

# The Drive Home

By Jeff Wagner

## CHAPTER 1 - Running Late

### Monday, June 8 - 5:55pm

"Son of a beehive, I need to get out of here..." Wes Anderson muttered to himself for the umpteenth time in the past half hour. But an important deadline and phone call after phone call prevented him from leaving at 5:30 like he intended.

Now he had to rush. It was softball night and he had to be at the field some 20 miles away by 7:15 while battling the unavoidable and ever worsening commute hour traffic. And that was only after stopping at home to change first, which, fortunately, was on the way.

But finally he could leave. The project was as done as it was going to get, and the phone stopped ringing. Wes quickly locked the overhead cabinet and three desk drawers in his cube before shutting down his Dell laptop computer. After a quick visit to the little boys room, Wes high stepped it down the two flights of stairs and through the badge-operated security door to the parking lot where his Ford Explorer patiently waited.

After deactivating his car alarm and unlocking "The Club" from his steering wheel, Wes attached his detachable stereo cover, started the engine, backed out of the stall, and headed west out of the parking lot. Sometimes he would head east, but the west route was usually a little faster.

"Now, if only these signal lights would cooperate", Wes wished to himself. But the four lights rarely did.

Amazingly enough however, he flew through the first three lights without having to slow down.

"Home free" he thought to himself as he turned right at a stop sign and merged onto a one lane, three mile stretch of uninterrupted road that lead to the final signal light before entering the freeway.

Wes accelerated to 50 mph, just a tad over the 45 mph speed limit. But not many cars use this road. Especially ones with big red and blue lights on the top of them. Half way through the three mile stretch, Wes glimpsed in his rear view mirror and discovered that on this day he'd be sharing the road.....a red sports car was coming up on him. And fast.

With about a half mile to go before the light, the red sports car caught up to Wes and was threatening to give his Explorer a push. But with the light coming up quickly, there was no time for Wes to let him pass.

"Sorry pal, but you're stuck with me", he muttered to his rear view mirror. Little did he know it, but Wes would be talking to his mirror a lot in the next 20 minutes.

As they approached the light. Wes pulled into the left turn lane with the red car right behind him. Wes could now tell that the car was one of those 2000 or 3000 model foreign cars, but the brand escaped him. Plus he really didn't have time to care.

Green light.

It was another 1/4 mile before they made a right turn onto the freeway entrance, and the red sports car stayed on Wes's bumper the entire way.

"Ok pal, I'm not in the mood for this." Wes was speaking to his rear view mirror again. Wes loathed tailgaters to begin with. But already being in a bad mood for getting out of work late, an idiot like this was the last thing he needed.

Both cars made a right onto the northbound freeway on ramp, drove up to the metering light and pulled behind two other cars waiting to enter the freeway. As the first car received a green light, Wes noticed that the driver behind him was a young male, probably in his mid-20's. It was hard to tell for sure due to the red sports car's slightly tinted windshield.

As the second car sped off onto the freeway, Wes pulled up and waited for his green light. Five seconds later the red light turned green and Wes took off in a way that would have made dragster Shirley Muldowney proud. After getting up to freeway speed, Wes moved over a lane to avoid the slower traffic.

After about a mile on the freeway, and about five miles before his exit, Wes once again noticed the red hot rod approaching fast.

"Ok, back off you idiot!" This time Wes shouted at his mirror. After a mile of tail-gating, the red hot rod finally got the message and passed Wes on the left. But as the hot rod went by, Wes couldn't resist a parting shot.

The bird.

"See you later, idiot", Wes muttered as he put his thumb to his nose and wiggled his fingers.

The red hot rod sped on by, and then, to Wes's surprise, slowed back down to Wes's speed. Soon, both cars were side by side. After driving together for nearly a mile, Wes peaked over and caught the 20-something year old driver staring straight at him. The driver pointed his right index finger at him, then pressed his thumb down upon it, as if imitating the shooting of a gun. Moments later, the red hot rod hit slower traffic and had to drop back.

A bit stunned, Wes instinctively moved over to the right lane in anticipation of his exit which was now about a mile away. He checked his rear view mirror and could see the red car dropping back fast thanks to the traffic.

Wes let out a big sigh of relief.

As he wiped the perspiration from his brow, Wes glanced at his clock radio and noticed that it was 6:15. "Time for a sports update", he said as pushed the second of five preset AM radio buttons to bring up the local all-news radio station.

"The Giants won and the A's are winning....cool."

As his off ramp approached, Wes took another quick look out his rear view mirror and saw no signs of the hot rod.

"Well, that was interesting."

### **6:18 pm**

"I wonder if I'll be playing the outfield or second base tonight", Wes thought to himself as he exited the freeway and followed the off ramp back over the freeway and onto a residential street, two lights and three blocks from his condo. After making the first light, Wes pulled into the left turn lane of light number two. While waiting for the light to change, he pushed a few more preset radio buttons until he caught the end of an Eagle's song.

"It's another Tequila Sun...." Wes began to sing but quickly stopped after glancing in his rear view mirror. The red hot rod was pulling into the left turn lane, three cars back. The perspiration returned to his brow.

"No, he can't be following me", Wes asked himself. "Better make sure I guess."

Wes glimpsed over the right lane and noticed there was only one car going straight. As the light turned green and the car entered the intersection, Wes carefully moved to the right behind it and drove straight through the light. He looked back and observed the red car doing the same thing. Wes noticed one other thing as well: the red car had its headlights on now.

"Great", Wes said as he glimpsed at his watch. "Now I have to loose him and quick." Wes proceeded to drive straight for a couple miles, hoping that the red car, still three cars back, would miss a light. No such luck. Finally, Wes decided to turn left at the next light, the busy Carlton Avenue, before he got too far away from his condo. To no surprise, the red car did the same.

Once on Carlton, Wes began changing lanes with more frequency, hoping to put a little space between him and the red hot rod. The strategy worked as the red car fell five cars back.

"Thank goodness for rush hour traffic," Wes told his mirror.

After making successive lights, the next light, about 500 feet way, was already turning yellow. As they got within 200 feet of the light, Wes, now in the second of three lanes, noticed a possible escape route. But he would need a little luck. There were two cars ahead of him in the second lane, but only one in the right lane. If he could get over to the right lane, and if the car ahead of him would turn right, he could put some more distance between him and the red car.

In the next split second, Wes moved over the right lane just before reaching the light. To his delight, the right blinker of the car ahead of him came on.

"Yes!" Wes shouted. To top it off, it appeared that the car behind him was not turning.

"Here's my chance....".

With the light still red, the car ahead of Wes turned right, with Wes right on its tail. As he had hoped, the car behind him was not turning. The red hot rod was stuck. The car ahead of Wes immediately turned into a driveway, giving Wes an open road. In two blocks he reached a stop sign where he turned right. An 1/8 of mile later he reached another stop sign where he made another right turn. Two blocks away was Carlton Avenue again. He could now turn left on to Carlton and backtrack the two miles to his condo. Wes pulled into the left turn lane and waited several agonizing seconds for the light to change. His eyes were glued to his rear view mirror the entire time.

One green light and three miles later, and with no red hot rod in sight, Wes turned onto Boulder Road. He began pushing his automatic garage door opener, even though he was still a block from his condo. As he approached his driveway, the garage door was just coming to a stop. Wes zipped into his garage and pushed the garage door opener again.

"Phew", Wes sighed.

### **6:40 pm**

Since it was a 30 minute drive to the softball field, Wes would have to leave in five minutes to make it by his 7:15 goal. But that wasn't going to happen. He was in no hurry to get back on the road right away. The game didn't actually start until 7:30, so he could wait a few minutes before he would definitely have to leave.

Wes checked his phone messages, he didn't have any, grabbed a bottle of water, and plopped down in his recliner. He took a swig of water, closed his eyes, and gave his blood pressure a chance to return to normal.

Ten minutes a later, Wes went up stairs and changed into his green and white softball jersey. Before heading down, he took a quick peek out of the guest bedroom window which overlooked Boulder Road. There was no sign of a red hot rod. He really didn't think there would be, but he couldn't resist looking.

### **6:55 pm**

Wes hopped back into his SUV, opened his garage door, and backed out onto Boulder Road. He cautiously drove the two miles to the freeway, purposely taking an obscure residential route to the northbound off ramp. He didn't think he'd really run into the hot rod, but there was no sense in taking a chance.

Once on the freeway, Wes sped off to the softball field, covering the fifteen miles in only 25 minutes. Not bad for that time of the night. And he still had 10 minutes to warm up.

### **10:30 pm**

Wes flipped off his bedroom light and hopped into bed. He was a little sore following his teams 20-4 win, but he'd survive. He wound up playing right-center field the whole game, had two hits and scored three runs. Not bad for a 40 year old softball veteran of 15 years.

But as his head hit his pillow, his thoughts drifted from the nights game to the red hot rod. "What an unbelievable idiot the guy was," he thought to himself. But he also realized how dumb he was as well. With all of the "road rage" stories he read and heard about on the news recently, giving someone the bird just wasn't very smart. And Wes knew it. You never know who you might upset. Wes had done the same thing once or twice before without episode, but he knew deep down he was pushing his luck. It was just hard for him sometimes not to express to a particular bad driver what he thought about their driving. But after tonight, he'd have to re-evaluate that practice.

## **CHAPTER 2 - Hello Paranoia**

### **Tuesday, June 9 - 3:30 pm**

The day was a pretty typical one so far. Wes arrived at work around 9:30am which was a little later than usual. The red hot rod didn't even enter his mind on the drive in, although he had already decided to take a different route home that night. Work was busy as usual, but now it was time to give his eyes a quick break from his 20" computer screen. On his way to the second floor balcony, where he frequently took breaks, Wes dropped by the break room to grab a bottle of water.

The balcony was in the back of the building, and provided a great view of a field that was on the other side of a creek that ran as far in both directions as one could see. Beyond the field, far in the distance, an occasional roar of an airplane engine could be heard from the local international airport. Soon thereafter, an airliner could be seen climbing the sky.

Directly below the balcony was the back parking lot which handled the overflow of cars that weren't able to park in the front parking lot, namely the people who arrive at work after 9am. Wes could see his Explorer off to the left where he usually parks when he parks in the back. As he scanned the parking lot, a red car caught his eye. It was backed up into a parking space one row behind and some 20 stalls to the right of his truck.

"No way," Wes thought to himself. "It couldn't be. It's not possible that this guy works here. But it sure looks like the same car."

Wes returned to his cube and continued working. The red car popped into his mind from time to time, but he pretty much dismissed the possibility of it being the same car that followed him the night before.

### **6:00 pm**

Wes was preparing to leave for the day, but couldn't resist taking a walk past the balcony again. He took a left out of his cube and followed the maze-like aisles until he reached the far wall of the building. From there, he could see out into the parking lot through the blinds that covered the large windows that surrounded the building. The red car was still there.

"Doesn't mean a thing," Wes said to himself. "All red sports cars look the same."

Even still, Wes decided to return to his cube and put in another hour of work.

6:55 pm

Red car or not, Wes was definitely ready to leave now. During the past hour, in addition to working, Wes went on the web and jotted down a couple of local police stations he would pass on this way home. If there was any following going on tonight, he would drive to the nearest one. But before leaving, he had to check the parking lot once more. He knew it was dumb, but he had to look. He shutdown his laptop computer, then made his way to the window and peaked through the blinds. The car, of course, was still there.

"Ah, the heck with it," Wes said. "I'm out of here".

Wes went back to his cube, locked everything up, and headed to the back parking lot. As he approached his truck, he could see the red car off in the distance. It sure looked like the car that followed him the day before, but it's hard to be sure. He didn't get the license plate, and there had to be dozens of cars like that in the area. But it was odd that one like it was parked so close to his. Unfortunately, the car was too far away to be able to tell if a 20-something male was in it.

Wes started up his truck and drove east, the opposite direction to where the car was parked. He checked his rear view mirror before making a left onto the road that led to the front of the building where the parking lot exit was, and it didn't appear that the car was moving.

"I didn't think so," Wes said to himself.

After driving the 100 yards to the front of the building, Wes took a right out of the parking lot and began taking a route home that he hadn't used in over a month. The road he was now on was a semi-circle that ended at a stoplight about a mile away. A quarter mile from the light, Wes looked out his mirror and saw a truck pull out of a side street a couple hundred yards behind him. Behind the truck, however, Wes saw what looked like a red car with its headlights on. And it was driving fast.

Wes again looked forward and saw that the approaching light was turning yellow. Instinctively, instead of turning right like he planned, he ran the yellow and made a left.

Just in case.

During the entire drive home, Wes couldn't help but wonder if that was the same car from the night before. It looked similar, its headlights were on, it was red, and it was driving fast. But could the car he saw in the parking lot catch up to him that fast? Or was it a completely different car? There was really no way to know.

One thing Wes did realize while driving home that he hadn't noticed before was the number of red sports cars on the road. He couldn't go a couple of miles without seeing

a different red car in his rear view mirror. And each time he couldn't help but wonder if it was the red hot rod. Chances are it wasn't. But there was no way to know for sure. To be safe, Wes kept his eyes open the entire 20 minute drive home. Like the night before, he had his garage door open and waiting as he pulled into the driveway. Wes hurried into the garage and quickly closed the garage door behind him.

"I think I'll stay in tonight," he thought to himself.

### **11:30 pm**

Wes set his alarm to go off at 7:20am, 30 minutes sooner than it usually did. He had decided earlier that he would take the train to work the next couple of days. Even though he still hadn't determined if anything actually had happened after work that evening, the thought of possibly having to ditch someone for the third night in a row didn't thrill him.

Wes flipped off the lights in his room and plopped into bed. His mind began to wander again: was the car tonight the same one as last night? Was the guy still plotting to get even? Or was he just being paranoid? Wes wondered until finally he finally dozed off.



## **CHAPTER 3 - Hello Imagination**

### **Wednesday, June 10 - 12:55 pm**

After picking himself and five other employees up at the train station, the shuttle bus dropped Wes off in front of his building at 9am sharp. That was four hours ago, and now he was hungry. Since he had no transportation, Wes was forced to have lunch at the cafeteria in the building directly east of his. He decided to walk over, grab a salad, and bring it back to his desk.

Wes also decided to take the exit at the opposite side of the building. That way he could take a quick look at the back parking lot on the way. Wes made sure his screen saver kicked in before making the walk to the back of the building. He then walked the entire length of the back wall, which let him view the parking lot from all angles

The red car he saw there yesterday was no where in sight.

Wes then continued to the stairwell on the opposite side of the building, walked down two flights of stairs, out the security doors and onto a path that led to the building next door. From the path, part of the front parking was visible. And in the parking lot, Wes couldn't help but notice a familiar looking red car. A red car backed into a parking space. Definitely the same car he saw parked in the back lot last night.

"Hmm, two days in a row. The owner of that car must definitely work here," Wes thought to himself. Wes noticed that the car was parked very close to the path, so he decided to check it out on the way back from the cafeteria.

After buying a Caesar salad and a small Broccoli cheese soup to go, Wes walked back down the path to his building. He took a slight detour and walked within 40 feet of the red car. He noticed that no one was in it, and that there were sun blinds on the dash board.

"This person definitely works here," he thought. Wes noted the license plate, then walked back up to his cube to eat his lunch. "Ok, so the person works here. That still doesn't mean that this was the car that followed me. Cool it Wes!" he thought. He was just being paranoid.....again. "Reading all of those Joseph Wambaugh books are beginning to take its toll," Wes snickered as continued back to his cube.

### **Friday, June 12 - 7:55 pm**

The long week was finally over, and better yet, things had quieted down in regards to the red car. In fact, the red car was no where to be seen on either Thursday or Friday, as Wes had checked both parking lots twice both days.

After the train took him home from work for the third straight day, Wes decided to take a bike ride to the nearby softball field and catch a few of innings of a game from the local co-ed softball league.

Wes hopped on his green and black 15-speed road bike and peddled to the softball field some mile and a half away. He stopped at the first of the two softball fields to see who was playing. He hung around for a couple of innings before peddling another quarter mile to the second softball field where another co-ed softball game was being played. After watching an inning of that game, he decided to head back to the first game, which was a bit more competitive. He hopped on his bike and began riding back to the first field when something bright red in the nearby parking lot caught his eye.

He stopped to take a closer look and noticed a red car backed into a parking stall just like the one he saw in the parking lot at work. Wes froze for a second. "This is nuts!" he said to himself. "I can't be that unlucky."

Wes began to peddle at double speed back to the first field when he decided that he had to know for sure. With that, he turned around and rode his bike into the parking lot and by the red car, passing directly in front of it. It was definitely the same make. He was hoping to catch a glimpse of the license plate, but as luck would have it, this car only had license plates on the back. And there was no way to see it.

Wes peddled several dozen yards past the car before he turned around and rode by it again. This time he noticed something else. There was someone behind the wheel! Wes was able to determine, however, that this driver was not the driver he had seen staring at him on the freeway five days earlier.

Wes sighed and rode back, at normal speed, to the first softball field and watched the rest of the game.

### **Monday, June 15 - 8:00 am**

Wes's alarm went off at its usual 8 am, and, for the first time since the prior Tuesday, he decided to drive to work again. The weekend had diluted much of what happened last week, and Wes wasn't as concerned about the red car that morning. Especially after having not seen the car the past three days at work.

But the episode was still on the back of his mind, so Wes decided that he'd leave work early today and work at home the last two or three hours, as well as to continue taking a different route home for the next few days.

An hour later, Wes pulled into the front parking lot at work. He couldn't help but notice that the red car once again was nowhere in sight. It became a habit to look now.

**3:35 pm**

Wes packed up his laptop, locked everything up, and headed out to his truck. For the fourth day in a row, no red car. "Great, a nice leisurely drive home," Wes thought to himself.

After inserting a CD from the group "The Cars" in his CD player, Wes exited the parking lot and drove east...opposite the direction he drove the previous Monday. Two lights up he would make a left, and then drive three miles to the freeway onramp. The first light was already red as Wes drove up to it. Halfway through the song "Just What I Needed", the light turned green and Wes proceeded through the intersection. Halfway to the next light, Wes noticed a red car in the far lane of the oncoming traffic. His eyes followed it as it whizzed by, and continued following it through his rear view mirror.

As luck would have it, Wes missed the next light as well. He eased into the left turn lane and waited for a green. All the while his eyes were focused on his rear view mirror, as part of him wondered if the red car would pull a u-turn and drive up behind him. But, of course, it never did.

The light turned green, and Wes drove the remaining three miles to the freeway a little faster than he originally planned. Before turning onto the northbound onramp, Wes took one last look in his rear view mirror.

Nothing.

"Boy, you ARE paranoid" Wes thought to himself.

## CHAPTER 4 - A Lesson Learned

Monday, June 22 - 5:30 pm

It had been two weeks since his memorable drive home, and one week since Wes saw anything resembling the red car. He had driven the final four days of last week without any kind of incident.

Wes had another 7:30 game that night, but unlike last Monday he finished his work early and was able to leave on time. He locked everything up and began the five minute walk to his truck, which was parked in the front lot on this day.

Wes backed out of the parking stall and drove west for the first time in two weeks. He made two of the four lights before turning right onto the three miles of uninterrupted road. Unlike two weeks ago, he was the only one on it.

He turned left at the light, right at the northbound off ramp, and pulled up to the metering light. Five seconds later the light turned green, and Wes merged into the north bound traffic and began his 10 minute ride home. He noticed that traffic was a little heavier today for whatever reason. Before long, Wes caught up to slower traffic and moved over to the middle lane.

A mini-van three cars back did the same thing and seconds later was on Wes's bumper. "Not again..." Wes thought to himself. The mini-van rode his bumper for about a mile before finally passing. This time Wes did nothing.

"Not this time buddy," Wes said to himself as he watched the van drive by.