

## READY THE NEXT TIME

"So that's Lorenzo. Nice-looking boy." Jason Bennett and his wife Amy watched from their car as their daughter entered the Monticello Dance Studio in the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D. C.

Emma had just turned fourteen. She went on "friend dates" with boys her age, with the Bennetts or the boys' parents driving. Recently Emma had started mentioning Lorenzo, but hearing her greet him as she entered the studio was the first time Jason and Amy realized he was black. It would be OK if she wanted to start dating Lorenzo. A guy into modern dance should be responsible. Thin and graceful in his walk, the boy had the look of a dancer. Probably didn't like girls that way anyhow.

The little victory of getting his daughter to class on time made Jason feel good. He was enjoying "Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me" on WAMU as they arrived in Fairfax County. They exited I-95 onto the highway leading to a shopping mall. The project for the morning was to pick out drapes for the living room.

Amy said, "Why don't we stop at CVS to get Emma's allergy medicine?"

"Yeah, there's time. Might as well." The CVS Pharmacy was a block and a half ahead on the right. He slowed down, planning to coast into the turn.

The sound of a speeding car passing him on the left startled him. A black Lexus cut in front of Jason's Prius, forcing him to hit his brakes. He caught a glimpse of the passing driver, a black man in wrap-around sunglasses.

Amy said, "What the hell?" as the Lexus turned into the parking lot. "Did you see that? What was the point of that? He was just going to turn in anyway."

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The adrenalin that came with the initial surge of panic was now making Jason mad rather than scared. "Yeah, what the hell. Son of a bitch." He turned into the parking lot.

"Did you see him? He looked like a thug. What's he even doing here?"

Jason said, "I know. Probably from D.C." There were African-Americans in Northern Virginia, but something about the man in the Lexus made Jason think he was from the city.

Jason joined the Lexus and one or two other cars circling the crowded lot in search of a place to park. The Lexus, now two cars ahead of Jason and Amy, turned into a suddenly vacant space. Jason said, "That son of a bitch. That spot should have been ours." As they passed the black man getting out of his car they both glared at him. Well over six feet, with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and close-cut hair, he wore a subdued green suit and pale yellow shirt open at the neck. He seemed oblivious to their hostile stares.

They circled the lot and lucked in to a space much closer to the store than the one where the black Lexus parked. When they got out of the Prius Jason noticed a tall red-faced man wearing old blue jeans, a black tee shirt, and a baseball cap faded from an indeterminate color to greasy gray. The man was staring at the black man who'd cut them off, now coming toward them on his way to the store.

The man in blue jeans looked back to Jason. "I saw that son of a bitch cut you off. Somebody oughta say something to him."

Jason nodded at the man in jeans, hoping that would encourage him to say something to the black man.

Amy came up beside Jason. "He's right, somebody should say something to him."

The black man came abreast of the man in jeans. Jason thought the man in jeans would say something, but he diverted his gaze and pretended to look at something else

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further down the lot. The man in jeans must have been afraid of the black man. Jason was ashamed that he, too, was afraid.

"Hey, fella, we don't appreciate you driving like that in our neighborhood." Jason surprised himself. Amy's comment made him want to do something to show he wasn't afraid, and he did it.

The black man stopped and stood looking at the couple. "What?"

"He said we don't like your kind of troublemakers coming into our town driving like a maniac." Amy's voice was loud and shrill.

"I don't understand."

From the corner of his eye Jason saw that the man in jeans, standing in the same place, was looking at him and the black man now. That bolstered his courage. "Cut the act. You know what you did, cutting in front of us like that, speeding. You may get away with that in D.C., but not in our town."

"I'm not from D.C., I live here. Look at my license plate." The black man nodded back in the direction of his car.

Jason couldn't think of what to say. He hadn't noticed the tags on the man's car before.

"You know what we mean. You have no business coming here, driving like a maniac." Good old Amy, never at a loss for words. Her voice attracted the attention of an approaching white woman, who slowed her pace.

"I'm sorry if I cut you off. I guess I was in a hurry." The black man smiled, trying to be winning, Jason could see. He started to walk on, but Jason moved quickly to get ahead of

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the man, then stopped in front of him, out of arm's reach. "Sorry doesn't cut it. What if you'd hit me?" It felt good to sound off, to show the guy he wouldn't be pushed around.

"Did I hit you?"

"That's not the point. Who do you think you are?" More people walking to and from the store were slowing as they approached, and some stopped to gape.

"Well, I'm me. What's done is done." The black man dropped the smile, his thin lips forming a straight line across the narrow, dark face. "What do you want me to do?" His arms had been at his side, and now he spread them with his palms outward. As he made that movement his suit jacket flared open, and for just an instant Jason saw the man wore a shoulder holster, with a gun in it.

"He's got a gun! Look!" Jason knew he sounded afraid, and repeated the phrase in what he hoped was a more confident tone. "He's got a gun." A collective gasp rose from the group gathered around them, which made Jason feel bolder, safer with all the witnesses. "What are you going to do, big man? Shoot me?" His exhilaration at challenging the black man began to subside as he struggled to think of an answer to the question of what he wanted the black man to do.

"Jason, be careful."

"I'm not afraid of him. We aren't going to let these thugs come into our neighborhood and threaten us."

"Sir, I'm not threatening you. I'm sorry if I cut you off. I just want to get some cold medicine."

"Go back to where you came from. You don't have any business being here." He and Amy kept talking to the black man, taking turns verbally attacking him, making it clear they

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wouldn't let their town be invaded. The black man's gun weighed on Jason's mind. Their loud, rapid talking might keep the gun at bay.

The black man started to talk once or twice, licking his lips and opening his mouth preparatory to responding, but they kept him subdued as he frowned at them behind those menacing, dark glasses. While they were talking the black man raised his head as if looking beyond Jason. A calm voice behind Jason said, "Hi. What's up?"

Despite the lackadaisical question, the voice commanded attention, causing Jason to look back. Two officers had gotten out of a county police car that had pulled up behind Jason and Amy. The officers approached. Jason noticed the man in the jeans was no longer there.

Amy said, "Officer, thank goodness you're here. This goon came here from D.C."

The officer glanced at her, then at Jason, and finally looked at the black man.

"I'm not sure what the problem is, Officer. I may have cut these folks off in traffic. I apologize if that's the case."

"He's got a gun!" Jason could tell his voice was too high.

"Is that true?"

"Yes sir. I have a permit. And I do live here. I work for the Department of Defense. The permit is in my inside coat pocket. May I retrieve it now and show it to you?"

"All right. Slow."

The black man opened his coat wider, again revealing the gun. He reached into the pocket and withdrew his wallet, slowly like the policeman told him. Taking a card from the wallet he extended it toward the cop, who said, "OK. Walk this way."

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When the black man was within reach the officer took the card from him. After looking at it he said, "May I see your driver's license, please?" After examining the black man's license the policeman said, "May I see your registration and insurance, please?"

"Yes sir. I'm going to walk back to my car and get it out of the glove box." The second officer, his hand resting on his holstered gun, followed the black man back up the lot toward the Lexus.

The first cop said, "Can I see your license, registration, and proof of insurance, sir?"

"What?" The cop's request caught Jason off guard.

"What do you mean?" Amy spoke in her mad voice. "You don't need to see his driver's license. We're not the problem."

The cop looked steadily at Jason.

"Oh, yes. Sorry, Officer." He stepped back to the Prius. Fumbling in the glove box, he got out his registration and insurance card. He handed them to the cop along with his license. The other cop came back, followed by the black man and holding the black man's papers. He took Jason's papers from the first cop and went back to the police car.

The first officer faced the black man. "Now what happened here?"

"Like I said, apparently I cut these folks off as I turned into the parking lot. That's all I'm aware of happening. I'm sorry if I've caused some misunderstanding." His soft southern accent sounded gentle, but Jason could see through his fake humility.

"There was a guy who saw it all, Officer. I don't know where he is now. He was here a minute ago. He said somebody should do something about this guy." Jason wished the man in the jeans hadn't left. He looked a little rough, maybe a redneck, but he would vouch for Jason.

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The officer said, "Do you know these people?" He nodded toward Jason and Amy.

The black man said, "Never saw them in my life."

"OK. Just stand there, please." He stepped closer to Jason. "Now, can you tell me what happened?"

"I was driving toward the CVS, and I slowed down to turn in, and all of a sudden this guy goes speeding past me, and cuts in front of me, and turns in ahead of me."

"Did his car hit your car?"

"No. But it could have."

"Are you physically all right?"

"Yes."

The cop turned to Amy. "Is that how it happened?"

"Yes. Except he was driving so fast I was scared to death. There could have been a terrible wreck."

"I see." The other cop returned and handed the first cop the licenses, registrations, and insurance cards, giving a brief nod. Taking the papers, the first cop looked at them, and handed one set to Jason, saying, "Mr. Bennett," then handed the other set to the black man. "And Mr. Holland." To the onlookers he said, "Folks, we need to keep this driveway clear, so please move on."

As she walked past the officer a stocky, gray-haired white woman in Bermuda shorts and a sun visor said, "He wasn't doing anything, Officer. He was just walking to the store, and that man and woman have been yelling at him." She spoke with a northeastern accent. Jason had never seen her before, and her comment shocked him.

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The woman spoke in a low voice, but she could be heard. A younger woman passing by said, "Yeah, he didn't do anything."

Some of the people moved on quickly wearing blank expressions, as though they wanted to get away without becoming embroiled in the controversy. Others, like the two women, frowned at Jason. He felt silly. The way he and Amy described it didn't give the police and the people in the crowd the full picture, how the man looked, and how threatening the black Lexus had been.

Amy said, "Aren't you going to give him a ticket?"

"I didn't observe Mr. Holland committing a violation. Everything checks out. We can all go about our business now."

"But he's carrying a gun. And he lied to you about living here," she said, still in a loud voice.

"He has a valid permit to carry a gun, and his license and registration show he lives here. Regardless, there's no requirement that a person live here to shop here."

Her face showed exasperation. She looked at Jason, no doubt expecting him to say something. He couldn't think of what else to say, and Holland standing there made him nervous.

The officer said, "You can go now, Mr. Holland, or was there something else?"

"No, sir, thank you." Holland continued on to the store.

The officer looked at Jason and Amy and said, "Well, I guess that wraps it up. Unless you have something else?"

Jason swallowed, trying to think of something more to say. He thought Amy might say something, but she remained silent.



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“No, sir.” He had already gotten into the Prius when he remembered the allergy medicine. Better to get it later. If he got out of the car and started for the store now, the cop would see he was so flustered he’d forgotten his purpose for being there. Anyway, he’d rather avoid being in the same area with this Mr. Holland.

As they pulled out of the parking lot Amy said, “I can’t believe that cop. He was scared.”

“It’s not all his fault. If he tried to do anything he’d be criticized. You know, I’m no racist, but that guy got a pass because he was black. I don’t believe in profiling, but Jesus, political correctness is killing us.”

“That thug will kill somebody one of these days, and it’ll be those cops’ fault.”

“If it’s so OK to carry a gun, maybe I’ll start carrying one. I never even owned one in Ohio, but if that’s the way it is here, maybe I should.”

“Why don’t you? I’ll get one, too. We can both get permits.” Amy’s eyes were bright, and her mouth was slightly opened with an excited grin.

“Yeah, that’s what we’ll do,” he said. “Hell, yes. Google it now, ‘gun permit Virginia.’ We’ll take the course, or whatever it is we have to do, and buy a couple of guns. I’ll be ready for that son of a bitch the next time.”

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