

# THE CROSSING GUARD

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Annette Barrs' patience would have ruptured even if the judge had called her first.

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Her secretary had told her that Detroit's traffic court was in session at 8:30 and she had learned that "lawbreakers" were processed alphabetically, so Annette should have been out of the courtroom by 9:30, latest.

By 11:30 she was hot, thinking of how much money government wasted through inefficiency and ineptitude, and how much money she wasn't earning while forced to wait for these morons.

"Next case, docket 0014532, Annette Barrs."

*Finally.*

As had all the others before her, she crossed to face the bench. Waited. Fumed while the honorable Judge Emmanuel Diego, bald and approaching sixty, shuffled paperwork. *Would this never end?* She glanced at her Rolex.

Judge Diego noticed her glance, but continued to shuffle. From their momentary eye contact she sensed that he was intelligent and observant. She hoped he underestimated her. She had dressed down to her simplest blue suit, the one for first meetings with new clients; clients who might be threatened by her, at twenty-seven, making more money and knowing more than they knew. Sales-work was the simple art of guiding perceptions, and Annette Barrs was very good at guiding perceptions. She caught herself again looking at her watch. Inwardly cursed.

Judge Diego glanced up. "Miss Barrs." She would have normally corrected him to *Ms.*, but not this time.

Time.

He was holding the court's copy of her summons. He looked to the back of the room. "Officer Collins?"

Officer Collins joined them. He was young and, Annette knew, inexperienced. *Good.* When he had issued her ticket he had been distracted because she was a beautiful woman, but not so distracted as to tear up the ticket. She wondered if she would have fared better as a blond or as a redhead.

Judge Diego was reading. "Clocked at forty-four miles per hour in a 'fifteen' zone. Beside a playground and a school." He flipped over the ticket and raised his eyebrows. "2:35... That's about five minutes after elementary school lets out, Officer Collins? ...I see."

Annette's chest flushed. She fought it back. Hadn't expected this to be easy.

"And you, Miss Barrs, you have... eleven points preexisting." Controlled. He had kings and aces against her deuce.

Those eleven points were the only reason she didn't just pay the damn ticket. The fine was irrelevant, but she needed her car. If she couldn't squirm out of this, she would need to buy a personal Uber driver. Which would stack immeasurable problems on top of her restricted freedom. She needed a way out.

Judge Diego shook his head almost too slightly to notice. "Do you know the average actual speed in a posted residential area?" He lowered his eyeglasses and looked at her as he might look at books on a stranger's shelf. "That's where you're required to drive at or below twenty-five miles per hour."

"No, your honor."

"Probably not." He jotted something on a yellow sticky. "Thirty-eight. About one-hundred-fifty percent of the posted limit." He opened his appointment book and flipped pages. "On the streets where we live, where we raise our kids, where we—" He looked up. "But you know that."

"Your honor, if I may?" *Keep it polite.*

He nodded.

"Sir, I know how this looks, but there are compelling reasons to consider leniency." Annette relaxed. She had the floor. "As I explained at the scene..." She nodded politely to the policeman and he smiled back and nodded. Annette hoped the judge saw the significance of her deference to the cop. "My speedometer was giving me trouble—it's a new car—and I've had it repaired." She submitted two photocopies for the judge's examination, one a BMW repair bill, the other a mechanic's statement that her speedometer had indeed been inaccurate. Three-hundred dollars under the table inaccurate. "As far as I knew, I was going twenty-five."

Judge Diego nodded. "I see. And your other traffic offenses, all of them speeding tickets, were also equipment problems?"

"No sir." Quick. Certain. "I admit my record isn't encouraging, but the other offenses were all more than eighteen months ago. Since then I've improved my driving a lot." She wondered if Detroit reconciled traffic offenses with their Canadian neighbor, Windsor. Her defense would fail if they knew that a sixteen-month assignment had relocated her to a company apartment forty miles east of Windsor.

"Quite true." Judge Diego seemed to agree. Watched her.

Annette continued. "I've changed my driving habits because I know I was wrong. Eighteen months with a clean record demonstrates my improvement." In a skinny five weeks one of her violations would drop below the two-year limitation and she would have breathing room. "I don't feel I deserve this ticket. I relied on my speedometer..." She stood taller. "I have a clear conscience."

Judge Diego searched her face, but for only a moment. "Obviously." Looked down at his appointment book. "The pivotal question is indeed if you deserve the penalties mandated by Michigan statutes. A strict reading of the Constitution leads to a definite yes." He paused. "However. Judges are elected in part to determine if normal penalties fit a specific case. Human administration of even the most strict laws outweighs any

need to attempt to legislate compassion.” He seemed to catch himself. “Bailiff, wave the flag for America.” He and the bailiff shared a smile.

“In this case,” he continued, “—I can take into account factors that determine that revoking your driving privileges is not the best resolution.” Final.

Annette’s stomach relaxed. “Thank you, your honor.” Paying the fine was meaningless, so she nodded slightly and turned to leave, calculating how long it would take to get to the Toronto office.

“Oh, another question.”

Annette’s tension returned. “Your honor?”

He handed the yellow sticky to the bailiff. “What were you wearing that day?”

“I...” *Trap*. “A, a red business suit.” He wasn’t looking at her. “Matching pumps. A hat. Why?”

“How many kids were there?”

Annette went blank. “How many?” She remembered children but indistinctly. “I’m not sure. School was letting out and—”

“How many adults?”

“Sir?” She remembered the critical frowns that surrounded her that day but had no idea how many. “Some parents, a few teachers; I’m not sure.” Total guess.

Judge Diego again seemed to be reading that stranger’s bookshelf. “Do you remember the crossing guard?”

“Yes, sir. Why?” Annette vaguely remembered an extended stop sign.

“The crossing guard. Was it a man?”

The foundation of Annette’s fib gave way.

“A woman?”

Stared, dreading having to depend on anybody, let alone an Uber-driving stranger.

“Bailiff, is there a third choice? Perhaps something I’m not aware of? ...No, I thought not.” This time Judge Diego made a point of glancing at his own watch.

“Miss Barrs, as I’ve stated, I can take into consideration factors beyond the narrow, though noble, strictures of law. And knowing the value of personal choice, I’ll give you two options. In addition to the driver improvement program that you’ll be attending, you can either accept the penalties provided by law, meaning forfeiture of your driving privileges for one year, or you can commit to community service for four months; said duties to be those of a crossing guard at an elementary school which I will designate.”

*Time.*

“But I can’t—I mean, I have a job. I, I mean, there’s no chance my boss will—”

“Ah! Then you prefer to lose your—”

“No!” Annette realized that there was a way out of the ambush. “I mean, yes. I’ll accept community service.” She watched Judge Diego’s brow drop an eighth-inch but kept her own face blank.

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Among Annette’s favorite sale strategies was *lose the battle to win the war*, and Annette was impressively capable of knowing when to lose battles. Judge Diego was sharp but she was sharper.

Going straight to her Detroit office, she took aside one of her staff—the one who looked a little like Annette—and explained the situation, finishing up by instructing her where to report on Monday as a crossing guard. The compensation Annette offered was generous enough to encourage her stand-in to brave the January weather and to perpetrate a petty deception.

Annette’s latest fib.

For Annette, that was that. Believing it would work, she powered through her weekend workload and thought no more about the issue—until she got that Monday morning call.

“Annette? It’s me. My God, they were going to fingerprint me! What could I do? What am I—”

Annette exploded. “You *idiot!* School principals aren’t Gestapo! They don’t have juris—Wait a minute. You didn’t tell them that you—”

“Of course I did! What else could I do?”

Annette listened for a moment longer but her rage was boiling, so she punched her iPhone’s disconnect icon. She had a perfect memory of Judge Diego’s brow lowering an eighth-inch but only now knew his cunning. No, not cunning. She wouldn’t accept he had outfoxed her. His trump was his experience, not his cunning.

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Her idiot stand-in had relayed that Annette must forfeit her license or be at Martin Luther King Elementary immediately, so Annette pulled into King’s parking lot at 10:15. She was leery of the neighborhood. She had passed houses that had been boarded shut and she’d seen dozens of men “hanging out,” even in the frigid weather. She kept her can of mace in hand while walking into the school, just in case. Not knowing how long this senseless waste of time would take, she further armed herself with her iPhone and tablet; then marched brusquely through worn doors, then down the short, sparsely furnished hallway to a glass-enclosed counter. “Excuse me, I’m Annette Barrs and I’m looking for—”

“Of course you’re Miss Barrs.”

Startled, Annette spun around.

A bold, blustery woman, eyes afire and fists on hips, at least fifty pounds meaner than Annette, was staring holes through her. “Who else could you be?”

Annette was too angry and frustrated to be intimidated: “Let me guess. You’re the Marine Corps.” Annette’s assistant had told her to seek Mrs. Markane, and the platoon now confronting her could be no other.

“Miss Barrs, follow me.” Mrs. Markane turned awkwardly. A heavy limp indicated that one leg was inches shorter than the other. For a sliced moment Annette was apologetic.

As Mrs. Markane walked off she spoke so softly that Annette had to strain to hear: “Responsibility. One of my favorite words. Right up there with *concern*.”

Once in her cramped office, she introduced herself. “I am crew chief for this district’s crossing guards. I am your boss. For the next one-hundred-twenty days you are in my world, Miss Barrs. You was a real hotshot before you got here but, five days a week, twice a day, your hotshot stuff is out. From now on you—”

“Oh, break off. I’m not a prisoner and you’re not a warden. This is community service, not hard time at Alcatraz.”

Mrs. Markane struggled behind the desk and sat down. Opened a drawer. “True. This isn’t Alcatraz. But before this is over you’ll wish it was. Now, up on that high horse of yours you might not have noticed, but when you sent Miss Parker in your place, you committed a crime.” From the drawer, she extracted an old camera. Annette clenched her jaws, cursing inwardly at her own foolishness. “I don’t know which law you broke, but I bet Judge Diego does. And since I have a snapshot of Miss Parker standing right where you’re standing and a photocopy of her license, I’ll bet I can get some jail time for you.” She raised the camera and snapped Annette’s picture. “You willing to bet?”

Annette’s hopes of talking her way out of this vanished, as did her considerations of an appeal.

The chill in Mrs. Markane’s voice let Annette know she’d been beaten. “So here it is. For the next hundred-twenty days you are mine. Do what you’re told when you’re told for as long as you’re told. One more screw-up and I’ll report to Judge Diego and wash my hands. Understood?”

Annette stared.

Mrs. Markane remained unruffled. “So much as talk back at me and you’re gone; but you do your job right,” She struggled to her feet. “—and you won’t have problems. That’s my promise. So. Now you say yes or get back to court.” She crossed her arms and glared.

What most angered Annette was that she’d built her own trap. She could ignore the threat of jail—any good lawyer could slice that—but without her car she quickly calculated a loss of thirty to forty percent of her income and most of the momentum she’d been building for years. She could not afford to lose her license. “Yes.”

Mrs. Markane nodded sharply. “Good. Then let’s do it.” She rummaged through her shelves and pulled out a bright white-on-orange vest and a handbook. “You know what you’re to do?”

Annette flashed through several harsh responses but controlled herself. "I'm to ensure the safety of children crossing the road at King Elementary." Flat. Emotionless.

Mrs. Markane had been paging through the handbook but looked up. "What'd you say?"

Annette didn't even look at her. "I said I'm to usher children back and forth across the street. Safely."

Mrs. Markane stepped into her line of sight. "That's what I thought you said." She was nodding again. "Children, huh? Not kids? Sounds like something you *respect*." She pronounced *respect* to sound like *despise*. "Children. Like something you keep at a distance." She came around the desk and got into Annette's face. "You get this and you get this good, Miss Barrs. That safety part? That keeping them safe? You be sure you got that part, you hear? You be sure you got that part good. Hate me or not, you don't take your hate out to the crossing, not out around my kids; you got that? You got that Miss Barrs?"

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Anger, humiliation, frustration and a dozen other negative emotions dampened Annette's day, but she prided herself on always honoring her contracts, no matter the consequences, and she would see this through. She didn't consider her attempt to get out of the crossing guard assignment as a broken contract—contracts require that both parties agree, and she had not agreed with the court. No foul.

Annette returned promptly at 2:15 to tolerate her first shift. Her sales manager was displeased to hear that his sales leader would be out of circuit for two sixty-minute segments each day for four months and would be managing the Canadian end of things over Skype. When she admitted that she'd been caught speeding through a school zone, although he said nothing, Annette's paranoia told her that he considered her penalty too lenient.

When Annette turned into the school, Mrs. Markane was in the parking lot, standing beside a massive old Buick Electra, arms crossed. She looked at her watch and nodded. For the next week or so Annette's "boss" was there mainly to, as she had put it, *encourage* Annette.

While they walked to the road, Mrs. Markane drilled Annette on the contents of the handbook. "Well," she concluded, "—you've read the guide, that's certain. All you do now is behave like what you was reading."

The bell rang. Classes ended. While Annette waited for the rush, she noticed that Mrs. Markane was holding a pocket dictionary.

Mrs. Markane noticed Annette noticing. "This? I carry it so I can learn more. You know, about words. I'm always around kids and I want to talk good so they have a good example." She sounded less officious, a little prideful. Friendly. "I believe we should all talk the best English we can."

Annette smiled unkindly but Mrs. Markane appeared to not notice.

“So I look up words that I hear or words in books, and I memorize them. Did you know the big dictionaries have histories of all the words right in them and that—” Mrs. Markane was getting excited. “—that you can learn where a word comes from and who used it first and how it—”

“Yes. I do know that.” Mrs. Markane’s consideration of herself as a worthy example of language conventions annoyed her. “Etymologies are quite useful.” She might be stuck working with the old bag, but she would not encourage her fantasies. And as for Mrs. Markane belatedly trying to be nice, Annette could never like someone who had so little respect for her.

Mrs. Markane looked hurt. “Yeah, I suppose you do.”

Behind Mrs. Markane, Annette could see children pouring from the school. In the seconds before they arrived, Mrs. Markane took out a small notebook. Annette watched her misspell *etymologies* but did not correct her.

Still, begrudgingly, Annette was impressed.

As the first wave of children flooded the sidewalk, Mrs. Markane took full control, guiding her kids and commanding traffic. Which, Annette noticed, was traveling at about the speed limit. Everything was moving smoothly, was perfectly in order, so Annette was surprised that Mrs. Markane was exaggerating her every motion, holding the stop sign as far out from her shoulder as possible, standing precisely in the middle of the road with her feet spread, forming a wall that cars could not pass. Teaching by example. Again, against her logic, Annette’s respect again stirred. Stifled it.

After the last group of students crossed, Mrs. Markane waved toward the school entrance. “Now, kids from King run kindergarten through third grade, and they’re your normal high-performance race cars, so you keep them in first gear. But there’s one special girl you handle different.” An elderly woman exited the school hand-in-hand with a young girl who Annette guessed to be about six years old. She wasn’t especially cute and seemed clumsy, almost as though she’d had too little practice using her body, but what most fully hit Annette was an overwhelming aura of timidity. She was gripping the woman’s hand, gawking at the world around her.

As the girl and her protector approached the crossing, the girl kept jamming two fingers into her mouth, then jerking them out, almost as though she was fighting to obey ancient parental demands, only to again capitulate to inner fears and the comfort of sucking her fingers.

“This one is Cassie.” Mrs. Markane said. “She’s a good girl, a good student—B’s and C’s—but she isn’t... Well, that’s just it. Nobody knows. Something happened sometime back—maybe as a baby?—and now she’s full terrified of traffic.” Mrs. Markane bit her lip. “Nobody knows.”

As Cassie arrived, Mrs. Markane bent down as best she could to receive her. “Hi, little darlin.” Cassie was definitely frightened, and Mrs. Markane spoke gently. “Now, we’ll wait for traffic to clear and we’ll cross the road, okay Cassie? And while we wait, this nice woman is Miss Barrs, your new friend. She’ll be helping us cross the road for a while. Is that okay with you?”



Cassie made no response.

They waited until the road was clear for a block in each direction. Then, with as much ceremony as Mrs. Markane could muster, she guided them across the road to just beyond the sidewalk. Mrs. Markane again bent down to Cassie. "Okay darlin, you get you home now, and we'll see you in the morning, okay?" Visually relieved, Cassie nodded and slowly started up the street, paralleling the sidewalk but staying well inside of it.

They watched her go.

Annette remained quiet only until she was certain Cassie was out of earshot. "Mrs. Markane, this is crazy. That girl needs help, and you subject her to a total stranger—me—for four months? As much as she needs therapy, she needs consistency. What good can it do to thrust a stranger at her where she's weakest? Crossing streets? And what does she do about the next intersection? How can she—"

"She lives on this block. Turn right, second from the end. She crosses only here. And therapy? Sure, but paychecks around here barely cover rent. Who pays for therapy? As for thrusting strangers at her, she's six. When do we prepare her for the big world? Or are you just trying to squirm out of your obligations? Again."

Annette took the punch.

Mrs. Markane was settling scores for the *etymology* insult and held Annette's eye. "No, the little we can do, we do. And part of that is keeping her crossing this street, encouraging her every day to get past her fear. Is that the right thing to do? I don't know. But we're trying to help, trying to let her know her safety don't depend on a crossing guard. Until she gets that from herself we'll do what we do because we don't know anything else. Now, *you* decide if you're part of her solution. And what I've seen? You ain't got it in you. But you become part of her problem? God's my witness, I'll make your life miserable. You listening, Miss Barrs?"

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Annette's next morning started with a curse for Mrs. Markane even before she was out of bed. She considered herself a good person, charitable and caring, just exceptionally busy. Where others might float through time, she used every millisecond; yet she still could not achieve all her goals. She knew that the difference between her and most people was a problem of perception, but saw it as a problem for the floaters. Not her. Granted, her more-correct vision created its own problems—speeding tickets, for instance—and, indirectly, her crossing guard deception stemmed from the pressures of time. But at heart she was a good person. Even good people make mistakes.

She arrived at the crossing and again cursed Mrs. Markane. She had been up until two a.m. doing work she would have normally finished at the office by nine and she was cranky. Mrs. Markane's presence did not help. Not that Annette saw her, but the Buick was in the parking lot, so Annette knew she was being watched.

She arrived on time to the minute yet was hardly out of her car before she saw Cassie. Ten feet inside the sidewalk. Stiff. Ready again to face fear. Annette shivered with sadness and admiration. She glanced around for Mrs. Markane. There were no

adults in sight. "Good morning, Cassie." Annette tried to sound chipper. Upbeat. Because this moment mattered.

Cassie said nothing; sucked her fingers. She automatically reached for Annette's hand, staring wide-eyed at the road and, without conscious thought, Annette committed to keeping her safe. She could feel Cassie shaking but not the tiny chip of ice in her heart melting. She wondered why Cassie's parents didn't drive her to school or at least walk her the short distance themselves. She wondered where they were, wondered if they were part of Mrs. Markane's "solution."

Annette remembered how Mrs. Markane had handled this. "Okay Cassie, we'll just wait for the road to clear before we cross over." They stood, watching a near-steady stream of traffic. Annette maintained small talk without responses until traffic was sufficiently distant. "This looks good. Ready?" She coaxed her forward. There were no drivers to signal but, for Cassie, she raised the sign high and crossed at Cassie's pace. Once at school-side, without a word, Cassie continued on toward school. Annette caught sight of Mrs. Markane coming out, but other children were nearing, so Annette re-crossed the street. Fulfilled her obligation.

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Her third day. One-hundred-seventeen to go. Eternity. Annette had managed only two hours sleep and was edgy. She wondered if she might lose her job, wondered if she should get a lawyer to fight this nonsense. She didn't have a strong case but expensive lawyers performed miracles. Not, however, miracles that could offset Judge Diego's discovering that she'd forced her minion to show up in her place on her first day.

A light snow was dusting Detroit, but driver visibility was excellent. As tired as she was, she arrived five minutes early just in case Cassie arrived early. The Buick was there, but once again Annette couldn't spot Mrs. Markane in any of the windows.

Moments later Cassie rounded the corner and Annette noticed that her dress, hanging below her tattered coat, was the same one she'd worn on Tuesday. *And on Monday?* Annette looked down at her own hand-tailored clothing and tried to reconcile realities.

"Hi, Cassie. Bright and early, huh?" She hoped her voice expressed compassion, tired as she was, and contrasted her current mindfulness with the mindfulness she carried into important meetings. The parallel was discomfiting but she didn't know why. "The road is about empty; how about we make a break for it?"

No response.

Annette wanted to make contact. She remembered how as a child she had been more involved in life when challenged, and that gave her an idea. "Tell you what. How about, when you feel like it, *you* lead us across? Would you like that?"

No response.

They stood there, statues, each waiting for the other to act, until Annette was sure that Cassie would stand there forever. In the distance she could see other children coming. "Tell you what, maybe tomorrow you can lead us across, okay? But today I'll do it. Ready?"

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Thursday, no different. Annette repeated the offer to Cassie. Silent Cassie. Unresponsive Cassie. Annette had again gotten little sleep but became fully awake at the crossing.

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By Friday morning Mrs. Markane's plan for Annette was obvious. She knew that Annette would be prompt so she waited each day until Cassie crossed before she came out. The underlying trust of this act did not fit with Annette's impression of Mrs. Markane, but Annette's sales experience had taught her to overlook exceptions in order to focus on general patterns, the general pattern here being that Mrs. Markane was an overly opinionated jerk who didn't respect her. For Annette, disrespect was unforgivable, exceptions or no.

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Although the handbook required four hours of training, Mrs. Markane stayed with Annette for a full fourteen hours—seven school days—morning and afternoon, before leaving her on her own. After that, Mrs. Markane mostly watched from a window, from inside the warm building, but Annette always knew she was there, even when she wasn't. Not long after the required four hours of training/oversight ended, Annette began wondering how far Mrs. Markane could push her before she punched the old bag. In her imagination she'd already punched her enough times that she'd lost count.

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Over the first few weeks without Mrs. Markane—the old bag's absence established by the absence of her Buick in the parking lot—she and Cassie made no progress, while Annette's relationship with the other children quickly deteriorated. The orderly, well-mannered children she had seen with Mrs. Markane transformed into mini-monsters. Shouts, horseplay and shoving were all becoming part of the routine. Annette was daily yelling more, was yelling louder, was threatening increasingly dire consequences, consequences she had no way of enforcing. The more strict she became, the more aggressive became the runts' rebellions. She started dreading a reappearance of Mrs. Markane—then, when Mrs. Markane did *not* appear—started wishing that she would.

She was losing control at work as well, was missing deadlines at an increasing rate, and management was concerned. Then, without consulting her, they redirected a new project that was perfect for her to another employee. She was so humiliated that she stopped looking her own secretary in the eye.

Her normal sixty-five-hour workweek jumped to eighty hours, and still she was falling behind. Sleep was nearly unachievable. She thought about updating her resume but never had time.

At the crossing, however, she was surprised how quickly she was getting to know the community around her. The men she had been frightened by early on proved themselves respectful and distant and, when one of them said more than "hello" he restricted his remarks to complimenting her car. She knew many of them by sight and

wondered what kind of lives they were leading that could keep them on the street even when the thermometer dipped, as it often did in the morning, below thirty degrees. She began to recognize many local drivers, most of them cautious and attentive, and Annette daily found it tougher to justify her own speeding, at least in residential areas.

Changes, though tiny, were in the works.

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By late February some changes solidified. Annette settled into a routine, and most of the monster-mites relaxed their rebellion (she assumed a behind-the-scenes maneuver by Mrs. Markane), but she still had to struggle to control them. The degree of her effort remained the degree of her defeat.

During those first weeks there were a few pluses. Annette astounded management by landing a major account in a single week, an unheard-of feat, but Annette figured it was a fluke. She had put little effort into selling the account and, in view of two accounts she'd lost, chalked her success to blind luck. Major account or not, her paranoia assured her that management silently agreed with her negative self-assessment. They were monitoring her closely.

From Annette's perspective, life was not going well.

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Until March fourth.

Until that day, winter had been gentle, an oddity in sometimes glacial Detroit, but a massive winter storm was pushing a cold-front ahead of it, and ahead of the cold front was just a bit of rain, icing the streets. Traffic's pace decreased while fender benders increased, stretching taut driver anxieties. Salt trucks were intent on cracking every windshield while peppering passing cars with thimble-sized salt pellets, yet doing little to improve conditions. Conditions, unfortunately, remained just shy of the threshold at which public schools would close.

One of the storm's effects was to slow ninety-five percent of traffic while accelerating the other five percent. Annette had always been a proud five-percenter but, standing at the crossing and watching drivers speed up when they should slow down, she saw the danger from the pedestrian's perspective. The safety margin built into traffic statutes was shaved razor thin and, for their varied reasons, some drivers were vaulting the razor.

*Gotta get to work on time.*

*The weather's not that bad.*

*Too slow is as dangerous as is too fast.*

So that she could sprinkle salt on the crosswalk, Annette arrived twenty minutes early.

As was customary, Cassie arrived first, just as Annette finished shoveling gaps in the snow that the plows had piled on the curbs. The two of them exchanged nods (that,

too, had become customary) and Annette removed a glove to hold Cassie's hand. Over the weeks Cassie's grip shook less, and for Annette that was immutably important.

There was a major gap in the traffic just then but neither moved. Annette supposed that Cassie remained mindful of her invitation to lead them across, but the truth was simpler. They preferred to hold hands for just a moment to better start the day.

The change in weather changed other people's habits as well. A mother and her two children had taken an early morning walk to view the iced trees and bushes surrounding the playground, and surprised Annette by appearing at school-side to cross back home before school.

The road was still clear, but a long line of cars was approaching, so Annette decided to bring the family across immediately, and quickly.

"Cassie? Tell you what. You stay here while I help them cross, then you and I will cross next, okay?" Cassie looked up at her—for the first time ever—and nodded. Annette flushed. "Good, sweetheart. Back in a flash."

Releasing Cassie, she raised her sign and started into the street. As her sign went up, a blue and white Camaro accelerated. The line of traffic had gotten closer, but it was still safely distant. The Camaro's action, to ignore her stop sign and power through the crossing, was unexpected.

As was Annette's reaction. She glanced at Cassie. Saw Cassie backing further away from the road.

Without thought, she raised the sign higher and walked faster. The Camaro's speed increased; so did Annette's. Feeling the tension build, she stepped in front of the car and shoved the sign forward, feet spread wide, heart pounding. Watched the Camaro break into a slide toward her. Saw the driver's face, a young woman, saw her eyes, blank, saw the car nearly stop just short of hitting her, saw it swerve into the oncoming lane and accelerate. Still without thinking, Annette raised her stop sign and swung it as hard as she could, fully focused on cracking the back window.

The Camaro, window uncracked, drove away.

Annette memorized the license number and the car's description for the police, but first she had a family to cross. The other drivers were stopped. She extended the stop sign and signaled the family to cross. As they approached her, the mother handed her a slip of paper. "I'm Mrs. Pace, and a witness. Are you okay?" Annette assured her that she was but wasn't sure. Was surprised at how strongly her heart was beating. She accompanied the family the rest of the way across the road, then signaled the drivers to pass.

Two teachers were standing in the parking lot, were watching. Pointing.

At the sidewalk, Annette again assured Mrs. Pace that she was fine before turning her attention to Cassie. She was surprised that Cassie's hand was already in her own. Shaking. But this time the shaking wasn't Cassie's.

Cassie was looking up at her, wide eyes seeking clues. “Maybe this time?” these were Cassie's first words to Annette, ever, but sounded far off. Her voice sounded like metal would taste. “Maybe I should lead?”

At the next gap in traffic, Cassie led Annette across the road.

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That evening, while watching the news, Annette wondered if she had been in shock. She couldn't remember much from after Cassie had led her across, could only vaguely recall assuring concerned teachers that she was fine and would finish her shifts.

She went online and confirmed what she knew. She had been in shock that morning, while not knowing she was in shock. “I took children across the road, in dangerous conditions... So why don't I remember doing that.” She had fooled others—Mrs. Pace, the teachers—into believing she was okay, had fooled herself; and that frightened her.

She thought back to times when she'd awakened from dreams in which she accepted bizarre impossibilities without realizing she had been asleep. Lately, she'd been having slow-motion nightmares in which she was driving toward the crossing in an ages-old, broken down car, terrified because she was late, terrified because Cassie could not cross, because Cassie was afraid and crying.

Could people in a coma know they were in a coma? Was that possible?

When she was dreaming, why couldn't Annette tell that she was dreaming?

When she'd stepped in front of the Camaro, she'd broken several crossing-guard rules. How asleep had she been right then? And why hadn't she known she was in shock? If, in these instances, she was unable to know that she was *not* fully conscious, how could she ever know? Even right that minute, thinking back to the morning, how could she know?

She tried to stop the tears, tried to dismiss the anger beneath the tears. Was angry because she was angry without knowing why. Saw herself standing on a cliff, wanting to jump.

All day she had been flashing on Cassie asking, “Maybe I should lead?” Keeping Annette safe. She began to realize just who Cassie was, how fragile yet strong.

Cassie had known. No adults had known, least of all Annette, but Cassie had known that Annette had shut down. *Takes one to know one*. She wondered what had happened in Cassie's life and how long ago, how long Cassie had been fighting the sleep. Fighting alone.

Sitting in an overstuffed chair, staring out the window into the frigid night, into blowing snow, Annette questioned herself: *How asleep am I?* There was nobody there to answer except for her. She thought of business dinners, of sales meetings, of parties, of the old days back in college. Compared to all her memories she had never been more awake than while at the crossing, yet she had been in shock there, had blacked out, and had not known it.

Tears.

*When did I begin disconnecting?*

*How can I reconnect?*

She hated the woman in the Camaro, hated that the bitch would risk Human lives just to get to work two minutes faster. Annette wanted to choke her, to beat her face with her fists, to scream at her until she understood how dangerous her choices were for pedestrians.

She saw images of Cassie at the crossing. Couldn't stop seeing the Camaro sliding toward Cassie. And always the woman driving it—

—was Annette.

Midnight slipped past. Nothing slowed down.

---

For four days the storm ignored forecasts that it would sweep back through, until Tuesday. Detroit woke to a four-inch blanket of new snow which, owing to the six-inch base and twenty-mile-an-hour winds, guaranteed all area schools closed. Children were overjoyed.

Annette was less joyful. She had to meet with several clients and persuade them to make a string of acquisitions as a group so to increase their clout and lower costs, not to mention roping them into Annette's corral. Today was one of the most important days of the year and Annette would not let a few snowflakes keep her home.

Other than allowing extra drive time, she didn't change her morning. She arrived at the crossing five minutes early and, as a formality, cursed Mrs. Markane. She could probably justify playing hooky herself, but she had pledged to the judge that she would be at King five days a week, so there she was.

She spread her salt, then tried to sit in her car for a while, but wet snow was clinging to her windows. Again cursing Mrs. Markane, she crawled out into the cold. Squinted into the wind. No children. Searched downwind. No movement at all. She checked her watch. Annette had dressed for the bitter weather, but she again cursed Mrs. Markane, just because cursing her felt good.

If no kids came within ten minutes she would leave, pledge or no pledge.

Ten minutes passed.

After twenty minutes and seventy-four cars—she kept track—Annette decided she would leave by eight. Nobody could say she shirked her obligation if she stayed until eight.

At 8:02 she was stamping her feet to warm them—*Just a few more minutes*—was squinting against the wind, when a large car started flicking the high-beams. A Buick.

Mrs. Markane slowed and pulled off the road, parking right next to Annette. Lowered her window and spoke in a nearly sing-song voice. "Gracious! Look at you! What are you doing here?"

Annette tensed, ready for confrontation, but enjoyed the wisp of warmth on her chilled cheek as it escaped through the Buick's window.

Mrs. Markane's voice made her words sound genuinely concerned, but Annette didn't buy the concern. "Didn't you hear? There's no school today. Don't you listen to radio?"

"No school?" Annette looked up and down the road. She was uncomfortable discussing this with Mrs. Markane, caught in so obvious a lie. "I was wondering about that on the way here, but my radio's broke." She looked downwind. "So I didn't know. I suppose most children would know it's a snow day?"

Mrs. Markane whistled through her teeth. "Miss Barrs, it's tough believing you was in sales."

Annette was surprised by the direction of the attack but mounted a cautionary offensive. "Really. You're an expert in assessing sales ability?"

Mrs. Markane did not look away. "I don't know if you can tell it, but I mean this as a compliment: you're a lousy liar." Annette looked into the wind until she was sure nobody was coming. She knew Mrs. Markane's twisted pretzel of a brain believed that her assessment was a compliment, so she withheld the scathing retort that came to mind. She could crush this pretzel in any thirty seconds of any day but withheld her attack.

Mrs. Markane continued. "Your radio's broke? In the same BMW, the same *new* BMW, with the broken speedometer? What, you think nobody's listening?"

Annette stepped away from the car. "Enjoy your day off." Her anger rising, she nearly vented it, but instead walked away. Tried to ignore the criticisms. She was more than halfway to keeping her driver's license and didn't intend to lose it for a moment's pleasure.

Behind her, she heard the car door open. Mrs. Markane was struggling out of her car and walking toward her.

Annette sighed. Prepared for battle. *Fine, bitch*. She geared up for the showdown, even as she grumbled that it was too cold for this nonsense.

Mrs. Markane wrapped her scarf tighter as she closed to within a foot of her, and Annette saw—

Mrs. Markane's fear.

Which surprised her.

The older woman's eyes appeared to be pleading with her. "I'm standing here in the cold because I know you won't get in my car, and I hope I know why. But first." She seemed to search for the right words. "There's all this cause and effect stuff that they teach in science class but, you know, nobody really learns it in a classroom." Mrs. Markane looked like she had jumped into deep water not knowing how to swim. Her fear ebbed and flowed. "Each of us gets stuck figuring it out on our own, out here, outside school. Like one day you see something that don't make sense, so maybe you start poking at it, start looking underneath it, and you finally figure out that it's an effect and you just need to—"

Annette looked back over her shoulder to see if any children were coming from behind her, and Mrs. Markane stopped speaking. Waited for Annette. "Tell you what,



Miss Barrs, you keep an eye up that way and I'll watch your back. When you start looking up there I'll do my part. Deal?"

"You have a warm car waiting for—"

"Deal?"

"No one's forcing you to—"

"Is it a deal!"

Exasperated, Annette nodded.

"Where was I? Oh, cause and effect. So. Once you figure out that what you're seeing is the *effect*, you just naturally set to wondering about a cause. Only, when you get that cause, it don't make sense, so you start figuring it's also an effect—from something else?—and you start fishing for what caused that and what was the cause before it, then for the cause of that one and, pretty soon, you're wondering for the one that started them all. Know what I mean?"

Annette was reaching for the meaning but not sure there was a meaning to reach for. She attacked. "Sounds to me like the confused self-justification of a busybody." Smug. She glanced up the road—and looked back in time to see Mrs. Markane searching the road behind her. Her throat tightened.

Mrs. Markane shook her head. "Confused? No, it's—"

Annette saw that her remark had drawn blood.

"Yes." Peace offering: "It's confused. But it's also... uniting." Mrs. Markane leaned very close to her and Annette fought the urge to back off. "*Uniting*. That's one of my favorite words. Right up there with *community*. But maybe an example can press it. For instance. Why would a woman who's out here in the cold not get in my warm car? Chase that one back and the big clue is that she's already not in her own car."

Annette and Mrs. Markane both glanced up the sides of the road, but Annette was listening now, was interested, though she couldn't quite breathe enough.

"Clue two. Even though it's a no-school day, she keeps looking for her kids to come. So. She's not getting in *my* car, and not sitting in *her* car because she already tried sitting in her car, maybe some thirty minutes back, and learned that she couldn't see good both the ways at once." Mrs. Markane looked at Annette's car. "I bet I could see as good from that car as from any car built, but, for this woman..." She was shaking her head. She looked down the road, then back at Annette. "For this particular woman, no car's good enough." She nodded; smiled. "See how that works?"

Annette wiggled deeper into her coat, trying to escape the cold. "How what works?"

"The cause and effect thing. See, there's always a cause. A reason. And usually one cause-and-effect leads to another cause-and-effect when you look. Like a woman who won't get in a warm car because she can't watch for her kids? That cause is an effect. And what caused that one? Well, her radio's broke, so she didn't know no kids was coming."

Mrs. Markane smiled. "Or maybe she thinks that *somebody else's* radio is broke, maybe somebody who'll send their child to King Elementary, and that child will have to cross this road with drivers not seeing good. Maybe? So she stands here, freezing her buns, waiting for kids what will never come. You think?"

Annette was listening carefully. Somehow this woman she had once referred to as the Marine Corps was sounding more like the Peace Corps. Somehow the cold was thawing both women, and Annette couldn't tell what would happen next. She tried to keep the fear out of her own eyes, to keep the tension from cramping her lungs, but she couldn't, wouldn't, look away.

Mrs. Markane looked scared too. And so close. Too close, too in her face.

"Annette, I know what happened the other day."

Spinal glaciers. Annette pulled her coat tighter. Saw the Camaro. Tried to catch her breath. She couldn't think about that day and look at Mrs. Markane. Looked away, then back. Mrs. Markane's voice was cracking. "That's how I knew you would be here." Lips trembling. "But you gotta keep moving. Sure, there's danger. Everyday. But you can't be everywhere and all the time, so you gotta be where you are, just gotta do what you can."

"That's wha—" Annette hadn't known her own voice would crack. "That's what I'm doing. I'm being here." Annette had more to say, but she was afraid her voice would betray her, would give Mrs. Markane more than Annette could lose. *Lose?*

*What can I lose?*

Mrs. Markane nodded. Studied her. "Then I'm kind of right?"

Annette could sense Mrs. Markane's desperation as the older woman struggled, out there beyond Annette's own desperation, almost as though Mrs. Markane was pleading with her, but Annette had no idea why. "Yeah." She didn't like being this close, this weak. Forced herself to answer. "Yeah, kind of right." Wanted to go somewhere where she might be safe—but flicked a switch to *on*. Just one switch. Just one switch.

"Oh, good." Mrs. Markane looked relieved. "Good, because that was the best one."

Annette was looking into her eyes, right into her pupils. She never liked looking too closely at someone's eyes because all she could see there was a closed door, was the fear behind the closed door. But this time, while she looked, doors opened. As Mrs. Markane spoke, doors opened, and Annette felt... invited in. She spoke to stop the silence, to stop the emotions before she could feel them too completely; spoke because she was unsure whether she could accept the invitation. "The best one of what?"

Mrs. Markane didn't blink. "Well, if you wasn't standing in the cold for the kids, then you was standing in the cold because you didn't want in my car. *My car*. Like something personal? And knowing about last week, that meant you didn't much trust me, so I—"

Annette's own face quickly closed, and Mrs. Markane instantly knew that trust was the real issue. In the fleeting hesitation between words Annette watched Mrs. Markane's eyes become closed doors. "...so I was glad—" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "—you was watching for your kids."

Mid-sentence, vibrant truths became deadening lies.

Annette wanted to say that Mrs. Markane was wrong, that concern for her kids outweighed her charge of distrust, but that lie would have been bloated and burdensome. *What do you expect!* She did not trust Mrs. Markane enough to sit in a car with her, did not trust her enough to let the resulting conversation flow. Conversations in free-flow always moved toward what's most important, and getting that personal was dangerous. Closed doors were defensible doors. Open them and who knows what might happen? Who might get in? Mrs. Markane's eyes kept cooling, kept moving further away in that face of stone; until Annette saw herself.

*What must Mrs. Markane see? What is my face doing? Didn't I shut down first?*

*Was I ever open?*

Where does Mrs. Markane get so much strength as to even try?

Annette remembered some of the vicious subliminal messages she'd used to batter Mrs. Markane.

*You're a confused busybody.*

*I don't trust you.*

*I don't like you.*

*I'm better than you.*

She hadn't let herself see it before, the tremendous weight she put on Mrs. Markane.

Her eyes misted. Breathing was painful. She needed more air. Spoke without thinking. "It's just, I mean, it isn't you. It's just, it's—I'm afraid."

Saw Mrs. Markane's eyes widen.

*My God! She didn't know!*

Admitting her own fear within the safety of Mrs. Markane's fear, sparked the change.

Because it couldn't be anywhere else, she felt it in her eyes. An opening of her own doors. A lowering of her shields. She could protect her fear, but only if she attacked fast. Didn't attack. Her survival instinct was washing away, abandoning her, and she was afraid. She tried to say more, tried to think of what to say. Tried to put words to the work stress, the successful pretty woman stress, the everyday living stress. She needed to explain about the woman in the Camaro, about the nightmare of not being alive, about the terror in Cassie, about the many, many Cassies in the world, about world hatred, about war, about all of it; needed to let out all of it, but she couldn't get to the words, couldn't say any of it—as she lowered her shields. Unarmed on a battlefield, yet lowered her shields. Gasp for breath, lungs raw. Looked deep into Mrs. Markane's open invitations, struggling with her own shields, grimacing with fear and intent. Tried to say something, tried to say something, tried to say something, but couldn't get the words, needed desperately to say something, but couldn't get the words, couldn't get the words; brought her hands up to cover her eyes and her fear, but thought she saw

movement in Mrs. Markane—and responded. Wrapped her arms around her. Hugged her. Enveloped her as Mrs. Markane hugged back. Gaspes of air. Filled her lungs and held on tight. Mrs. Markane's ragged breathing in her ear, sobs coming from someone. *Who?* Hugged tighter. Thrust herself into the grip of change and held tight. Did the unthinkable and hugged tighter. Gaspes tears and hugged tighter. Charged past her inhibitions—

And hugged tighter still.

Few cars were out. The wind sometimes howled, sometimes stilled. Snowfall increased; decreased. Above the clouds, clear blue sky.

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At some point in April—Annette wasn't sure exactly when, but not long after willows started budding—Annette noticed the willows budding. A small moment's pleasure, yet Annette could not recall the last year when she had known that willows were budding. An image of Cassie flashed before her eyes, perking her smile. She wondered if Cassie had noticed. She smiled for an entire quarter-second before her brow furled. Of course Cassie noticed. The question was, how could *she*, a grown woman, not notice one of the main moments of spring? When was the last time she had known? Ridiculous! Nobody should be that blinded by their work.

She reached for her voice recorder, intending to record a memo to *slow down and smell the willows*, but couldn't think of anyone who could share her joke. The realization hit her like a November chill and she shivered. Why should anyone be her friend? She knew so many people and had so many acquaintances, but what had she given to anyone that would have invited them into friendship? She made money for people. For her efforts, people rewarded her with money. She wondered if any exchanges were less fulfilling.

Several kids came running from behind a neighboring duplex and broke Annette's musings. She was surprised that anyone was arriving before Cassie and intended to chide Cassie when she arrived, for being "late." Annette checked her watch. These kids were a little early, and Cassie was only a little late.

She responded to each of the uncoordinated, sing-song calls of "Good morning, Miss Barrs!" before she escorted the kids to school-side.

Still no Cassie.

For no particular reason she started thinking about the Camaro and that event's effect on her life. She didn't know which changes had come first nor did she wholly believe they would last. Her relationship with Mrs. Markane was working its way toward friendship, or at least what she thought friendship might feel like. But even though the two women hardly ever saw each other, every conversation heated into an argument, whether about local politics, global crises, or which channel best predicted weather. Still, Annette looked forward to seeing Mrs. Markane and was pleased to see her car in the lot. When she finished her shift she would visit. She could use Cassie's tardiness as a conversation starter but would quickly get around to her feelings. She was anxious about her "real" job, and needed a talk. Needed human connection.

For the past three to four weeks she had been working drastically fewer hours, well below sixty, and her boss had asked if there was a problem. Annette had pointed out that her community service would soon end and that she could get back to normal; but since telling him that, Annette had decided she would never get back to normal. She was working less and enjoying more. Losing accounts had humbled her and she had been watching her competition close the gap, but she now understood that the major account she had won a few weeks back was not a fluke, was a different way of doing her job. In dealing with that client she'd had zero time to prepare and, having assumed she couldn't win the account, she'd remained relaxed (for the first time ever) while telling them what they needed to know, without pressure, ploys, or tactics.

And they were impressed.

Liked her *style*.

Annette giggled.

She wasn't certain she could reestablish that attitude whenever necessary, but she was trying, and the results weren't bad. She was slowly shifting from being "the best in the business" to being "the best she could be without eating herself alive," and her new course embraced more than the narrow scope of her job.

She giggled again. *The narrow scope of my job.*

Talk about a change.

She delivered another gaggle of kids across the road, calling some by name, high-fiving the younger kids, then watched them skipping toward school.

Even if her new attitude proved fruitful she would soon be earning less money, and that would require adjustments, but the major adjustment would be to relax her goal of retiring at thirty-five. She smiled. If she could do her job in a way she enjoyed, why retire? And if she didn't enjoy her job: she needed to retire today. Get a job that she did enjoy.

Five minutes later, little Thomas Allen, regularly the late-bug, came trudging up the walk, his nose buried in a book.

Still no Cassie.

Annette escorted him across and, as Thomas stepped onto the school-side curb, Annette playfully clapped three times. "Get the lead out, Mr. Allen." He stared up at her, unsure what would happen next. She knelt and shook her finger, pretending to scold him. "The bell is about to—" The bell rang.

They stared at each other as it rang. Thomas guessed that she was playing with him. "Aren't you the mean lady anymore?"

Surprised, Annette stared at him. "I never—" Then recovered. "No, Mr. Allen. Maybe I'm not."

Thomas judged her with a smile. "Good." He spun around and rushed toward school.

Annette was bandages and Mercurochrome. Little hurts were repairing. She felt warm beyond the Sun's influence and thought about willows.

She waited another ten minutes. Cassie had seemed healthy the day before and had not mentioned missing today. They were talking quite a bit lately, and Annette had minor regrets that she would soon see Cassie for the last time. In a way, she regretted that she would soon stop seeing all her kids. They had become important. Her time at the crossing had become an important part of her day. She again checked her watch, again looked for Cassie, then went to Mrs. Markane's office.

Mrs. Markane was on the phone but signaled her to sit. When she hung up, she didn't look at Annette.

Sensing something wrong, Annette kept quiet.

Mrs. Markane glanced at her twice but didn't hold her gaze until she spoke. "That was Cassie's foster mother. I called her to—"

"*Foster* mother? Cassie's in a *foster* home?"

Mrs. Markane's face drained. "She was."

She waited until Annette understood.

Annette's brow lowered and she flashed anger, the sign of a final defense, but she knew even before the corners of her mouth turned down. When she crossed her arms, Mrs. Markane continued. "She'd been there since last summer. She almost made it through the whole year in one school which, when you're six, that's important. She never missed a day, so when her teacher reported her absence I volunteered to call. We like to check on these things, just to show that we ca—" She looked away. "That we care."

Annette could hear the clock ticking, could hear kids in the hall on their way to the library. She recognized some of them by their voices. Picked up Mrs. Markane's coffee cup and wiped a mote of dust from the rim. "Why did... Where will she go?"

Mrs. Markane watched Annette rubbing the cup. "I don't know. Her foster parents had some problems and it sounds like things got rough. Poor woman was crying even before I called, so I know she didn't want to give up Cassie, but some—"

"How do we find her?"

Mrs. Markane looked at Annette. "Find her?" Studied Annette. "Why?"

The old numbing began seeping into Annette, the numbing that promised to protect her from life pains. "I don't know, I—" *No! Not again!* Shutting down was self-betrayal. "I didn't get to, to say goodbye."

Mrs. Markane nearly whispered. "I don't know where you're from, but down here these things happen." She stared at the cup. "So many families busting up, and they're mostly good people; just life gets too much, sometimes, and it's tough to hold your claims. You say you'll raise your family proud and honest, then, slam, you lose your job and, with no car to get another? Well, one day your kids need food, and you got no money to buy it, so... So you get money." Mrs. Markane attempt to make sense of it

wasn't enough. "Only sometimes you get caught. End up in jail. And then your kids got no daddy, and mamma don't know how long she can go it alone."

Annette watched Mrs. Markane struggling to cope. "Is that what happened to Cassie's foster family?"

Mrs. Markane didn't respond right away. "Cassie's family. My family. Does it matter?"

Annette wondered what Mrs. Markane was feeling, wondered if she shared the numbness. "Yes."

Each sat in her own world, trapped in her own thoughts. Each sorted through the ill-fitting pieces of life, wishing she could fix everything. Or even, just now, this one single problem.

Mrs. Markane spoke first. "I once swore I'd make your life miserable if you was part of Cassie's problem, you remember?"

Annette nodded. Didn't look up.

"I was wrong about you. You was part of the solution. Not, maybe, a big part, but you decided which side you're on, and you did what you could."

Slowly, Annette corrected her. "We did for each other."

Mrs. Markane sighed. "I thank you for that."

Annette's eyes began to burn and she wanted to shut them. "I care about her, that's all. I..." She drifted into memories.

"*Caring.*" Mrs. Markane nodded. "One of my favorite words. Right up there with *humanness.*"

They sat, huddled across a small desk, sharing pain and warmth like a hug.

---

Nine days later Annette arrived in traffic court fifteen minutes early and watched the couple dozen attendees file in and choose seats. All sorts of people were present, their common tie being the violation of traffic laws. A man in a three-piece suit sat in the same row as a scrawny younger man in overalls. An elderly overweight woman attempted to contain the curiosity of her grandson as he watched life through the twin lenses of fascination and imagination. Annette couldn't help but smile. Next year the boy would be as old as the kids she regularly helped cross to school-side. She wondered if he would like Cassie.

Behind his grandma, a woman in her late teens bit her nails. Annette figured her mind was on her boyfriend. Envied her. Across the aisle sat a grey-bearded man, looking like Moses, sitting rigidly straight, arms crossed. She wondered where he came from and what he thought of short skirts. Smiled.

Just as the clock touched 8:30, while Annette was distracted by all the other people in the courtroom, an exasperated young father burst in, towing his ten-year-old daughter. He was probably racing the clock but hadn't quite gotten her to school before court convened. Annette wondered where his wife was, then figured she was already at

work. The girl looked embarrassed, as though she could only expect her father to be so dumb as to get a ticket for—what? Speeding? Had his daughter been there? Were her friends there too? Was he dropping them at a slumber party when a cop pulled him over for running a stop sign? To a ten-year-old girl that could be embarrassing.

The bailiff called the room to order as Judge Diego entered, interrupting Annette's rambling reveries. She stood quickly.

Judge Diego looked younger than she remembered, perhaps around fifty, and he wasn't frowning as she'd expected, but nearly looked friendly. She wondered if he had kids; realized he had once been a kid. She imagined him as a bald boy with a too-large tummy, citing Michigan statutes. She grinned. Hoped he had had a best friend.

He sat down, comfortable in a room full of uncomfortable people, and everyone else followed suit. As he ordered his paperwork he surveyed the roomful of rule breakers, his eyes making contact with each person. He seemed to brighten at the sight of the ten-year-old, and Annette imagined that he had a granddaughter. When he looked at Annette she held her breath and tried to appear composed. She thought he recognized her but knew that was unlikely.

She hoped to be called before noon, so was surprised that hers was the first name called. This time, no docket number. She moved to the front of the court swiftly.

"Miss Barrs." Judge Diego reviewed her file. "Do you understand that you are under no further commitment to this court?"

"Yes, your honor."

Judge Diego tapped his pen. "Unusual." He pursed his lips and looked up at her. "As rushed a young lady as I remember you being, I'm surprised you're here." He again pursed his lips, returning to her file. "According to Mrs. Markane's report your service was, to quote her, exemplary."

Mrs. Markane would never know how good that made Annette feel. "Yes sir, I—" She looked down. "It took a while, but I did okay."

"Really."

She looked up.

He was studying her. "Mrs. Markane, a woman not prone to exaggeration, specifically says you were *exemplary* and you say you did *okay*. Bailiff, am I missing something?"

The bailiff threw up his hands in mock shock.

The judge nodded. "Chin up, Miss Barrs, I'm sure exemplary is accurate. Which, to restate myself, relieves you from all obligation to this court."

Annette perked. "Sir, I—your honor, I have a, uh, well there is one thing that, uh..."

"Yes, Miss Barrs?"

"Well, if there's no, uh, I mean it must be difficult to find people to work as crossing guards. I mean, you're probably not paying much over minimum wage and, I mean most people can't afford to—"



“Miss Barrs, I assure you the system can struggle along without you.”

She scowled. “Well of course it will. But, I mean, it's not like you can put just anybody in there. If—”

“I agree. For instance, I wouldn't put anyone in there who, oh, was caught speeding in a school zone.” He smiled. “Would you?”

Annette did not enjoy his humor. “You don't need to poke my weaknesses. What I'm saying is that I recognize the value of what I've been doing and, if the court would hold its honorable tongue for a moment, you might grasp that I'm willing to stay on at King's crossing. Until a suitable replacement is found, I mean.”

Judge Diego glanced at the bailiff. “Thank you, Miss Barrs, I—”

“Ms!” Adamant.

Judge Diego nodded. “Ms. Barrs. A suitable replacement has already been contracted. Anything else?” Curt.

Annette's anger wrapped around her like a lover's arms. He was dismissing her. “No.” She turned away and moved toward the door, fighting back her urge to yell at the fat old bald know-it-all.

“Oh, one further question.”

Annette's stomach tightened. *Stay calm*. Her defenses rose but she didn't know why.

“Ms. Barrs, look at me.” She did. “Without looking down, tell me.” He leaned forward. “What are you wearing?”

Annette automatically looked down. Cursed herself. She was being tested. Again. “A brown plaid suit. Why?” Scowled. He had asked her the same question four months ago and she didn't like the parallel.

Judge Diego pointed at her. “You cheated.” He spread his hands. “I saw you look.” He glanced at the bailiff and they shared a nod. He again leaned forward. “This time, *don't cheat*... How many kids are in the courtroom?”

Annette wondered where he was going with this nonsense, remembering his questions from the first time she had... Gaspd. “Two!” She covered her mouth. Stared at the judge. Saw the edges of his smile. He stood up. Leaned farther. “And how many adults?”

Again she gasped. “I—Wait! I can...” Saw each face behind her, counted each face that she'd seen while sitting among them. “Seventeen!” Stared wide-eyed at the judge while seeing everyone behind her. “No!” Realized her error. “*You* are here. And the *bailiff*! That's ni—” Gaspd. “*And me*... Twenty adults.” Tears limning. “I'm here.”

Judge Diego sucked air, himself inches from tears. “Yes, Ms. Barrs. You are here.” Sat down. She wouldn't say that he was staring, but his eyes were locked into hers. Not staring; just engaged. His words were smiles. “You are here.”

Annette could feel the bridge, could sense that she was feeling it only because she had helped build it and, at least a little, she understood what it meant to be a crossing guard.

Scowled. “Wait, wait, wait. Are you saying that I’m legally *constrained* from working the King crossing?”

Judge Diego’s mirth melted. “I am saying, Ms. Barrs, that the City of Detroit no longer requires your presence at the King crossing. I am saying, Ms. Barrs, that as a judicial representative of the City of Detroit, I set community service, I do not hire nor fire employees. However, if you will accept the responsibility to train your replacement for, say, three or four weeks—at your own expense—I’m sure I can arrange it.”

Annette was not satisfied, but now she had enough to work with. *Lose the battle to win the war*. “Then I have the legal *right* to be there for four weeks?” Careful.

“For three or—” He sighed. “Yes, Ms. Barrs. Four weeks.”

“Then I’ll see you in four weeks. Your honor.” Her eyes were dry enough now to turn around. Every face in the room was wide and open and caring and staring at this stranger, this stubborn, feisty woman who had just waged strange battles with a Dragon of Authority. And, just maybe, had won.

The grandmother, perhaps not knowing why, was misty eyed; the ten-year-old girl, observant but steel-lipped. The man in the three-piece was looking at his watch, lost in his own future. Of them all, Annette decided he, the three-piece man, most needed hugs, although she’d bet three teddy bears that he would deny it.

She walked slowly down the aisle and smiled at everyone, *with* everyone who would. As Judge Diego chuckled, Annette opened the door.

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From Annette’s perspective, life was looking just fine.

Thank you for reading *The Crossing Guard*. If you've enjoyed Annette's story and believe other readers might enjoy it too, please share with your family and friends where to find it: **seedingDandelion.com**.

*A Ghost Refused*, the first book I'm releasing, will be available on Amazon April 1st. If you email me at [fsFoster@seedingDandelion.com](mailto:fsFoster@seedingDandelion.com) I'll send you a free copy in exchange for an Amazon review when I release the book—and add you to my mailing list, if you wish. I will occasionally release more *free* short stories that you might like, so get on my eMail list if you want to read them. I'll seldom eMail you, but I plan to publish ten books over the next year, as well as add other interesting content. For starters, check my blog.

By the way, unlike any other ghost story, *A Ghost Refused* will challenge bits of your worldview. **My job is to tell outrageously entertaining stories while draining a few gallons from “the pond of what everybodyKnows.”**