

Traffic

It's too hot. But only a few minutes ago it was too cold. Some cars just never got the temperature right. Summer was fine because you could keep the air con on low and that always seemed like enough. But winter was different. Getting in the car offered no solace from the frost outside, so the heating got cranked to the max. But because you had so many layers on, it quickly became stiflingly warm, and it got switched off. Soon enough that icy chill returns like a church bell ringing to your core. We had been inching forward for about half an hour and then the inching had stopped and we were stuck. Dad's driving, so the radio is playing words instead of music. Mum's on front of me with her head firmly placed against the headrest, presumably her eyes are closed and she's sucking something for her travel sickness. Danny's behind dad, headphones plugged in; brain plugged out. This trip was a nuisance to him. We all were a nuisance to him. I've been in a traffic jam before, but this feels different. We've not moved for four minutes according to the car clock. People in the cars around us are cranking their necks; some are sticking their head out of the window to see if they can see what's going on. Nobody in my car moved. The cold's biting at my fingers now. Dad must have felt it too, because he cranked the heat up to the max. I won't bother complaining, it's so cold, and I'll worry about the heat after it's done its job. There's a lorry in front of us, so there's no telling how long the traffic jam is. 'Caution – carrying Livestock' it read. I wonder if the animals know what's going on. I wonder if they're cranking their necks to see what's happening, or if they even care. At least they don't need to think about the temperature. We've been stationary for seven minutes. Why are my palms sweating? It can't be the heat; Dad's clearly gone back to absolute zero again, because I can see my breath. I wish we were at least inching forward again. I need the toilet. At least I think I do. I went before we left, but now I'm pretty sure I need again. What'll I do if I really have to go? The car next to my window was empty bar the driver, who looked like he couldn't care less. Isn't he worried that someone could be lying in the middle of the road, skull smashed to smithereens? Or a medic massaging the heart of a kid who wasn't wearing their seatbelt? He sensed my glare, because he glanced round at me, scowled, then leant on his door with his elbow, hiding his face from me with his palm. My seatbelt feels tight, maybe that's making me need the toilet. We're on the motorway; if I had to go outside to pee I'd literally be doing it on front of an audience of tens, maybe hundreds. We haven't moved for eleven minutes. I'm getting very fidgety and I can sense that Danny is getting annoyed by this. I should keep still for a while and focus on something else. Why can't Dad put some music on? I don't care what kind; I just don't want to hear the news. It's so confrontational. People barking at each other. Why do they have such strong opinions anyway? Ok, I really need to go to the toilet now, or I'm going to have an accident. How awful would that be? Two year olds can sit for eleven minutes without needing to pee, why can't I? Maybe if I grab hold of it, that'll make it go away. I'll pinch it. I think it's worked! Oh no, Danny's just looked round and he's got his 'wtf' face on. I'll need to let go. Well that's just made it come back worse! We've been stopped for fifteen minutes now. There's a man on the other lane who is out of his car. He looks really angry. If he can get out and just stroll around, maybe I can too. I think my heart might just knock a hole in my chest the way it's bouncing back and forth. Why has it become so difficult to swallow? Every time I try it, I feel like I'm choking. Am I going to be sick? I hope not. That would be worse than wetting myself. Being sick in a car, or worse, out the window for all of those people to see. Maybe I can ask my mum for a sweet to suck. She's asleep, she'll just get grumpy. The radio says our country's gone into depression this quarter. How can they tell that? No wonder we're all depressed, listening to the news all the time. I think I'm going to have to get out of the car, I'm either going to be sick, or pee everywhere, or pass out. I don't think I'm breathing anymore, why am I still alive? I can't feel the air going down my throat; it's just sticking there like my saliva. I'm just going to close my eyes; maybe I'll go to sleep. It's so cold, why can't we get the temperature right in winter?! I'll tap my feet and

bounce my legs, maybe that will take my mind off everything else. Our car's so small, why can't we have a nice big Land Rover or BMW? I suppose if our car was so nice I'd be even more scared to pee all over it. There's a car at Danny's side with a boy about my age. He looks so worried. What's he got to be worried about? He's in a Jaguar. Maybe everyone's feeling the same way we are and they're just hiding it better than us. That's stupid; he's got nothing to be worrying about. Wait a minute, did his car just move backwards? No, we moved forwards! We're moving! Dad's going through the gears – first, second, third, yes! Finally! I don't need to pee anymore! I can swallow, and my heart is beating like a normal person! Seventeen minutes of sheer hell. Why are mum, dad and Danny not jumping for joy? Everyone's still going pretty slow; we must be coming up to the cause of the jam. This could be very messy; I'm picturing blood, guts, wailing widows. But I just don't care anymore. I feel elated to be through the other side of that dark tunnel. I'll feel bad for the person splattered on the road, but I won't swap my freedom for their life. We finally reach the scene, each of us preparing ourselves for the gory aftermath. And like every single other person on the motorway who was sitting for seventeen minutes, dealing with their own personal hell inside, we give a collective smirk of disappointment at the cause of the jam. Three chipper old ladies sitting on the grass verge with a picnic, watching on as an AA man struggles to change their tyre. Fourth gear, fifth gear, we're off! Man it sure is cold in here...