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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

The Intern

By Christine Webb

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The Intern

I thought I was driving home from work alone, but I when I looked into my rearview mirror I made eye contact with a stranger staring at me from my back seat.

My eyes grew wide, and I let out a shriek that should have cracked my windshield. I desperately grabbed for the pepper spray on my keyring, but it was (predictably) attached to the keys in my ignition.

“Don’t scream,” the man said. His voice was icy. “I don’t want to hurt you.” I screamed anyway. How could I not scream? There was a creepy man in my back seat! I could only see him when I passed under street lamps, where lights would quickly illuminate his face and then plunge us both into darkness once again. He was wearing a black leather jacket, and his blonde hair was spiked in a way that looked dangerous rather than stylish. We passed under another light. I saw him again, so I screamed again. I tried to yank the pepper spray off of my keyring. What kind of idiotic engineering didn’t prepare my keychain for a time like this?

“Stop it,” he said evenly. “I mean it.” I tried to take deep breaths, but I ended up sounding like a pregnant lady at a Lamaze class. I pulled over to the side of the road so that I could throw my car into park and get my keys out of the ignition.

“Whoa,” the man said. “What are you doing?” A thin line of uneasiness snuck into his voice. He saw me reach for the pepper spray, and he lurched forward to grab my wrist. I yelped at his touch, but I did my best not to scream. His jacket was bulky enough to conceal a firearm. I transferred the pink canister into my left hand. He put his free hand over the top of the driver’s seat to try to grab at my flailing arm. We struggled while I tried to get a clear shot at his face. Finally, I saw an opening under my right arm. I took aim and squeezed. He let go of both of my arms and put his hands up to cover his face. Nothing came out of the canister.

Now that my arms were free, I took aim again, this time directly at his face. I squeezed again. Nothing came out besides a faint hiss. He tentatively peeked between his arms. I squeezed harder. The faint hiss fizzled to nothing. I guess I should have replaced the canister sometime in the six years between my freshman year of college and now.

“Ha,” he smirked. “That’s awkward.” He put his arms down.

I scowled. My heart was still pounding. I contemplated punching him, but I didn’t want to fight a potentially armed and dangerous man. I threw my keys down and opened my door to make a run for it.

“Close the door and do not move!” he shouted. “I will shoot you!” I peeked over my shoulder, and he pulled back the side of his coat to reveal the matte black handgrip of a pistol. I shut the door and sat up with ramrod straight posture. Did he want me to look at him? Did he want me to look forward? Tears burned my eyes. In all the ways I pictured dying one day, this was never it.

“Listen,” I said, trying to buy myself time. “My purse is on the passenger seat. You can have it. There’s no money in my wallet, and I only have \$36.11 in my bank account. I’ll get that for you if you want to go to an ATM. I swear that’s all I have, but you can have it.”

“Don’t move,” he said again. He reached for my purse and pulled it into the back seat. I stared straight ahead, trying to focus on the dust on my dashboard. After about five seconds I heard “Ew, sick,” and he threw the purse back up front. It tipped over and spilled loose change and cracker crumbs on my already messy floor.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Tampons,” he responded.

I raised my eyebrows at my dashboard, but I didn't dare turn around. "Can I go now?" I asked. "I seriously have no money."

"You work at a law firm," he accused.

"I'm an intern."

"Whatever." He seemed exasperated. "I don't even care about money. Where's your Chinese food?"

This interaction was getting weirder by the minute. "I...don't...have...Chinese food," I said slowly. "I can get you some," I quickly added. "\$36.11 worth, anyway."

"No." He sounded annoyed. I snuck a peek into my rearview mirror and saw him roll his eyes. "The Chinese food you ate for lunch. Where did you throw the trash? Is it in here?"

To the man's credit, it was a valid question. There were many take-out containers in my car. I'm a law intern with a one-eyed cat for a roommate. This leads to a lot of late-night takeout and lunch breaks without enough time to clean up my drive-thru trash. Well, also maybe I'm kind of a slob.

I fought through my feelings of panic and tried to remember lunch. I went to Panda Palace. I took the won ton soup and white rice to go, and I ate it in my office. I threw the trash in the can by my desk, and the five o'clock janitors would have collected it hours ago. It would be mixed with all of the trash of our building in the large dumpster out back.

"I don't have it," I said. "I threw it away by my desk."

"Can you go back and get it please?" I didn't know robbers said "please."

"The trash has already been taken out, and our dumpsters are padlocked." My heart started to slow down a bit. I no longer thought this man was going to shoot me. I didn't know what he was trying to do, but murdering me didn't seem to be a top priority.

“For real?” He sighed in defeat. He leaned back against the seat, and I peeked at the rearview mirror. He seemed lost in his thoughts, so I turned around. He didn’t react.

“Sorry about that,” I said. There was an awkward silence. A car drove by us. I wasn’t sure what to do. “Um...why did you need my trash?”

“You had one job, Raymond. *One job.*” It took me a moment to realize he was talking to himself, not me. “This was your shot, Raymond.” He turned, leaned on the back door, and kicked his feet up on the seat. He buried his head in his hands. I quietly looked around at nothing.

The Super Mario Brothers theme song shattered the silence. I jumped. Raymond sighed another heavy sigh and pulled his phone from his coat pocket. He looked at who was calling and looked at me apologetically. “Sorry, I should take this.” I motioned to him to go ahead, as if I had any other choice.

He held the phone up to his ear. “Hey Mom.” I tried to eavesdrop, but all I could hear was a garbled feminine voice. I took the opportunity to notice that my assailant was about my age, and he was pretty skinny under his bulky jacket. He continued talking. “No, I told you I wasn’t going to be home for dinner. I had work stuff to do.” Another pause. “Mom, I know. Seriously, I’m about to get a big promotion. For real.” Then, after another pause, he looked at me, his face flushed red, and he quickly said, “Loveyoutoomombye.” He hung up and looked at me accusingly. “What?”

I held my hands up in defense. “No judgement here.”

“I’m only living with her while I save up for my own place, which I’ll be able to afford really soon. I’m getting a promotion.”

“What do you do?” I couldn’t believe I was making small talk with someone who just threatened to kill me.

“I’m a bank robber.”

“Oh.” I probably should have been more scared than I was.

“Well, I’m *sort of* a bank robber. I’m going to be one someday soon. Right now I’m an intern.”

“You’re...I’m sorry...*what?*” I turned my body fully around so that I was facing the back seat.

“Yeah, it’s a really tough business to break into, but I’m gonna make it.” He clenched his jaw and locked his brown eyes on mine, daring me to say he can’t make it in the larceny business.

“Ummm...right,” I finally said.

“Can you pull into that McDonald’s?” He motioned to the golden arches glowing about a hundred yards away. “I’m starving.”

I didn’t want to go to McDonald’s; I wanted to go home. I maybe wanted to go to the nearest police station. I knew he was armed, though, so I decided it was best not to argue. I put my keys in the ignition and drove to McDonald’s. Raymond glowered out the window our whole way there. “Drive-thru?” I asked.

“Nah, let’s go in.” I pulled into the nearest parking space.

“I don’t think you can carry a weapon in there,” I ventured. I figured a thief who was fine with breaking into a car and threatening a random stranger probably had no qualms with carrying where he shouldn’t, but it was worth a try.

Raymond laughed. “This thing?” He pulled the gun from inside his coat, and I bristled. Then I noticed a bright orange tip on the barrel of the pistol. “This is a paintball pistol,” he said. “Here.” He tossed the pistol to me, and I breathed again. “Corporate doesn’t let interns carry real guns. They’re afraid we’ll ‘create an incident.’” He rolled his eyes.

“*Corporate?* You’ve got to be kidding me.” I put the gun on my passenger seat.

He misunderstood my incredulity and answered, “Yeah man, corporate can be a real pain in the you-know-where. We have to jump through so many hoops to get any sort of status.” He sighed and opened his car door. We headed into McDonald’s together, and it felt oddly like the weirdest date that has taken place in the history of...ever.

The harsh fluorescent lights made me squint when we walked in. Almost as bright as the lights was the carpet, which was done in a pattern of neons that looked like the 1980’s exploded. A bored high schooler behind the counter put down her iphone and said a robotic, “Welcome to McDonald’s. Can I take your order?” Raymond ordered a BigMac and fries. I ordered the same. I reached for my purse, but Raymond motioned for me to put it away. “I’ve got it,” he said. “I feel bad for startling you.”

Startling me? Saying he startled me was like saying “fire is warm.” I almost peed my pants earlier. I wanted to tell him this, but I decided not to press the issue. I was getting a free BigMac out of the deal.

We took our trays and sat down at a booth where the vinyl was struggling in vain to contain all of the stuffing. I unwrapped my sandwich.

“So you’re an intern?” I ventured.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m just getting into the business. My first independent job was to get the code for a bank vault to one of our main guys. The code was in a fortune cookie, and the

fortune cookie was supposed to go to the guy behind you. They put it in your bag instead. *I can't believe I messed that up.* I mean, if I can't get one little cookie to the right guy, do you think they're ever going to give me a bigger job? No! I'm going to be doing coffee runs for the rest of my life!" He bit into his BigMac aggressively.

"You do coffee runs too?" I asked. "I hate coffee runs! Is coffee consumption directly related to one's level of success? Why do bosses always drink *so much coffee*!?"

"Right?!" Raymond was talking with his mouth open, but I didn't care. "So much coffee. Every day. All hours."

"I know!" I rolled my eyes. We laughed.

"So you're an intern too?" he asked.

"Yes, a law intern," I say, feeling sophisticated. "I'm going to be a lawyer in a few years."

"I hope you never have to represent me." He smiled, and the devious glint in his eyes was offset by his dimples.

"Me neither." I crunched a fry thoughtfully. "Does your boss yell at you a lot?"

"All the time! I'm always told I'm incompetent, I'm never going to amount to anything, that this business isn't for wusses...all of it." He shook his head in disbelief.

"Why do they do that?" I wondered aloud. "I mean, do they think we can work well under all that pressure? How are we ever supposed to get better if we're slaughtered for every little mistake?"

"Exactly." He took his jacket off. He was wearing a t-shirt from an indie rock band. I was wearing my black skirt suit. He kept eating, and I grabbed my phone from my purse. The

screen was cracked from when I dropped it three months ago, but I could see enough to send a quick text.

“You hope you’ll make it one day,” Raymond continued, “but there’s always this voice in the back of your head saying that maybe you’re not up for the challenge. That’s how it is for me anyway.”

“You’re completely right,” I agreed. “I had no idea that bank robbery was so...organized.”

“If you want to get in with any of the good crime rings, you have to work your way up,” he said. “Do your time, make the coffee runs...all of it. Bank robbery isn’t even the most prestigious branch of crime. I tried to go for politics, but I didn’t get in.”

“Bummer,” I said. My phone dinged with a return text, and I checked it. I smiled.

We continued eating and lamenting the rough lives we have on opposite sides of the legal system. “How did you get to my building?” I asked when I was almost done. “Do you have a car there?”

“I have a car down the road,” he pointed toward the front door. “I can walk from here.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

I rolled up my wrappers and got ready to go. Before I left, I grabbed a small post-it pad from my purse and wrote down a number. “Here you go,” I said. “From one intern to another.”

“Is this your phone number?” He looked hopeful.

“Nope,” I said. “It’s the combo to the dumpster padlock.” His face brightened immediately, and he looked down at the post-it as if it was made of solid gold.

“Thank you,” he said. “Seriously, thank you.”

“Good luck,” I responded. “See you around.”

“Hopefully not,” he smiled.

I smiled back, nodded, and walked out into the chilled night air.