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It was November 28, 1997, the day after Thanksgiving, and the guy had a gun.

The scene could have been painted by Edward Hopper. The flat faces of the Chicago warehouses-turned-condos jutting up from the edges of the sidewalks. Here and there, pale light seeping around drawn blinds, the shadowed figure of a man walking past a faded red Honda. Isolated in the dome light of that car, our family of four: my husband Dennis, who I’d met in 1983 at the apogee of my one-divorcee crusade to be independent of any man, my son, Bob, his girlfriend, Amy, and me. Bob nosed the Honda into the only parking spot on Peoria, directly across from his condo. Dennis stepped onto the sidewalk and pulled open the back door on the passenger side to help me out.

A man’s voice shouted.

Dennis swiveled on his heel and growled “N-n-o.”

I wiggled myself out of Bob's backseat, hampered by a short tight skirt and three-inch heels, and was shocked to see that the shadowed figure had doubled back and was pointing a gun at Dennis. "I told you,” the guy said, “get back in the car."
 "And ***I*** told you, we're - Not - getting - Back - in the Car."  Dennis jabbed his left pointer finger at the gunman’s chest and with the other hand slammed the car door behind me.
 Getting no cooperation by holding the gun on Dennis, the gunman pointed it at my chest. "Give me your money or I'll blow *her* head off."

I stopped moving.

 In 1962, when I was a new freshman at the University of Southern California, our campus safety instructors told us to cooperate with robbers, even rapists. “If you fight you could get hurt or killed.” Days later I caught a young teen boy stealing my bicycle, grabbed the handlebars and kept the bike. In 1966, alone in a furnished apartment with my infant daughter, I heard the front door rattle at 3:00 am. I bounded out of bed and threw my shoulder into the door, and the guy ran off. In 1980, in New York City, in Penn Station, I bolted after a purse-snatcher, caught him in the crowded terminal, punched him in the arm and kept my purse. For much of the early 1980’s, at 9:00 pm, I walked across Thirty-fourth Street from Herald Square to Penn Station, alone, carrying my purse under my coat, wearing running shoes and a don’t mess with me attitude. Nobody did.

That night in Chicago, it was like somebody pushed my pause button. I stood, weight on my toes, wondering what would happen next.

Somewhere in my post-war childhood I saw Edward Munch's, The Scream, and believed that the woman was trying to scream, but couldn’t. When my sixth grade art teacher gave us chalk and wet paper, I drew a black cat's head with terrified eyes and an oval mouth, its green tongue thrust out, a desperate, mute cat-head being sucked into a swirl of fading color. The teacher entered it in a contest and it won, perhaps because it expressed such helpless terror. It comes to mind as I try to describe how I felt that night.  It wasn't fear of death.  Death was merely disappointing. It wasn't fear of pain.  I knew that if that gun went off six feet from me I'd never know it. I was petrified because I had no idea what to do. By the time I realized there was a situation, Dennis had taken control of it, and I felt like the cat-head, helpless.

 Our gunman was between eighteen and thirty, black, with a round head like a small, squat pumpkin. He stood about 5’10”. I can estimate his height because the gun in his outstretched hand was pointed at the center of my chest and in those heels, I was 5’11”. Did he have a hat? What color was his jacket? I never noticed. What I saw was the end of the gun – black or dark gray with a bluish sheen, rectangular – about an inch high, a round hole in the center big enough to obscure the man behind it.

The only other thing I saw was in my imagination --- skinny, Nordstrom’s-dressed me with a salad plate sized hole in my chest, dark blood oozing from underneath my body onto the sidewalk.  Dennis tells me, "The hole in your chest would have been small. The big hole would have been in your back."

I wanted a serious conversation with my husband, not quibbles about the size of the hole in my chest. In re-telling the incident over the years, Dennis had concocted a glib story involving a standoff between a bad guy armed with a gun and a good guy armed with a brain. The hero saved his frozen wife and clueless kids, then twirled his smoking brain around his finger, holstered it back in his head and sauntered away. “In the battle of wits,” Dennis says, “the guy was unarmed.”

What galls me about Dennis’s story is the frozen wife, the damsel-in-distress who needed a white knight to save her. I remember another time where I really did act.

 As a freshman in college, the lecture about cooperating with rapists ringing in my ears, a cute upperclassman asked me to a walk-in movie. On the way home, he pulled onto a dark street behind the Shrine Auditorium, shut off the car and started pressing hard kisses against my mouth. Then he grabbed my breasts.

 “Don’t,” I said.

 He shoved his weight against me, forcing me against the passenger door, then pushed his hand under my skirt, yanking at my underwear. I considered grabbing the door handle and jumping out. I knew the general direction of the dorm but would be running through what was, at the time, a dangerous part of the city. I figured that if I could convince him I really didn’t want him, he’d quit. He pushed me so hard into the door that the handle stabbed a bloody gash in my back.

 “Get - Off –of - Me.”

 In those days, cars had bench seats with the gearshift on the steering column. I twisted to kick and landed flat on my back. It was a stupid move, because now he was on top, my head wedged under the armrest. Breathing was difficult and I feared suffocating, but I clenched my legs and my mouth. If he wanted sex he’d have to know it was rape. Suddenly, he sat up, pumped the gas pedal and started the car. I hugged the passenger door, but my fear drained away. What was wrong with a cute guy like him?

 “Why do you want to have sex with somebody who doesn’t want to have sex with you?” I asked.

 “You’d be surprised how much I get that way.”

I told Dennis, “I want to write about the night in Chicago, because I want to deal with the difference between your reaction and mine. How'd you decide what to do?"

"Combination of adrenalin and common sense.  Lots of scenarios went through my head."

“What were they?”

Dennis poured himself a glass of pinot noir, ambled to our screened-in porch and settled into the wicker couch. I followed with a legal pad.

 "It was a kidnapping. He could have just taken the car. We were already out. I figured if we got in the car, he'd get in the back seat with you and Amy and force us to drive to his neighborhood, somewhere safe for him.  We’d be robbed and killed, maybe tortured, maybe worse. On the street, where we were . . . what was the street Bob lived on?"
 "Peoria."
 "Right.  On Peoria there were people living in all those condos above us.  It's a busy street. That White Hen around the corner was a cop hang out. I figured if we stayed on the street, somebody would come by, maybe a cop. I even thought that if the guy did get in the car, if Bob would just drive around the corner, I might be able to grab the wheel and crash us into a cop car."

In the seconds it took me to climb out of the backseat, Dennis had imagined the scenarios, assessed his resources and decided to fight.

“What made you think you should be the one to take him on?”

"I'm a male.  I'm the oldest.  I thought about how the kids had most of their lives ahead of them."

Did Dennis think males were more capable or more expendable, or was he taught this was a man’s job? Dennis had three brothers, a mountain of a father who ran security for one of GM’s assembly plants, and a friary full of Franciscans to educate and coach him. If I’d been brought up with strategic thinking and competitive sports would I still have stood there glancing from Dennis to the criminal? Maybe. A 2009 study published in “Science Daily” found that “while viewing negative images,” and I assure you a gun in your face is a negative image, men exhibited more “activation [than women] in the left insula which . . . generates subjective feelings that can bring about actions.” Interesting, but I don’t believe that we were simply living up to our biology.

Dennis continued his story. “We weren’t going anywhere with him. I thought it was my night to die, and if I was going to die, I wasn’t going to die begging.”

*Wasn’t going to die begging*. If Dennis was going to be murdered, he intended to have a say in where and how. The criminal with the gun could destroy his body, but not his manhood.

Dennis said, “When I slammed the car door I thought the last thing I’d see in this life was the flash from the muzzle. When I didn’t see it, I knew everything had changed.  I could see it in the guy’s face. He didn't have a Plan B."

That was the moment the pumpkin head pointed the gun at me and demanded Dennis’s money.
 "Where was your wallet? Inside breast pocket?" I asked, wondering if the guy let him reach inside his coat. I couldn’t remember.
 "I warned him, ‘I have to go into my pocket.’ First I pulled the cash out of the money clip and handed it to him.  I only had twenty bucks.”

Dennis reminded me that our gun-toting friend looked clean and healthy, wasn’t slurring his words like a drunk or acting jittery like a junkie. “The guy was rational. That gave me a big advantage. He knew he couldn’t stand there all night.”

Dennis sipped his wine and waited for my pen to catch up before he went on. “Then the guy said, ‘Gimme your wallet,’ and I told him, ‘You got the cash.  I don't know why you want the credit cards because the minute you leave here, I'll cancel every one of them.” At that point, I remember Dennis lecturing the guy, “You’re no good at this,” he said. “You could get a real job.”

Dennis continued, “I was trying to waste time, hoping somebody would come along. I kept thinking, he doesn’t want to fire that gun because somebody will hear it. The guy was beginning to look nervous. This wasn’t working out for him.”

I scratched across the yellow pad, trying to get Dennis’s exact words, but I heard his voice and thought, “You were convincing yourself that the guy was rational, and you told him he was leaving without shooting you.”

On that Chicago sidewalk, my eyes flickered from the gun to Dennis and back, wondering what to do, but I knew what to do: don’t interfere. Had I done anything, I’d have been competing with Dennis, and he wasn’t the enemy.

 When Dennis and I first dated in 1983, not only did he shower me with theater tickets and upscale restaurants, but he wanted to open doors, unload the groceries and fetch the car if it was raining. It was like having an entire Boy Scout troop show up at once. I protested that I was strong and wouldn’t melt, but when he made my questionably-parked-and-subsequently-impounded car magically reappear, the I-can-do-it-myself divorcee began to melt indeed. I still wandered Manhattan alone after dark, but where Dennis could take care of me, more and more I let him, though not without worrying what that meant.

Dennis went on with his story. “Then I told him, ‘O.K.  That's all you're getting.  We're leaving.’"

 I remember Dennis barking those words. The guy looked astounded as though Dennis weren’t being fair with him. I took one step toward Dennis and away from the gunman. “Gimme her purse,” the guy said and waved the gun at my purse. I paused, waiting for instructions from Dennis, who grabbed my upper arm and propelled me into the street.

 “I was counting my steps,” Dennis said. “I figured if we got thirty feet away, his chances of hitting us got slim.”

The pumpkin head yelled at my son, “Gimme the keys.” I turned to see Bob and Amy still standing on the street side of the car. I didn’t have a plan but it was tough to desert my son. Bob tossed the keys onto the driver’s seat.

“Keep moving.” Dennis dragged me onto the sidewalk in front of the door to Bob's building.

Abruptly, the gunman turned and ran north up Peoria.  Dennis sprinted after him like a rabbit in tassel loafers, but couldn’t catch up. Just seconds too late, the help Dennis had hoped for, Bob’s neighbor Fred and his German Shepherd Thor, rounded the corner from the south end of the block. Fred and Thor ushered me into the condo lobby. Bob and Amy ran off toward of the White Hen in search of a cop.

Turns out, there were no cops at the White Hen, but the clerk dialed 911.  A squad car showed up because of the gun, and the cops and the kids rode around for a while --- no one. Dennis and I returned to the Midland Hotel, walked through the Art Deco lobby as though nothing had happened, but I shook all night.

When Dennis finished his story, I said, “You saved my life.” I hated admitting that, and in all those years, I probably hadn’t. Then more like a question to myself, not as though I would have fainted without him, I said, “I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t there.”

“You would have gotten back in the car when the guy told you to.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

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Years ago on a gloomy street, my family and I might have been killed. In the face of that threat, Dennis relied on himself, and I relied on Dennis. I’m grateful that he was there, though not proud of my dependence, which makes me determined to see similarities between Dennis’s reaction in Chicago and mine in a car at the edge of South Central Los Angeles.

Each of us believed there was no one else to rely on. Each of us assessed the situation and made a split second decision to resist. If we went down, we’d go down fighting, not begging. We kept thinking positive thoughts: Dennis that someone would come along or the gunman would run out of guts, and me that the boy would realize I wasn’t going to give in. Seems peculiar to me, but we each found the mental time to be frustrated by the stupid choices made by our attackers --- seemingly healthy and intelligent, well-groomed men who could have earned the car or the money or the status or the sex that they wanted. After we thought the danger had passed, all we felt was outrage. Without Dennis, would I find the courage and skills to protect myself or have I gone soft under the umbrella of his protection?

In Chicago, Dennis’s growl was visceral, atavistic. Confronted with danger, his eyes narrowed to threat and his hackles rose. I could not have reacted that way. He thinks that protecting me is his job, the male’s job. For years, he and I have been a team, with two careers and overlapping responsibilities, and we’ve become interdependent. My Me-Against-the-World act left the stage years ago. If I had to face a would-be robber, carjacker, or kidnapper on my own, my reaction would depend on the circumstances. I have no choice but to believe that in a battle of wits, I’d be armed.