

And now, like it or not, he had a good number of hours ahead of him on the road – at night. He'd only just passed Oxford – hardly half way there.

Absolutely nothing he could do about that.

And while, oh yes, there were a few shortcuts he knew – narrow Cotswold lanes that went up towards Cherringham, clipped a few minutes before they came back to the main roads – he had decided, after what happened just over a month ago...

It's strictly the main road for me.

Those shortcuts, so twisty, hedges scraping the side of the big lorry, barely fit for a car.

But in truth – it wasn't the width of those roads that gave him pause.

He took a breath, trying not to think about it.

Instead he thought of getting to Manchester. Unloading. Then, to the

Bricklayer's Arms, hopefully in time for one of their greasy meat pies and a pint.

Not exactly the life, Barry thought.

But – like it or not – it was his life.

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This main road seemed emptier and emptier as he snaked his way north – the occasional car, or another lorry, passing – his own headlights now properly cutting the gloom.

He had a thought, with these long drives, delivering the expensive radio sets... *wouldn't it be great if the damn lorry had a wireless radio!*

Wouldn't be so bored.

Barry was thinking the same thoughts over and over.

But always, in the back of his mind, that bit of fear.

And when he had that worrisome thought, he told himself, *Cor, what are the odds?*

There's no odds. Lightning doesn't strike in the same place twice.

Even if it wasn't exactly "lightning" he was thinking about.

He thought of his wife, Molly. Their two little 'uns, Sam and Ellie, whom he loved to bits.

Thinking of them, always gave him an added boost when he was midway on his trip.

Midway. Halfway.

Sometimes Barry Hobbs spoke out loud to himself, saying, "Almost there! I've got this covered, I have."

Even as he passed little side roads that he knew were shortcuts.

Shortcuts he didn't take.

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After another thirty minutes had passed, he saw something ahead, barely picked up by his headlights.

Something blocking the road. And as Barry slowed (while his heart picked up its pace), he saw it was a tree trunk.

He could see a car, headlights on, on the other side of the felled tree. Someone standing beside the trunk. Black car, man in a hat. A fedora.

Barry slowed even more, until he brought his lorry to a full stop a few yards short of the tree.

And now he could see the man, still just a shape, looking at the tree limb barring his way, heading in the other direction.

For a second, Barry thought about getting out of the cab, jumping down, having a quick chat with the other driver, as you do in such situations.

But he stopped himself. Thought twice about it. *Given the circumstances.*

With a shake of the head, the man got into his car, and began making a three-point turn that actually needed an additional back and forth, before he turned around, rear lights glowing like eyes, until they and the car disappeared in the distance.

Barry looked down at the seat next to him. *The Motorist's Road Atlas of Great Britain.* Latest edition, but still not totally reliable, Hobbs knew.

This tree wasn't going anywhere tonight. He was going to have to find another route. He remembered seeing a few small roads, a half mile or so back. No question. He'd have to use one of them.

The atlas popped open to the page covering this part of the Midlands.

He grabbed his torch from the small compartment to his left. Flashed it up and