

## Motorcycle Man

By Wendy BooydeGraaff

Heidi peered into the side view mirror. The man on the motorcycle was still following her. He'd been there for the past three turns, his face an emoji with the swearing exclamations plastered across the mouth. His face too large for his helmet, tomato red for having been squeezed in anyways. A brown oak leaf had caught itself in the strap under his chin, fluttering against his unkempt beard. He had one hand on the handlebars, while one hand was gaveling into the air—at her—as if she'd done something wrong. As if she'd cut him off or veered over into his lane. But she was sure that she hadn't. And she was a very good driver. No tickets, no accidents. Now he was trying to pull up beside her but getting wedged between her bumper and the rusted-out Oldsmobile next to her. The traffic was heavy. He caught her looking at him in the mirror and he was shouting something at her now, too. Heidi couldn't hear what. She was glad for the closed car windows.

"Mama, Mama," Terrence called from his car seat.

"What, honey?"

"Mama, Mama," Terrence called again. He liked the sound of the repeated syllables, rolling his lips over the soft sounds.

"Terrence, Terrence," she called back.



He giggled.

The Jeep jolted forward, and Heidi flashed to the rearview. The man hovered behind the rear windshield now. His round face was covered in sweat and his mouth was contorted. He looked like he could be one of the Hells Angels, except one of the Hells Angels would have a better bike. One without the rust and without the clouds of oily exhaust. She couldn't see the front tire of his motorcycle. He rocked the motorcycle back and his large hard potbelly moved up and down, and

then—with a thump—she was jolted forward by his heft crashing against her bumper.

Wasn't anyone else seeing this? The other drivers idled beside her, texting or staring straight ahead, hands on the steering wheel, ready to go the instant the light turned green.

"Mama, Mama," Terrence called.

If she were braver, she'd roll down her windows and shout at him. What a bully! Instead, she'd have to try and out-drive him. She glanced at Terrence, who played with his sippy cup, turning it upside down and shaking it, watching little drips of juice wet the arm of the car seat. She'd have to balance safety with getting the hell away from the motorcycle man.

The light turned green. Heidi stepped on the gas and the Jeep jerked forward. Terrence's cup flipped out of his hand.

"Mama!" he cried. "Mama! Mama! Cup!"

Motorcycle Man's rusted bike sputtered to keep up. If it weren't for these dang stoplights, she'd have lost him by now. And all the traffic—why all this traffic? On a Tuesday morning after 9? Especially this white minivan in front of her that keeps stopping for all the yellows. Were it not for that van, she might even have run a stoplight or two and left Motorcycle Man far behind.

They both pulled up in the right lane at 60<sup>th</sup>, and they both lurched forward as soon as the light turned green. She pulled ahead—six cylinders will do that, and it's not as if she purposefully hit the pedal to drag race—but when she saw a school

bus edging forward out of Sunnydale she instinctually waved the bus driver on in front of her. The bus turned widely into the left lane. The two lanes of traffic slowed for the bus. And then Motorcycle Man suddenly appeared right in front of her. Had he passed her on the shoulder? How had he maneuvered that one? Heidi shook her head. No matter, she was a calm driver. She maintained her usual car's length distance behind him—"angel space," as the Ladies of the Lord called it. After all, the spiritual realm renamed every facet of life. Motorcycle Man slowed, slower and still slower, as if he were looking for a particular street to turn onto.

Heidi patiently waited for an opening between the steady stream of cars in the left lane, checked her blind spot, and then switched lanes. Motorcycle Man switched at precisely the same time, maintaining his position in front of her. Maybe he wanted to turn left at the next light? Heidi switched back to the right lane. Motorcycle Man switched back, too. *Okay*, Heidi thought to herself, too graciously, *maybe he's being polite and moving back over so I can pass him*. She turned on her signal earlier, giving a few extra seconds before pulling into the left lane. Motorcycle Man veered toward the center line, as if he were trying to keep her from passing. The other cars passed the two slowpokes.

She turned off her signal, waited a few seconds, then pressed hard on the gas. Motorcycle Man lurched forward, his torso up and off his seat, as if his physical force could

speed his bike. His voice pierced through the sound of the revving motors as she passed him. Terrence had to be protected from expletives. Could she take him to Ladies of the Lord with him repeating “Fuck, fuck, fuck”? Heat rose to her face. Faith and shame, a marriage made in church.

Another red. Heidi stopped again behind that damn white van. Ladies of the Lord weren’t doing much for her own—internal—profanity. She’d made three extra turns, across 44<sup>th</sup> and down Eastern, zigzagged through 36<sup>th</sup> and back onto Kalamazoo. Weaving through traffic, not the way she normally drove since becoming a parent. She’d lost him this time. She took a deep cleansing breath and looked down 32<sup>nd</sup> with its maple lined sidewalk, leaves still hanging on to branches by orange threads.

“Cup?” Terrence called. “Cup?”

Should she turn around and go home? No. There’s no way she could take the chance of him finding out where she lived, as enticing as it was to think about pulling into the garage and pressing the button to close the door the second her tailpipe cleared the sensor.

She heard the sputter first. Motorcycle Man, three cars back, riding the yellow dashes between lanes towards her.

These shenanigans needed to stop! Heidi had to be on time for once. No more detours. Ladies of the Lord didn’t mess around. The church-sponsored fair-trade coffee and donated local bagels were waiting for her, scenting up the

narthex. And she had to bring Terrence to the nursery before the worship songs began. So many rules. It wasn’t that she didn’t like the women, it’s that they all seemed to know something she didn’t. And they agreed about things she didn’t necessarily agree with. To their break-out group Marissa had brought photocopied close-ups of fetuses, skewed statistics about abortions, out-of-context lists of Bible verses about children and babies. Lucy had organized a rally at the entrance to the Women’s Health Clinic. They were called—by God himself, they said—to protest silently and pray. Heidi’s temples pounded at the image of the six of them huddled by street, outstretched arms waving and praying over each car that turned in the driveway. She wanted to say the Women’s Health Clinic did much more—education, birth control, free PAP smears—and that she had recently donated some money to them after hearing about government cutbacks. In the end, Heidi didn’t say anything to them. She needed these women, their free childcare and their adult presence—to feel sane—at least on Tuesday mornings. So she stayed silent. Unmoved by the photos of baby parts and the horror stories of third-term abortions. She had promised Suza she’d give Ladies of the Lord a chance. She had never pictured herself as a stay-at-home mom, yet here she was. For this year at least. A whole year off with no purpose of her own. Her career had faded. Her whole selfhood had faded into motherhood. Why had she done it? She questioned herself every day. But it had

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been too hard to go back to work when Terrence was a wriggling bundle of need.

“Cup, cup, cup, cup, cup!” Terrence chanted. “Cup, cup, cup, cup!”

Now he was a verbal bundle of need.

One car remained between her and Motorcycle Man.

Heidi edged toward the bumper of the van in front of her. Change, light, change! It did—a green arrow for the lucky right-turn lane. Heidi's stayed red.

What could she do? Road rage had been popular topic back when Heidi was an undergrad. She had read DMV articles for research, written a paper: “Road Rage and the Modern Driver.” It had been more about statistics than solutions.

The angry-sounding muffler vibrated louder, closer. Spitting and rasping.

Motorcycle Man balanced the dashed line beside the flank of Heidi's Jeep and slammed his palm against the back window. She jumped. Terrence screeched—and then laughed. “Him, Mama. Him!”

Heidi was reaching for her phone to call the police when the light turned green. Instinct took hold. She gunned it—Eking around the white van, cutting off the blue Malibu. Eat dust, she thought.

The fire station sat on the corner past 28<sup>th</sup>

Street. They would be obligated to help her, right? And if she got pulled over for speeding, well, then she'd have the police to tell about Motorcycle Man. She could ID him in a flipping heartbeat.

When she neared the fire station, Motorcycle Man was gone; he must've turned into one of the neighbourhoods or into the superstore parking lot. She rolled her neck and the muscles relaxed.

She turned down Linwell and looped around the church, just in case Motorcycle Man was hiding out somewhere. Nothing. She laughed aloud. The coast was clear. Terrence laughed too, as he did whenever she did. He stopped, suddenly serious. “Cup?” he asked.

Heidi pulled into the church parking lot and found a spot between two SUV's. She was late. The cars lined up neatly in their spots, doors closed, not one person digging around in the backseat for the study guide, no moms pulling toddlers with long outstretched arms, no one slinging infant car seats over elbow crooks.

She hopped out of the Jeep. The back of the church showed only its solid brick back with a windowless emergency exit. The sanctuary was on the other side of that wall, and the sounds of opening worship seeped through: Lisa trilling keys on the grand piano; Ruth plucking the electric guitar strings; and Deb sedate on the drums, keeping narcoleptic time—all while

Bethany's soprano led the group. *Open the eyes of my heart, Lord . . . I want to see you.*

Heidi lifted Terrence out of his car seat, grabbed his sippy cup off the ground, and kicked the door shut. She locked the Jeep and dropped the keys into the side pocket of the diaper bag. She headed toward the entrance. Why did it have to be such a big church? So many cars!

Then she heard it: the low pattering growl of an exposed muffler. She ran. If she didn't look left, she told herself, he'd leave. She was non-confrontational. She was holding a baby. She was closer to the church than she was to her car.

"Bop, bop, bop," Terrence sang, his words vibrating as he bounced against her hip.

The click of a kickstand, and the heaving of bulk against leather. Motorcycle Man dismounted, his bike standing sideways in front of her.

Heidi darted between two vans.

"Think you can outrun me, huh?" His voice reverberated in her ear. Disembodied. She didn't know whether to go forward or back. Where was he? She pinched her eyes closed, said a prayer, and geared up to sprint again for the church door. Then she saw him through the windows, directly on the other side of the van between them. He pounded on the van's window and the van rocked side to side. "I'll teach you how to drive. Cutting off a motorcycle! Don't you know how vulnerable I am? No doors, no steel between me and the road!" He put his thick hand on his helmet, unbuckled it, threw it to the side. The oak

leaf fluttered loose, flitted in the air between them before it dropped out of sight.

Heidi was trapped. She moved to the front of the van. Motorcycle Man stepped forward to meet her. She rushed to the back of the van and so did he. Matched, move for move, she shoved her hand into the diaper bag and rooted around for her keys—for the panic button on the fob. Motorcycle Man reached up to the roof of the van and stepped on the sideboard. He was going to come over the van!

She grabbed the van's handle and pulled. Hallelujah! It was unlocked. Heidi wedged herself, and Terrence, and the diaper bag, in behind the wheel. She slammed the door shut behind her and scrabbled around for the power locks. Thank God for power locks. Just in time, the van clucked as its doors locked. There was Motorcycle Man, on the other side of the window, his breath fogging up the glass in small bursts that evaporated immediately. He fumbled at the handle for a moment, and then pounded the glass, his fist smudging red upon impact. His eyes bulged. Then he stopped, and pulled something out of his pocket.

Heidi screamed. Never had she heard herself scream so loud. Not when her water broke in the cereal aisle of the grocery store, not when her sister called mid-Friday night pizza about her parents' car crash, not when Suza chopped off the tip of her index finger while dicing peppers for salsa. Heidi held down the horn, forcing all her might into the center of the steering wheel.

Terrence screamed.

Motorcycle Man held a switchblade, a longer one than she'd seen in movies, longer than the length of her hand. He slipped it between the window and the fuzzy gray strip that ran along the bottom. The handle of the knife shone with studded gems. He slid it toward the lock mechanism. Wiggled it. The blade slid further down the unknowable space inside the door of the van.

What was she doing screaming and laying on the horn? She wasn't some helpless woman in a horror film. No, there had to be something she could do. Clamping her mouth shut and swallowing back the bile, Heidi looked frantically around the van's interior, for something, anything. She gripped Terrence closer, his crying mouth pressed against her chest. She had to keep Motorcycle Man out there. She hovered her fingers over the lock button. If his jimmying worked, she could be faster and relock the doors.

"See if you'll get away now," Motorcycle Man yelled. Spittle spattered the window. A horrible scraping noise came from inside the door and he jiggled the handle. It didn't open. Not yet. He angled the blade the other way. He made a grotesque face that reminded Heidi of a book she had as a kid, about phlegmy, drippy, red-faced trolls. He banged on the window, his fist centered on Heidi's face. The glass rattled.

She hopped the gearshift, she and Terrence now in the passenger seat. There was a lock button on that side, too. Terrence screamed

louder, indignant for being jostled around and crushed into Heidi's tight grasp. Heidi tried to shush him. She needed to hear the thunk of Motorcycle Man popping the locks.

Too late. He had the driver's door open. She hadn't heard it. She banged at the lock on the passenger side, then began tugging on the interior handle. The door would not open.

Motorcycle Man snorted, braced his arms against the door frame, the blade glinting in his hand.

Heidi backed against the door while Terrence squeezed hard against her. She anchored herself. The armrest dug into her spine. She kicked her feet out, ready to heel Motorcycle Man in the face.

His face reared back.

Bethany's face loomed above Motorcycle Man's. She'd jumped him. Latched onto his shoulders, then hacking at his back with her fists. The knife dropped, nicking out a chunk of the seat cushion before it landed under the brake pedal. Motorcycle Man collapsed sideways, and there was Lucy, too, knocking his legs from under him, and Patsy, pounding him in his large, hard belly. Then there was Dora, going for his eyes. Marissa appeared, too, wedge heels in hand, hammering on Motorcycle Man's temple.

He slumped to the ground, his face a smear of shock.

Heidi heard words come out of her. She didn't know what words, what sounds. It didn't matter. The Ladies of the Lord weren't looking at her.

Their attention was focused unswervingly on Motorcycle Man. They dragged him away from between the vans, one woman to a limb, Marissa continuing to hammer away with her wedges. They dropped him in the open.

Heidi, emotions blunted, exited the van, carefully adjusting Terrence, the diaper bag over her shoulder. Her heart thumped. Cautiously, deliberately, she moved toward the Ladies of the Lord. Motorcycle Man lay, panting and ragged, while the women surrounded him. He rolled to his side and Marissa knocked him onto his back.

How had they known? The church wall was thick, windowless. She hadn't had time to text. Had they heard the horn? Then appeared?

The other voices inside the church sanctuary sang. *Majesty . . . worship his Majesty*. Someone else—Jenn?—had seamlessly replaced Bethany's soprano lead.

One by one, counter-clockwise around the circle, they kicked him. Dora, then Bethany. Lucy, Patsy, Marissa, then Dora again. Round-robin. Motorcycle Man blanched with each kick.

They weren't stopping. They didn't even seem to notice her. She covered Terrence's eyes and groped around in the deep pocket of the diaper bag until she found her keys. She made her way to the Jeep. Buckled Terrence, then herself.

"Mama, Mama," he said.

"Terrence, Terrence," she called back softly.

She pulled out of the parking space, the

exhaust plume clouding the circle yet not one of the Ladies of the Lord watched as she left the church parking lot.