

Trust or Bust

The usual stuff happened. At least at first.

I exit the train, I fling my backpack over my shoulder, grabbing both lashes with my hands at the height of my chest. I try to appear cool as shit, because I know that people stare at me through the windows of the train.

As I walk down the stairs, someone blows into a whistle, doors close and the train rides on.

Normally, there's nobody behind me and I can relax a little now. But of course, it was one of THOSE days.

I hear female footsteps behind me, that unnecessarily loud clacking of high heels, drawing all attention towards them.

I've been there. But that day, I was wearing comfy sneakers.

In any case, I turned right, heading into a hallway that ended after, say, six meters.

The female footsteps behind me turned in the other direction, away from me, and up another set of stairs to exit the station.

I was finally alone and could relax.

It was cold and dark and almost half past eight post meridiem. Yes, you read that right. Dating literature guys does that to you. Sorry.

I was making my way out of the station, across the street, turning right and headed towards home.

My breath formed white clouds in front of my face and my fingers refused to warm up, but that was okay. In about twenty minutes I'd be sitting in my room, wearing my favourite pajamas. I'm a big girl, or at least, that's what I try to make everyone think of myself, but at home, people would probably fail to recognize me.

The parking lot across the train station was - once again - illuminated by strange orange light, beaming from thin pillars five meters high. Some lonely cars parked here and there - and there was a group of guys gathered around a souped up BMW. Alright, now they identified me as a woman. But that's okay, I can handle a few dirty gazes.

At least, nobody was whistling.

Keep on walking, girl!

They seemed to have lost interest fairly quickly.

I could've been glad about that, or sad and let it affect my ego. I chose a little bit of both.

There was the weeping willow again, towering above the street like an old woman, her long gray hair like a curtain through which everyone must pass to get caught in her curse.

Or, you know, it was just a stupid old tree. Which looked kind of creepy with that small lantern right behind it.

Moving on.

Past the giant plant, I - like every freaking time - go over the bridge, which was built above another street, which went below the train tracks to the right of me.

Five minutes and I'm home! Gotta change to the other side of the street.

On my way to the opposite sidewalk, I heard a car approaching.

I leaped to safety before the light of the car embraced me in full.

To my surprise, the car stopped right next to me.

I kept walking, of course.

The driver's door opened and closed.

Shit. My heart took that metallic noise as a shot to start a race.

"Excuse me," a male voice said.

In a parallel universe, I just continued walking.

But in this one, I actually looked over my shoulder and stopped.

The man was maybe 35 or 40, a bit round around his belly area, wearing a gray pullover and blue jeans with a tight belt holding everything together.

His hands clapped once and he chuckled - in an embarrassed way.

"Excuse me," he repeated. "I noticed you're a woman, all alone, in the dark."

"And your name is Mr. Obvious, I presume?" I replied.

"Steve McNair, actually," he said, completely ignoring my joke. He was still standing behind his car next to the driver's door.

"Good for you," I remarked and set another foot in front of the other, turning forward again, away from the scene.

"Please," Mr. Obvious continued. "Let me at least give you a ride."

Have you ever heard a church bell at close range? At least a thousand of those just went off in my head.

I didn't know that fear and panic could shake me up so wildly. My voice was already kind of weak, when I said: "No, thanks."

"Ah," he continued. He laughed, again with that weird shyness. "Of course, you must think I'm one of those men who kidnap women and do horrible things to them. Let me assure you, I am not one of those bastards!"

"That's wonderful," I heard myself saying, with a trembling voice that would make Pavarotti sound like an amateur. "I'm sure you'll be handsomely rewarded in heaven."

"Okay, please, I can't drive home now knowing that you could be in terrible danger!" the man said, now taking two steps away from his car, closer to me.

I produced my cellphone. "I'm calling the police."

It was a bluff, of course. Once again I had forgotten to recharge that damn thing.

"Look," the man said, his arms stretched out, forming a welcoming gesture. "You can drive." He took out a bundle of keys and shook them in the air, as if he was trying to lure me.

I gave it a try and entered the emergency number. The cell stayed dead. My knees were struck with fear and felt like a ton each. I couldn't move. I realized, I could as well stand still for a moment and try to recover, while the man was still a few meters away.

"Here," the man said.

Then he threw me the keys.

For a long time there was this strange noise in the air of tiny keys flying and touching each other, producing this high pitched sound.

Then they landed in front of my feet like a sack of gold.

Looking at the man's car, I realized that, due to the Mercedes logo on both one of the keys and the car, gold wasn't that far off.

The man walked around behind the vehicle in a defensive gesture. "Here, I will just sit on the passenger seat." He was now standing a little closer to me, next to the right side of the car, raising his arms as if I were holding him at gunpoint.

"How about you leave me the fuck alone and we both go our separate ways?" I said. I was weirded out, naturally. It just felt so wrong!

"Just take the keys, get in the car and drive to wherever you live," he explained.

"Then you can just get out of the car and forget about me!"

"I think I'll just turn around and start forgetting you right away."

"Please, Madam," he begged and dared to take another step towards me. My feet allowed me to take one backwards.

"You are freaking me out," I said.

"Okay, you know what?" He took out his cellphone and pressed his manly fingers on the touchscreen in a regular interval. A dialing noise was being barked out by the phone's tiny speaker.

"Hello?" a woman on the other end said, her voice sounding as if forced through an old radio. "Steve?"

"Yes, honey, it's me," he said.

Of course, it was him, she probably saw his number anyway. People never learn, I thought. Yes, I was so confused that I had time to think about crap like this.

The man stuck out his hand with the cellphone wrapped in his fingers. "I'm standing here with a young lady and I offered her a ride home because it's dark and all," he shouted at the poor telephone.

"I see," the woman's voice crackled.

"I just wanted to make sure she was safe, but she doesn't trust me," the man complained.

"Oh, can you put me on speaker?" the woman asked.

"You already are," the man confirmed.

"Darling," the woman said, addressing me, apparently. "Don't worry, I've been married with Steve for almost twenty years now, he's a good person. You can trust him!"

"But it's only five minutes and I'd be home," I explained. "I'll just leave you guys to yourselves."

"No!" the woman yelled out of nowhere. "It's too dangerous!"

"I've been walking this path for the past five fucking years, and besides, this is a village of what, a hundred people? Everybody knows me!"

"Child," the woman continued, sounding deeply worried. "Just do the right thing and let my husband help you!"

"Right!" the man exclaimed. "Okay, honey, thanks, I will be home in an hour or so."

"That's what you said last time," the woman said.

"You know me, I can't help it," the man said.

They hung up.

We were alone. Again. Or still.

I stared at the keys at my feet, shimmering in the light of a street lamp.

"You won't do it, will you?" the man asked, not waiting for my response. "Just get in the car."

I slowly shook my head.

"Alright," he said, his smile fading away. He went to the trunk and opened it.

For a quick second, I already saw him producing a gun and shooting me - but instead...

"Here," he said, putting handcuffs on his wrists.

I put on my disgusted face. "What the hell? What kind of trip are you on?"

"No trip, Madam, I just want to make sure you're safe. Now you can safely pick up the keys, get in the car and drive yourself home. You don't have to worry about me."

"Worry about you? It's you who should be worried about yourself!"

"Look," he said, his arms dangling in front of his belly, held closely together by the silver tight chain between them. "I've had a lot of hard cases, but in the end I've convinced all of them. I just want to help!"

I thought quickly. Actually, now was a good time to escape. But he could still have some nasty trick up his sleeve, like the handcuffs turning out to be fake or something.

"Throw me your cellphone," I said.

"Oh, I can't do that," he said with a sad grin.

"Why not? You want me to trust you, right?"

He sighed. "Okay, I'll just sit in the back."

"You could strangle me with the handcuffs."

The man hesitated. I heard crickets warming up to their love songs somewhere in the grass. The wind slapped me with a cold hand.

Steve looked at his pocket on his butt containing the phone and tried to somehow wiggle his right hand into it along with the left arm dragging behind with the chain.

He sighed again, his whole body inflating and deflating like a balloon. "I can't reach it. You may try to get it out, of course."

I shook my head. "It's a trap, I know it."

"You are still here, so you must trust me a little bit already," he reasoned.

Again, I looked at the keys. He did have a point.

Although - he could have had another set of keys, of course.

"It is getting really late," he said, taking a quick glance up at the moon. "Please, by God, just pick up the keys and use my vessel to travel home safely!"

Oh, he definitely wanted me to use his vessel, alright.

"Nuh-uh," I said, folding my arms.

"I'll climb into the trunk," he offered.

My eyebrows instinctively shifted upwards. "I don't want to go to jail for kidnapping YOU," I said.

"My wife would explain it, should the police stop us and see me in the trunk," he said.

"It's a perfect plan! You get home in one piece-"

"I can do so now!"

"And I can sleep with good conscience tonight," he finished.

"Your conscience is none of my business, to be frank," I said.

"Fair enough," he replied and looked at his car, almost bitterly.

"It was nice meeting you," he said.

If my eyebrows were able to go any higher, they would've climbed another mile upwards. "I... So, that's it? Can I go now?"

"NO!" he yelled. "You drive! Don't you understand? I will just walk in this direction."

He nodded over his right shoulder. "Whenever you feel comfortable enough, grab the keys, sit in the car and drive home."

"But..."

"Not a word!" he insisted.

"Your car could still be a trap, you know?" I said. "I am not getting in there."

"It's not a trap!" he screamed.

A dog barked somewhere in response.

"You have simply watched too much television, it has clouded your judgement, you think every human is a potential threat to you!" he rambled. "I can understand that from a certain point, but look at me!" He put a little strain on his handcuffs and held them up high.

"I'm just cautious, that's all," I defended myself. "Do YOU want to be kidnapped, held in a basement for months and raped every hour?"

"If it takes that much to finally convince you that I'm not a bad man, then yes, I would gladly let someone do that to me!"

"Are you fucking serious?" I said, my mouth wide open. "You're out of your mind, you old freak!"

"You are the one throwing foul words around, polluting the very air I breathe! And you know what? I still care whether you return home in one piece or not!"

"You must have done something terribly wrong for having such an unhealthy urge to redeem yourself," I concluded.

"Never," he mumbled, his voice very calm now. "But if you must know, I had a daughter, too. Once."

For a second or two, the cricket concert used the opportunity to build up to a crescendo.

Needless to say, I was dumbstruck.

"If this is one of your tricks," I said, cautiously.

"One of my..." He turned around and walked a few steps. "What tricks? This? Is this a trick to you?" He faced me again and once more demonstrated the strength of the handcuffs. "I'm not a magician. I can't get out of those without my keys. Which, by the way, are still in front of your feet."

I was done. This was getting too bizarre for my mind to handle. And I've seen bizarre. This was a whole new level. "I just want to go home, please," I said, a bit desperate.

"You still want to go home alone? In the dark? Now?"

I looked behind me. It was true, there was a part of the street on my way to my house that was only scarcely lit. The wind animated the trees in a grotesque manner and the crickets resembled the high notes of the strings in Psycho's shower scene.

It might have taken me five minutes to get home, or an eternity.

"Maybe I'll just curl up right here on the ground and try to sleep," I said.

"Your parents will be worried!" the man said.

"But now I can't go there alone, and neither can I get into that car," I summarized.

"And what if whatever happened to your daughter was your fault?"

"Ah, I admit, that was a lie, of course she's still alive, married even, with a son! But my daughter did come home very late sometimes and we were always worried sick!"

"I knew it!" I said.

"You knew what?"

"You're a cheat! You're up to something."

"I just thought that little story would finally convince you!"

"Well, yeah," I said, and shrugged. "It almost did."

"Do you want me to jump off that bridge back there?"

"What good would that do us?"

"I don't know, maybe then you can't be trapped or tricked by me anymore and we can finally both rest in peace?"

"You're getting sarcastic. That's not making me trust you more."

An angry male voice from afar interrupted us. "What the devil is going on here?"

Both Steve and I looked at where it came from. A house on the opposite side of the street had lights in all windows, little shadow heads pressed against the window in the upper floor, a worried mother in the door, and the father standing outside in the garden with his hands on his hips, looking at us.

I used the opportunity, crossed the street and walked towards them. "Can I use your phone?" I asked, slightly out of breath.

"Sure thing," the mother said. "Come inside."

I hesitated.

I looked back at Steve. He shook his head.

"Uh," I said. "Do you have a cellphone I can use outside?"

"No, we don't," the father said, coming closer to me.

I glanced up at the window on the second floor. Both of the children's eye-less black heads were still staring at me.

"I'm sorry to bother you then," I said.

I left the garden, ran past Steve's car and, with almost invisible feet, I raced my own shadow home. The trees cheered me on with a roar of hissing leaves, and the crickets rang their songs of love in my ears until it sounded distorted and discordant. My legs carried me with lightning speed, my muscles burned, my throat yearned for water, my heart beat a thousand times per minute. My mind formed scenes in which Steve's car was following me, just out of sight, the face of the Mercedes forming a sinister grin.

I passed several more houses, the windows filled with darkness, hiding things I probably never wanted to see.

I turned left. A cat jumped past me and disappeared in the grass next to me.

Then - finally - I saw the familiar house.

As I reached it, I unlocked the door and went inside.

"Oh, there you are!" my mother said, eyeing me from up the stairs. "You are late! Has the train been delayed again?"

"Yes," I said, went to the cupboard below the mirror, and stuck the charger cable into my cell. "Something like that."

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