

## George

By Lloyd Hawes

C'mon, c'mon, just let me merge will you? George thinks to himself. Why won't these boneheads let me in?

His frustration level rises as he tries to merge unto the I-5 in his 15 year old Ford Taurus. The fast moving traffic refuses to clear a path for him as he attempts to enter the flow from the on ramp. A quick look in his side view mirror reveals only the grills of oncoming vehicles in the approaching lane. He glances at the Beretta setting in the passenger seat.

"I'll show these rude drivers after I take care of ..." he trails off.

It was fairly recent George felt secure he would be fully prepared to retire soon. His 401(k) looked healthy and his mortgage was almost paid off. Then, the little catastrophes that derail the best of plans, occurred. The stock market tanked and with it his 401(k) balance. He accepted he would have to work a few more years, but retirement was still within site. And then: the layoffs.

But, why me? he thought. I am the most productive person on our team. Those other guys just goofed off and laughed while I finished my tasks. It doesn't make any sense. How dare they remove me, the one person who would actually work for the company during the economic storm. And, now they throw my retirement plans into the mud.

He was now, a cliché. A statistic. This morning, George joined the thousands of others close to retirement, but now, who are too old to start over and are not prepared for a life without work.

He thinks to himself, I'm going to show them and that idiot manager of mine, too.

A short space becomes available in the merge lane and George fills it with his car. The speed of the interstate traffic makes him nervous. He calculates the velocity and mass and closeness of each of the two tons of metal on wheels around him. If something goes wrong, which it invariably will, he knows the results will not be good.

George's job as an aerospace engineer is - was - to foresee and resolve problems. His life consisted of seeing the problem with this and the problem with that. He was good at it, too, almost too good. He saw problems everywhere; including, the unsafe distances between vehicles hurtling at 70 miles per hour on the I-5.

Incompetent drivers!

Incompetent manager!

Incompetent co-workers!

You'll see what your foolishness will lead to. You will!

George recognizes the green sign pointing to the 220th Street exit. He has taken the off-ramp many previous mornings in order to reach his office. Well, as of today, his former office. He turns on his blinker and prepares to exit the freeway when a gray BMW cuts right in front of him. It causes him to slam on his brakes and spikes his pulse. The car behind George bellows its horn, and fuming, George slams his foot unto the accelerator pedal in an attempt to catch up to that wild driver now zipping up the off-ramp.

Both cars serve around the slower off-ramp vehicles. George thinks this guy is crazy and needs to be stopped. Gritting his teeth, George zeroes in on the BMW. Enough with these dangerous drivers, thinks George, I'm going to teach this guy a lesson! Attempting to keep sight of the beemer, George cuts off several other cars as he serves in and out and around traffic. The sounds of angry horns do not register on him.

Chasing the maniac driver, George recognizes the route. It is the way to the office campus. He turns left, left, right, left, following the frantic BMW ahead of him. George hears in his mind, "Man, I have to take care of this lunatic. He is endangering all these other drivers." In his pursuit, George doesn't hear the horn of another car he erratically cuts off as he again changes lanes.

The BMW pulls into the parking lot George had left a few hours earlier in the day. What the hell, George wonders. He sees the BMW whip into a parking stall, crooked, of course. George hurtles into an opposing slot, grabs the Beretta, and jumps out of his Taurus.

"Hey, you. I'm tired of you careless drivers threatening the rest of us. What's wrong with you?" George yells, as he points the gun at the driver leaping out of his auto. George notices the man has a dark object in his hand. George sees the BMW driver point the dark object at him. It's a Glock semi-automatic.

"Don't you stop me. I have had enough of this stupid company. I'll show them they can't treat me this way." The man screams back at George. "I just bought this expensive car, and a house, and now they tell me, I'm not needed any more."

George's mind starts spinning, grasping, for something just out of reach.

The man continues with his rant, "My team, my team! They have me decimate the most productive team in the company and then they cut me? The incompetent boobs. I have to show them how stupid they are. And, and, you're not going to stop me."

Time slowed to a crawl in the instant. The ambient sounds of the city faded away from George's ears and his vision noticed in detail the quality of the man's suit, the whiteness of the shirt almost glistening in the afternoon sunlight, top button undone, and loosened power tie. The man's short hair, speckled with gray, moving slightly in the faint breeze. George felt a wave of pity flow from his own face, through his body, to his legs. Now what do I do, he thinks.

And there, the two of them stood. Facing each other; pointing their pistols at the other - frozen in the moment.

George was a problem solver. His career consisted of identifying potential problems and coming up with solutions. But, this didn't compute in his engineering head. George's brain found no logical path to address the current situation.

George croaks out, "What will you achieve, walking in there with a gun? Jail time and blood on your hands?"

"Who the hell are you?" the man responds. "You don't look like security. Not police." The man scans George with a quick up-down. "You were planning the same thing as me, weren't you?"

"No. Well, er, no, er, I just ..."

"I've seen you around here. You were whacked, too, weren't you? Go on admit it. It'll all come out in the headlines anyway."

"You, you're, ..." George stammers.

The suit with the sparkling white shirt doesn't wait for George to finish his sentence, "Fuck you. I'm going in there, and if I have to shoot you first, I'm gonna do it."

George hears the man cock his gun.

"Unless, of course, you want to double team 'em. Ha, I love it. Ex-labor and ex-management take down the idiots. Isn't that what you want, to take down these idiots?"

The circuits in George's brain were amping on adrenaline. Thoughts hopping from one incoherent flash to another. He couldn't get a grasp on any idea, except, this guy is truly crazy.

In the next second, the notion creeps into his psyche that this isn't the smartest thing to do: stand there, with the nut pointing a gun at him. This is a problem for which he has no solution.

In the recesses of George's gray matter, he knows, he doesn't have the guts to actually go through with his initial plan of Beretta insanity. Does he? This lunatic's idea is better. Why not go in and scare the bejeebers out of the management team, or what was left of it? No, no, no. What if the gun accidentally goes off, and a co-worker, er, ex-coworker, gets killed? Some of them are more innocent than others. Or, the security guard shoots you? No, not good.

The police will surely be called. And, that won't end well either.

"Mister you don't really want to go in there. What about your wife and family?" George asked.

"The bitch left me," the man yells.

With that line, George sees something in the man's eyes. He perceives a deep pain filling the man's face and George feels the fear and pain inside himself also welling-up. He thinks he isn't a negotiator. He is an engineer.

"But, is this the way to win her back?" George blurts out.

The man lashes out, "What do you know about her? I gave my life to this company, to provide a good life for her, and she leaves me."

George doesn't respond, as he doesn't have a response.

Dropping his head a bit, the man states; "Said I work too much."

And with that last comment, George sees the man take a deep breath and sigh, gun arm dipping slightly. The processing in George's brain finds a flicker of a solution, a possible resolution path. It doesn't involve going in the building with guns-a-blazin'. The logic is there, he just needs to help the man see it, accept it.

George states, "Well, seems to me, if your wife didn't like you working so much, now's your chance to make up for it. You're not working, for the moment, are you?"

George sees the man's face scowl and flush as he points his gun with more emphasis at George. Maybe I made a mistake, George thinks. The thought crosses his mind that he might have to actually shoot this loser. In the fraction of a second between deciding to shoot and actually squeezing the trigger,

George sees the man's face blanch and soften. The fire in the man's eyes, doused. He sees the gears start to move slowly in the man's head, working and reorganizing the man's paths of reasoning; the logic becoming apparent to this pusher, er, ex-pusher, of status reports, and personnel evaluations, and budgets.

"Shit," the man says as his butt plops onto the parking lot asphalt.

George drives his 15 year old Taurus east on 220th street towards the I-5. He glances at the Beretta and Glock on his passenger seat. His thoughts drift to his wife. He knows she will be at home, waiting for him to return from work. From the vision of his wife puttering in his home, the pictures in George's head drift to his original plan of that afternoon. He realizes he wouldn't have carried it out. He sees now, how stupid that plan was. In his mind's eye he sees himself park in front of the office building, walk through the front door, and put the gun to his head. He would've never pulled the trigger. Right?

The Taurus accelerates down the on-ramp towards the thick traffic. George sees an opening in the entry lane, and plans on merging. His old car is about to merge into the dangerous flow of sheet metal, when a car from the middle lane cuts him off and fills the spot.