

SHORT STORY: DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

It was a dark and stormy night as Jessica Snow drove along the treacherous curves of Highway Thirteen. Or rather, she hoped she was still on Highway Thirteen. At 10:00 P.M she veered off the interstate to take, what she thought, was a shortcut through the mountains. With pounding rain she wasn't sure if she missed the road sign and was driving along some back road leading to who-knows-where. It was now one minute to midnight, and her worst fears were true, she was way off course heading in the wrong direction as the lightning storm intensified.

She glanced at the passenger seat and the sack of cash. Hers was a heroic mission, a mission for the children at the orphanage. She picked up the money earlier in the evening, nearly one hundred thousand dollars, from a reclusive benefactor. She had to deliver it to the bank by 9:00 A.M. The benefactor was from out of state, the bank was in the city. Should she be late, the bank would foreclose on the orphanage, leaving sixty children without a roof over their heads.

"Oh brother!" she said as another bolt of lightning struck somewhere ahead. For a moment it was light enough to see the entire landscape. But there was not much to see. Tree's, with gnarled fingers, reached down from either side of the road. With the wind whipping them, they seemed to beckon to her:

"Come, steer to us, crash your car here!"

She drove on, not heeding them, clutching the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white.

Then it happened, the engine stalled as is inevitably the case in stories like this. A glance at the instrument panel told her the whole story: she was out of gas! How could she have been so foolish as to not fill up when she turned off the interstate.

Jessica rolled her eyes.

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She coasted until she found a safe place to pull over on the narrow curvy road. It was a driveway carved between the trees. Houses were few and far between so she should consider herself lucky for this find.

“Yea, real lucky,” she said in disbelief over this entire situation.

Another strike of lightning illuminated a wrought iron gate crossing the drive. Beyond that, at about a hundred feet up was an Victorian house. The gate was slightly ajar and there was a light on in one of the house’s upstairs window.

She reached to the back seat and grabbed her rain poncho and a flashlight. It was late but she hoped whoever was home would understand and let her call for road service and perhaps let her wait out the storm. She slipped into her rain gear and prepared herself to make a mad dash to the front door.

“Hold on, wait a second,” she said before jumping out. She took the flashlight and trained it onto the imposing wrought iron gate. There was a sign on it. “Ah, ha!” She tried to make out the words, it read: “Dr. Zacharia Zum, Taxidermist.”

Knowing now who awaited her, Jessica prepared herself for that dash to the house.

“But wait, there’s more,” she said, flashlight still on the sign, “another smaller line of print, it says ... ‘and mad scientist’.”

Deciding it must be a flavor of local humor, yet one more time, Jessica prepared herself for that dash to the house. She opened the car door -

“You must be crazy if you think I’m going in there! I’m waiting right here. I’ve got my cell phone, I’ve got Triple A, and I’ll stay here until road service arrives.”

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“No, you’re going up to that house and ringing the doorbell. The mad scientist and his Igor type assistant are peering at you already from the belfry window. They’ve got everything prepared for an exciting story.”

“I’m not moving from this spot!”

“You have too.”

“Uh uh. No way, no how. I’m not going up there. Who knows what kind of situation I’d be getting myself into.”

“Let me explain something to you, I’m the writer, and you’re the character. It’s my job to put you into inescapable predicaments. And using your wits and the meager resources I throw at you, you’ll come out victorious in the end. But, before that, you’ll be chased around by the mad scientist and his equally mad assistant. Of course, they’ll eventually catch you, and when they do, they’ll tie you up in chains down in their dungeon.

“And as you’re tied there struggling to break free of your bounds, you’re going to watch as the mad scientist prepares some bubbling concoction made of a disgustingly green fluid. Then you’re going to look on in horror as Igor turns on a giant machine by throwing a monster sized knife switch on the wall. You’ll get to hear as the electricity courses through the machinery while it hums up to speed. You’ll scream in horror as you watch as they prepare the instruments which will turn you into their serving robot. And then the mad scientist will approach you as you continue to struggle in your bounds, and he will make his maniacal laugh -”

“Stop right there. Don’t you think this is a bit too much? Your story line reeks of a bad black and white movie. And what’s all this about a sack of cash for the orphans on ‘a dark and stormy night’, who are you kidding?” Jessica looked into the rearview mirror to check her eye shadow. “When I’m written into a story, I expect to be treated right. After all, I go the trouble of dressing

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for the part, doing my hair and makeup, getting into the right frame of mind ... Some date this has turned out to be.”

“You’re forgetting something, you’re not real. I made you up out of my imagination. And you’re going to do exactly what I tell you to. And right now I’m telling you to go up to that house, ring the doorbell and ask to use the phone.”

“No way, I’m not doing anything of the kind. What kind of dumb blonde do you take me for?”

“It’s the only way you can proceed. I’ve written you into a tight situation. You have to go up the house if you want to move this story along.”

“I’ll see about that!” Jessica said as she fumbled in her handbag for her phone. She pressed 9-1-1. “Hello, I’d like to report a case of bad writing.”

“I see, where are you now, ma’am,” the dispatcher said.

“I’m in front of a spooky old house. The sign says ‘Dr. Zacharia Zum, taxidermist and mad scientist’.”

“I know where that is. Have you gone into the house yet?”

“No.”

“Good. We advice that you don’t. And your car is disabled?”

“Yes it is.”

“Out of gas, or a flat?”

“Out of gas.”

“Yes, you certainly are a victim of bad writing. We’ll send an officer by with a can of gas. And for what it’s worth, the Zum place has been slated for destruction years ago. It’s old and cliché, and isn’t used in today’s modern stories. It’s only standing because of the county’s budget

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issues. Stay in the car, and if the writer tries to get fresh with you, like sending down a space monster or werewolf, call us back. The patrol car should be there in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, I’ll be waiting.” Jessica clicked off the phone.

“Are you happy now?”

“Happier than I was.”

“Because now there’s no story.”

“Sorry about ruining your plot. But, I’m not changing my mind.”

“Then, I think there’s just one more thing I need to write.”

“What’s that?”

The End.

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