



# Curbside

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Story by Mike Finley

“You drop me off here at the curb and go buy groceries,” I tell Rachel. “I’ll pick out a 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.

At the curb outside, I see a familiar red Mercury 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  
for you frame by frame.

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

Great, I think. He must be curled  
on the front passenger seat. I'll  
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 –

and I am grinning like an ape, in expectation of happy dog reaction -- I realize there is no dog there.

Worse, I realize that the woman at the wheel is not one I know.

She is perhaps thirty, with bright eyes and honey-colored hair. God help me, I then told myself what all men tell themselves in such situations. I said to myself, *Make a good impression on this woman!*

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. She thinks I am a murderer, or a maniac. I am not making the good impression I meant o make.

I take a step back from the curb, and adopt the most inoffensive expression a man in this situation might make. I arch my eyebrows as high as they will go, and adopt an OOPS! Expression, throwing in

a funny frown of my own  
invention.

I am mouthing something like:  
“Sorry, my mistake!”

I wish there were a universal  
gesture of reassurance one  
person can make to another  
person through safety glass. But  
there really isn't one. Midway  
through my OOPS expression, I  
realize I look like an urban  
psychotic bent on becoming an  
important element in her life.

It is about this time that my brain identified the red car as a Buick LeSabre, not a Mercury Grand Marquis.

My OOPS expression is gone now. It is not a face of pure fear, blank resolve to terminate this moment at whatever cost. This expressionless expression is much scarier than the reassuring OOPS one. I can count three distinct horror lines furrowing her forehead. One. Two. Three!

I get an idea. I step in front of the car so she can get a better look at

me, and I gesture with my hands,  
pointing to myself as if to say:  
“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, Lon  
Chaney-ish, all wacky eyes and  
horned eyebrows, my terrifying  
face brilliantly illuminated,  
advancing on a luckless motorist.

And what's that gesture toward  
my chest with my hands? Am I –



am I touching my nipples for her approval?

I can't read lips, but I believe she is praying.

I finally realize there's nothing I can do to make this situation right, something both of us can laugh pleasantly about.

*"I thought you were my wife!"*

"And I thought you were going to kill me and throw me into a culvert!"

“I tell ya...”

Instead I turn and scuttle away,  
away from the lights and into the  
cover of night.

I wait behind a boulevard tree  
while the woman’s husband  
returns to the car, and I see her  
pointing and I see him mouthing  
What – what? The car pulls away  
with a screech.

They drive away, and I huddle in  
the dark, awaiting the arrival of  
my regular wife, and my usual life.





Kraken Press

1841 Dayton Avenue

St. Paul MN 55104

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