyone always asks, “What happened?”

“You had a heart attack,” said the Doctor. “Lucky thing too, you were in your driveway just as it happened. Your family found you immediately. Just lucky they were waiting for you, I suppose.”

Lucky, thought Mitch to himself. He looked at his wife and his two kids standing in the room and smiled. “I’m lucky,” he said.

His wife cried while clutching his hand.

A few weeks later, Mitch rode in the passenger seat of his wife’s car, headed into town. The first light ahead was green. “Slow down,” Mitch said. As she did, the light changed to yellow and then to red.

On the corner stood the young man, his blonde hair shining in the brilliant sunlight. Mitch rolled down his window and waved to him. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled the small bottle out and handed it back to the man. “Thank you,” he said. “I think that these saved my life.”

The young man smiled.

“Oh,” said Mitch, “Can you put this in the trash can over there for me?” He handed the still unopened piece of paper to the man who broke into a huge smile.

“Sure,” he said. “Happy to help.”

The light changed and the care moved slowly away. As they stopped at each red light, Mitch noticed the people, the flowers. The small animals. The decorations that his town put up for the upcoming holiday. He looked over at his wife who was smiling back at him.

He breathed in deeply and smiled. “Yep,” he said, “I’m a lucky fellow.”