

If you are unfortunate enough to travel it at the wrong time of year, then sunrise hits on the A108 hits you straight between the eyes as you head eastbound. Aremay was precisely this unfortunate on that particular Monday morning, and so was squinting out through the windscreen of the hire car, fumbling up for the sun visor to try and take the edge off the light.

Before him, the blood-red disk of the Sun was cruising slowly up, over the horizon, flooding a clear June sky with a wave of light. Around him East Anglia was chirping, tweeting into life; a burst of nature lost to his ears above the sound of the engine and the growl of tires on tarmac. Directly in front of him was someone, some *idiot* in a Dacia, hogging the overtaking lane at a perfectly sedate 53 miles per hour.

At least, with the visor down, one could get a better look at this pillock. Unlike the Sun, whose glare would at least fade as it rose up into the sky, this driver's personal vendetta against speedy travel on Britain's trunk roads was unpredictable; who knew when they'd take their crusade off at a junction, to snarl up the traffic of an unsuspecting commuter town? What perhaps made them peculiarly irritating was that they seemed to be the only other driver on the road at this hour.

Of course, when you stumbled off an overnight flight from New York, discovered they'd booked you a Nissan – a *Nissan* – as a hire car and been served a cup of tea from a service station coffee shop that frankly would make dishwater taste and feel like a fine wine, most everything is irritating in some way. Aremay, who was not known for resisting the temptation to find things annoying, was positively seething in his seat as he locked his glare onto the rear bumper of the Dacia.

Sometimes, Aremay really missed his field days. He particularly missed his Defender; a battered, indefatigable vehicle, once white but by the time he had left permanently stained with the dirt of the roads, dents and nicks in it caused by everything from pebbles to bullets. It would always start, even when he left it out in a sandstorm (twice), a tropical rainstorm (at least seven times) and had been used as a goal by some of the children at the refugee camp (once, never again). It complained at him at the right times, it was just about fast enough to get him where he needed within enough time to apologise decently and it had the feeling to it that it could do another 150,000 miles before it even thought about giving up the ghost.

Compared to this, the hire cars of his office days were blancmanges; beige cubes, with all the purposeful feeling of an elderly lady doing her weekly shop in a Tesco, bereft of passion or indeed much of a story. The passenger seat might once have been used to convey an escort back to a hotel near Luton for a bout of disappointing sex. The Defender's passenger seat had conveyed the shattered body of his best friend back to the nearest UN field station for storage until it could be returned to his family in distant Wales.

It struck him far more force than the sun had, just minutes before, and he dropped back in the seat. It was exactly 5 years to the day since Roger had been killed. *Shit*. Had he forgotten that so quickly, already? Somewhere between the awful journey to get here and the arguments about why he'd been sent to this conference, out in the backwoods of East Anglia, it had just slipped by him.

He blinked, seeing a junction bowl towards him, signposted with an array of little villages either way. Without a second thought, he flipped the indicator lever, and slid off the carriageway, the Dacia bumbling out of sight and mind behind him. At the top of the ramp, he eased the car to the right,

turning down the utterly deserted road. The sign told him “Blatchley”, but the name was immaterial – the sea was his destination.

It had been just a few miles south east of Nairobi, he recalled. Just outside Athi River, on the Mombasa Road, a route regularly used by UN convoys on their way too and from the capital and its sprawling camps of refugees, who had congregated there to flee the roving militias of the countryside. The road was a tempting target for those same militias, as they sought to disrupt the peace process and also the security of those same refugees.

Blatchley, it turned out, was a respectful English village. Tidy cottages crowded close to the road, tangled up here and there in clematis or ivy, their windows still filled with curtains at this time. A little church, with gravestones pulling close to it, stood in the centre, peeking its little Gothic windows between the yew trees. Beyond, the view between the houses, down the road, opened up to show a sea front; a car park, pressed up against a concrete sea defence, facing out over the sea.

The church yard was so like that they had buried Roger in. The mortuary had done a wonderful job of disguising the wounds that had killed him in the end. When the militia had started their attempt to block the road, tumbling down from the hills in technicals, they had preceded their assault with a shower of mortar rounds. One had slammed straight into the tarmac on the opposite carriageway, spewing out a hail of metal and rock in all directions. Aremay had slammed the brakes on hard, bringing the car to a juddering halt; and looked up to see his best friend since university oozing blood from just about everywhere, pierced with much of what had been his passenger side window.

Aremay stopped the Nissan in the first bay he could point it to in the car park, and cut the engine. Almost immediately the sounds of the sea washed through into his ears, and sighed softly, letting some of the anger that had built from the drive seep away through his nostrils. He pushed the car door open, flipped off his seatbelt and stepped out into the wash of cool air of an English summer morning. Before him, the curved sea defence slid down to a wide, open gravel beach trailing down into the chilly grey of the North Sea. Ranks of wooden posts, paired up, marching out to the sea, called him down onto the stones. He began to stagger towards the water, diagonally, moving away from the car park.

After the ringing had stopped, Aremay had put his foot down. He didn't know that Defenders could drive that fast, or that he could swear so much in such a short space of time. He had weaved and bobbed between the stopped trucks and buses on the highway, bullets pinging around him as peacekeepers surged into try and repel the attack. Behind him, somewhere, a petrol tanker was blazing – back to Nairobi was no option, he had to press on to the next station. What seemed like every other second was spent trying to comfort Roger, reaching hand over, grasping at his wrist, almost begging him to hold on a moment longer.

It must have been within sight of the station that Aremay realised it was in vain. That there was no pulse in the wrist he was gripping, what would have been painfully tight now, and that Roger was simply gone. His life had soaked through his shirt and into the seat cushions of the car, seeping away all too quickly for anything Aremay could do to staunch it. His green eyes were half-open, gazing over his left shoulder, out over the savannah. Still, he had driven the last of the way, stumbled from the car and around to the other side, practically pulled the shattered door off the car and dragged Roger out.

He stopped half-way down the beach, and turned around. There was still not another soul in sight here. Just the rush of the waves, the call of a distant gull and the rattle of a loose stone he must have kicked free. He closed his eyes, and dragged a hand down his face, letting another rush of air escape his lungs. Then, with the breath back in, came the anger.

“Fuck.” He said, then spat another. “Fuck!” He clenched his fists and slammed them down, and repeated his furious, sorrowful cry; “Fucking fuck!” A kick was lashed out, sending a shower of stones down the beach, rattling away. Grabbing at his forehead, the rabbit dragged a ragged breath through his open mouth, clenching his eyes to suppress a welling urge to cry. 5 years later, and just the realisation that it was the anniversary brought all this back up in him. He let his arms drop, and then the rest of him, crunching down into the cold stones, back to the rising sun, eyes drooped to the ground. There he sat, on the pebbles, shoulders heaving, eyes crowded with his tears, until the sun had long cleared the horizon and the sea had nibbled its way back to his feet.