

## Curbside

by Mike Finley

“You drop me off here at the curb and go buy groceries,” I tell Rachel. “I’ll pick out the movie, and you swing around to pick me up.”

That was the plan. Inside I pull a movie from the shelf and put my money down.

Leaving the store, I see a familiar red car idling, and a woman's hands on the steering wheel. The plan is working.

What happens next happens quickly but in an intricate sequence. Let me break it down frame by frame.

I approach the car to get in. But as I do so, my brain sends a message: Something is wrong. There is no dog in the backseat, as there is in our car.

Great, I will rap on the front window to get a rise out of him.

I rap on the passenger window to get the dog's attention. But as I peer deeper into the window, grinning like an ape, I realize there is no dog there, and worse, that the woman is not one I know.

She is perhaps thirty, with bright eyes and honey-colored hair. God help me, I then did what all men men, do. I think, *Make a good impression!*

The problem is, she is screaming inside the cab, one hand gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles, the other repeatedly punching the LOCK buttons on the door arm.

I am dejected. If she thinks I am a murderer, making a good impression is probably not in the cards.

I take a step back, and adopt the most inoffensive expression a man in this situation might make. I’m like a guy she has bumped shopping carts with in the cereal aisle. I arch my eyebrows as high as they will go, and adopting an OOPS! expression with a funny frown. I am mouthing something like: “Sorry, my mistake!”

While I wish there were a universal gesture of reassurance one person can make to another through safety glass, there really isn't one. Midway through my oops expression, I realize I look like an urban psychotic, a crazy Quixote who has mistaken her Buick LeSabre for a windmill/ogre and is engaged in hallucinatory combat with it.

My oops expression now shows blank fear. But that expressionless expression is even scarier than the reassuring one. I can see three distinct horror lines furrowing her forehead.

I step in front of the car so she can get a better look, and gesture with my hands: “See, I’m just a man in

a Hawaiian shirt with a copy of *The Transporter* in one hand and *Kite Runner* in the other.”

But the headlights make me look like a horror monster, all wacky eyes and horned eyebrows, advancing on a luckless motorist.

And what's that gesture toward my chest with my hands? Am I touching my nipples for her approval? I can't read lips, but I believe she is praying.

The episode ends, and I slink away, content that she thinks I am a lunatic discouraged by locked doors, to try my luck with some other woman's door handle.

I have only one desire: while I am still within sight of the woman, Rachel will drive up in her similarly red car – admittedly, a Mercury and not a Buick. I will greet her with sweepingly affectionate gestures indicating the happiness of our marriage and the cleanliness of my rap sheet.

The dog will bark cheerily at my approach, and I will tousle his shaggy head, like the most normal man in the universe.

But Rachel doesn't come. Turns out she is in a long line at Whole Foods, waiting for an elderly customer to pay for a quart of organic strawberries with a sockful of nickels.

I stand by the curb, rocking on my heels, as if waiting for a bus, even though it is not a bus stop. I want to communicate to anyone watching – the woman, her husband, innocent bystanders – that I intend to leave the area shortly.

The husband emerges from the store. I am forty feet from them now, but I see her speaking animatedly to him, and pointing at me, then the car jerking away with a screech.

At least he didn't come over and start poking me in the chest.

As for me, what do I care? The night is cool and my love and protector is no more than a mile away.