

If Cornered, Scream

On the night it happened she hurried across the hospital parking lot, unlocked her car door, and got in. She started the car, waved to her co-workers, honked to the security guard, and drove the half block to the freeway entrance. The late hour meant light traffic, and though she was a good driver, she was always relieved whenever she had negotiated an entrance ramp. That done, she settled back, driving easily.

Then in the dim dashboard light she saw the gas gauge indicating empty and remembered with annoyance that she hadn't had time to stop for gas. Working a late shift at the hospital was not an ideal situation but it meant more money and allowed her to attend graduate classes during the days.

As she drove, she found herself gripping the steering wheel and made a conscious effort to relax and think pleasant thoughts. Each night during the drive home, she relived the safety lectures given to the nurses - make sure someone on the ward knows where you are at all times; leave the grounds in groups; avoid isolated places in the hospital; if cornered, scream.

Again she deliberately relaxed her grip on the wheel and took a deep breath.

Funny, she thought, she didn't know why, but she was even more uptight tonight than usual. She was tired and looked forward to a long soak in the tub and her new magazine which had lain unread the last three days.

The gas gauge again caught her attention. She could probably make it home on what was still left in the tank, but she would have to fill up before class in the morning. If she stopped tonight at the station that Gabriel ran on Imperial Highway, she'd have a few extra minutes in the morning and wouldn't have to rush.

She approached Imperial Highway, flicked on the right blinker, headed down the off-ramp, waited at the stoplight, and then made a left turn. She pulled into the station at a pump and rolled down the window as Gabriel walked to the car.

Since he always spoke pleasantly on the nights she stopped for gas, she had automatically discounted the few disturbing rumors that accompanied his sudden appearance in the area.

"Hi, Florence Nightingale. Fill 'er up?"

"Hi Gabriel. Yes, fill it up please."

As she handed him the gas-tank key, he asked, "Any more ping-pong playing under the hood?"

"No, no more noise. It stopped when you did whatever you did."

Gabriel filled the tank, cleaned the windows and mirrors, and gave her the change from a twenty. When he finished he said offhandedly, "By the way, my birthday was Sunday. Why don't you step inside the office and see what my sister gave me? You won't believe your eyes!"

"Oh, Gabriel, I'm really in a big hurry. I just can't stop tonight. But I will next time. I promise."

"Aw, come on. It won't be new any more by then. Besides, this is something extra-special. Come on. Only take a second."

As she and Gabriel talked back and forth, she realized she was wasting more time than if she went in and saw the silly gift.

Looking more agreeable than she felt, she said, "Okay, you win Gabriel. Remember, this better be good!"

"It is. You'll see. Oh, before you get out, angle the car over this way — just in case anyone wants to pull in." Watching his gestures, she parked the car and followed him to the station office.

Once inside, Gabriel locked the door and quickly took a gun out of the drawer. Through the roar of her heartbeat in her ears she heard him say that there was no birthday and no present. Her fingers tingled. Nausea pitched and rolled through her body like seasickness. Each time the nausea crested, her legs felt like loosened moorings.

Her nose and toes were cold and she knew clinically, almost like an observer, that she was experiencing the symptoms of shock. She was unable to make a self-protective move, or even to scream. She tried to prepare to die, but didn't know how. Crazy, in the midst of her silent hysteria, the absurdity of it struck her, and she had a demented desire to laugh. Gabriel's lips were moving but she still couldn't hear above the roar in her ears.

Finally she heard sounds coming from his mouth. The sounds became words as her head cleared, and the words began to make sense.

"...sorry I had to scare you by telling you that. But don't feel bad; I was scared myself when I saw that dude on the floor in the back of your car. I had you angle the car that way so that I can see both doors from here. And if he tries to get out, he belongs to me. I'll call the cops now. It's okay. Good thing you stopped for gas tonight."

In a few minutes she was aware of the sirens, the flashing lights of the squad cars, and the bellow of the bullhorn.

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Pattern of Events

1. What purpose does each of the following incidents serve?
 - a. The main character drives out of a hospital parking lot.
 - b. She looks at her gas gauge.
 - c. She turns off the freeway.
 - d. Gabriel cleans all the windows and mirrors.
 - e. Gabriel asks her to look at his birthday present.
 - f. The main character decides to get out of the car.
 - g. Gabriel tells her to angle the car out of the way of the gas pumps.
 - h. He takes the gun out of the drawer.
 - i. He tells her there's a man on the floor in the back of her car.

2. Could any of these incidents be eliminated without damaging the story? Explain.

3. Could the order of these incidents be rearranged without lessening the impact of the story?

4. What is the outcome of the story?