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Sweet Home

Bright LED headlights cut through the gloomy ambience of the night as my little black Honda Fit cruised along the highway. Rain pelted the windshield, enjoying only a moment of rest before being swept to the side by the sun-damaged rubber of my windshield wipers. As I struggled to keep the reflective lane markers in sight, the falling droplets of water captured the light from my headlights, giving the impression that I was experiencing hyper-speed in a science-fiction spaceship.

“Yikes, it’s really pouring out there,” observed my wife, Julia, from the passenger seat. The two of us were driving home early from our vacation in Pensacola because I had forgotten to bring my medication. Though she had been disappointed, she had been gracious with me about it – something that I greatly appreciated.

From the back seat, from *nowhere*, a faint whisper called to me. Instead of acknowledging it, I turned on the radio, filling the car with the familiar voice of The Weeknd.

Julia, not having noticed anything amiss, began to lightly bob to the beat, mouthing along to the words of “Cry for Me,” legs partially covered by her soft Kingdom Hearts print throw blanket.

‘*Only a couple of hours left until we’re home*,’ I thought as I glanced at the clock.

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An hour later, we found ourselves outside of a 24-hour Mobile gas station. Julia had run inside to use the bathroom, leaving me outside to re-fuel the car. As I locked the nozzle handle, I leaned against the car and turned my head towards the road. Across the street was a vacant parking lot belonging to what appeared to be a church bathed in darkness – the ever-invasive specter of the night. A marquee sign in front of the building gave a dull, yellow glow, and read, “Sweet Home Church of Christ.”

From the darkness surrounding the building, the black silhouette of a person emerged. I squinted, trying to get a better look. The figure appeared to be moving towards me, stumbling and staggering in a way that seemed reminiscent of cheesy old zombie movies.

**\*CLICK\***

I glanced down and realized that the gas nozzle had released: the car’s gas tank was full. Mildly irritated at the distraction, my gaze shot back towards the church, only to see that the figure had vanished. A visceral chill ran down my spine, and I shuddered.

“Fuckin’ weird,” I muttered as I returned the nozzle to its place on the gas pump, fighting unease.

Slipping back into the driver’s seat, I caught a glimpse of Julia trotting back to the car in the rear-view mirror. Determining that what I had seen was likely just my imagination, I decided not to tell her about it. I didn’t want her to worry – especially because it was my fault that we had to cut our trip so short.

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We had only been back on the road for about ten minutes before my travel companion began to interrupt the peace with a series of loud snores. As loud as they were, I was glad that she was finally getting some rest: all this traveling was exhausting, and if she were too tired when we got back, I might be on the hook to unload the car by myself. I affectionately glanced at her momentarily before turning my attention back to the pavement stretching out into the distance before us.

A hand – a left hand – firmly grasped my shoulder, squeezing it. Startled, I peered again at my wife, who was still sawing logs in the passenger seat.

*‘It’s not her hand’* – the realization evoked instant terror in me, causing me to yelp loudly.

The feeling faded immediately, and Julia’s torso sprang up in her reclined seat, her brown eyes open and wide with concern. “What happened? Is everything ok?” she asked.

“Err, yeah, sorry. I got this cramp in my calf, and it hurt so bad that I couldn’t help but shout,” I lied, hoping she wouldn’t dwell on the issue too long.

“Gosh babe, do you need me to finish driving us home so you can straighten out your legs?” She was far too good for me.

“No,” I answered. “We’re only about 30 minutes away. I can –“

I stopped speaking as the car’s LED headlights illuminated a figure standing in the road. It appeared to be a woman wearing a filthy white dress. Raven-black hair covered most of her face, coming down to the middle of her back. It looked wet, but did not shine in the light. Her mouth was unnaturally agape, as if her lower jaw were detached; it looked as if it could fall off at any moment.

*‘Was this real?’*

As the car continued to hurtle towards her, I began to scream.

Panicked, I cut the steering wheel to the left to avoid hitting her. Julia began to scream now, too, as the car started to fish-tail.

Suddenly, we were moving sideways – then we began to roll. Everything was moving so quickly, but for a split second I experienced life in slow motion. Our luggage flew across the car, first to the left, then the top, then to the bottom. The windows disintegrated. Julia had stopped screaming – I prayed that she was ok. I pressed my eyes shut.

Finally, the car stopped moving. I hesitantly opened my eyes, afraid of what I would see.

The car was resting on its side, with Julia’s side of the car submerged in water.

‘*We must have rolled into a pond,*’ I thought, trying to get my bearings. Blood dripped from a wound somewhere on my head and splattered into the water.

Seeing that the front windshield was gone, I determined that the hole it once occupied would be my best option for an exit. With that loose plan in mind, I unbuckled my seatbelt, falling on top of Julia who was laying completely still under the water. I fumbled blindly with her buckle, desperately trying to free her.

I began to sob, cursing loudly as the buckle continued to hold.

Frantic, I grabbed her under the arms and tried to pull her free, wiggling her legs loose from the belt.

This strategy proved to be far more successful, and I silently rejoiced when I was finally able to get her head above the water. With no small amount of effort, I pulled her body out of the front windshield and tried to identify dry land. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I spotted the bank. I was too weak to properly carry my wife, so I took her by the arms and dragged her.

As I pulled her limp body across the mud, something caught my eye – a small orange RX bottle sat on the dirt. Moving closer to inspect it, I could make out my name on the label, along with the medication name, Risperidone – my anti-psychotic.

I felt sick.

I was sure I hadn’t seen it with our things while we were in Florida. I was *sure*.

‘*It’s not real.’*

Phantom screams permeated the air – they seemed to be coming from the tree line. I ignored them as I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed 9-1-1.