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Moment of Truth

By **Sandy Asirvatham** (</index.php?category=author&s=Sandy Asirvatham>) | May. 3, 2000

Most of us fantasize that, in a bad situation, we'll act with resolve and courage. It's awful being faced with the truth of your capacity for indecision and cowardice -- not to mention the truth that all those years of watching TV cop shows has taught you exactly nothing.

A few Saturdays ago, I returned very late at night to an empty house with a carload of expensive musical equipment. (My husband, Kevin, was away for the weekend, and I was coming home from a job with a band I'd just joined as a keyboardist.) We live on a relatively safe South Baltimore street, but on weekend nights the neighborhood becomes the domain of loud, drunken kids, dealers, junkies, and general creeps. So I'd made some mental preparation to ensure the safe passage of my shiny, eminently re-sellable electronic stuff from car to house. Furthermore, to ensure the safe passage, I'd planned to park illegally -- in a crosswalk or right at the corner, although not in front of a hydrant (wouldn't want to block firefighters) -- if the only other option meant parking far away and putting myself in the path of potential trouble.

I was relieved when I got home because all was silent. Rainy weather had kept the usual rowdies and night crawlers inside. I double-parked and spent about 10 minutes unloading my equipment, all the while scanning the sidewalks. The only movement I saw was a person slowly lurching up the other end of the block. I

continued to hump heavy stuff across the sidewalk and up my steps but kept my awareness focused in that direction. Then, as I was finishing up, this figure materialized next to me.

"Can you help me?!" It was a woman, skinny, blond, wearing no coat, and clearly high on something. She was shivering, gripping her left elbow with her right hand, crying hysterically. "I don't know where I am, I'm not from around here, I can't find my car, I can't move my elbow, I have to get out of here!" My mind remained cautious, but my heart instantly went out to her. "Oh, honey, what happened?" I heard myself say. "I don't know where I am, I don't live around here, I'm from Georgia, my mother lives in Brooklyn, but I don't know where my car is!"

I asked a few questions and she gave some tearful, incoherent answers. The gist of her story was that she'd been on a blind date and an argument had started, and now she couldn't move her elbow. The way she described this date was chilling -- it sounded as if she'd been forced into it by some cousin who'd brokered the deal. Oddly, I cannot remember whether she actually said the words "He hurt me," or whether that was the unspoken message I'd intuited from her jumbled speech. In any case, I found myself asking, "Honey, did someone hit you? Did he hurt you?" She didn't respond directly, just whimpered. I had a strong impulse to put my arm around this woman, take her into the house, and deadbolt the door against whatever bogeyman or -men threatened her. Instinctively, I felt she was truthful. But I also thought about how stupid I'd feel if this woman were the decoy for some kind of robbery scam, or if she were a desperate junkie herself, just trying to get into my house with a sob story.

I told her that the best thing would be for me to call the police. They'd find her car or drive her to her mother's house. "Wait right here, I'll park my car, then I'll go inside and make the call." She kept saying "Yes, ma'am" in a plaintive but weirdly polite way.

I circled the block, headed for an empty crosswalk I'd spied earlier. But as I straightened out in the space, I looked 50 yards up the street and saw a car double-parked in front of my house. A man got out, started tussling with the woman. I couldn't hear anything. Maybe if she'd been screaming, it would have spurred me

to action. Instead, I just sat there baffled, second-guessing my own eyes. I watched like a complete idiot as the man literally picked this woman up and bundled her into the car.

Should I have gotten out of the car and run up to help her? I was too scared. Should I have locked my doors, driven closer, and started honking my horn, to wake the neighbors and maybe scare off this possible abuser or rapist? Or was it possible this woman, who was clearly fucked up, was simply being helped back to a safe place after a drug-fueled argument that had gotten a little out of hand? My mind raced for five seconds -- too long, because the other car was already making a U-turn. I got out and started walking back toward my house, watching with mouth hanging open as the car sped out of sight with the woman in the backseat being either subdued or comforted by a third person I hadn't noticed until then. The street was soon silent.

I cried out of sheer confusion and shame. I went home, locked the door, called 311, and explained everything I'd just heard and seen. The dispatcher didn't think there was much to be done, although he promised to send a patrol car to prowl the neighborhood.

"Did you happen to get the car's license-plate number?"

No, I admitted. In my utter failure to do anything to help this possibly endangered person, I had not even mustered that much common sense.