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Age: 15

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10th Grade



The Waiting Room

Robin Moore's 1975 Oldsmobile Cutlass was a miracle of automation. Despite it being almost twenty years old, the ignition still started and the axle hadn't snapped. It still performed its job dutifully.

Robin had just gotten off of work by the time the sun had set. Travel agencies had a lot more lunatics than you would expect, especially older couples who argued about what hotel they should stay at. As much as she didn't like handling this type of behavior, she still dealt with it nearly every day out of her need to do the right thing. It felt wrong, almost sinful, to Robin, not to help someone even though she had the ability to.

The drive home was quite monotonous. She didn't live in the peaceful countryside nor did she live in a big city. Kitoon, Kansas, offered neither of these; instead, it served up a heaping pile of nothing. Most of the town consisted of overgrown woods or dilapidated factories that had long been abandoned during the Great Depression. "Nothing at all can be better than too much," Robin's mother had told her, but after living in nothing for almost three decades, life got dull.

But something was different about this particular night. During Robin's almost ritualistic drive back home, on a stretch of road about five miles away from civilization, a car was parked on the side of the road, not much different from Robin's Cutlass. A figure was standing awkwardly beside it. Instinctively, Robin pulled over into the gravel patch behind the car, her

headlights shining weakly on the figure to reveal an old woman. The woman seemed as perplexed as Robin to see another person this late at night.

Robin struggled to put the Cutlass in idle before stepping out of it, waving politely to show she was no threat to the woman. “Do you need help?” Robin called out to her. “I’m not a mechanic, but it looks like you need it.”

The old woman stared blankly at Robin, absentmindedly fiddling with a loose button on her worn coat. “I’m not sure what happened to it,” she began, “but it just doesn’t run anymore.”

Robin nodded in understanding. “Need a ride to a mechanic?” She looked back at her own car that could meet the same fate as the old woman’s at any moment. Quickly, Robin turned back around and added, “I have all the time in the world. I just got off of work.”

The old woman shook her head. “No, no... actually, yes, I do need a ride.” She picked at the peeling paint on her car’s trunk. “I have an appointment in... oh, what time is it? Anyway, I have an appointment at 9:00 and I have to... to be there.” She paused. “My son’s frustrated at me for not getting to my appointments on time...”

A sudden feeling of homesickness washed over Robin. Regardless, she responded, “Yeah, yeah... I can do that.” Cautiously, she asked, “Do you know where the appointment is?”

The old woman simply nodded.

Robin crossed the headlights to the passenger side. “Alright then. You can, um...” Robin rattled the handle of the passenger door. “You can sit here and give me directions, ok?”

The car ride was mostly quiet, except for when the old woman mentioned upcoming turns. She never seemed to acknowledge that the car’s turn signals had to be jabbed to work or that Robin had never offered to turn on the radio.

Robin grew tired of the awkward silence. “So,” she started, “what’s your, uh, name? I’m Robin. Robin Moore.”

“Kay.” She continued to stare out the window.

After a moment of waiting for her to say more, Robin pursed her lips and took a sharp inhale. “Well, Kay, what’s--oh, I don’t mean to be too personal, but--what’s this appointment for? This late at night?”

Kay didn’t respond for a couple of seconds. Robin glanced worriedly towards her, panicked that she might have offended Kay. She was about to apologize for her insolence when she was cut off. “I don’t know.”

Robin held her gaze at the old woman. How does she know where she’s going but not what she’s going for? she thought, but quickly chalked it up to, well, old people-ness.

There was no more conversation for the rest of the drive.

Kay gave the final signal to turn into the parking lot of a plain brick building. Robin parked alongside the empty spaces of the parking lot. She shut off the car and stared at the building, trying to ascertain what the building was used for, but it was nearly impossible to. There were no signs in sight; all that surrounded them were trees. She thought it was strange that a building would be isolated like this; she’d assume it would be somewhere near town. But the fact that bothered her even more...

“Uh... are you sure this is the place? There’s no cars here, and the lights aren’t on.” Sympathetically, she turned to the old woman. “You may have just gotten the wrong time or the wrong place.”

Kay shook her head. “No--no, I’m very certain this is the place.” Before Robin could contradict her, Kay was already pulling herself out of the car. She scrambled out of the car to chase after Kay, who was shuffling towards the door of the building.

“We may just be a bit early, but I really don’t think that--” Robin called out, but her words stuck in her throat when Kay opened the door to reveal a very much open clinic. Clean, off-white walls paired nicely with the mellow light coming from the overhead lights in the waiting room. Soft armchairs were organized in rows across the room; a man sat in one, preoccupied with his thoughts.

“What?” Robin stood in the doorway, her mouth gaping open. “Where did all these people--how is this place--” She supposed that she was talking to anyone in the room that would listen, but it seemed that none of them even noticed that the door opened.

Kay had already tottered to the receptionist’s counter to the left of the entrance. Their conversation was kept at a low murmur. Robin blinked against the lights, deciding what she should do now. *Should I go back to the car? Or stay in here and wait?* In a daze, Robin stumbled over to an open pair of chairs in the middle of the room and sank down into the dark fabric.

Robin, still unsettled at how well the building had worn a mask of closure, scanned the space around her. It was just like every waiting room she had been in before, but one thing was noticeably different. Against the wall opposite the receptionist and the entrance were two large doors. One was painted a dark maroon; the other was a pure white made obvious by the walls surrounding it. Each showcased elegant brass door handles and walnut trim.

By the time Robin had recentered her gaze, Kay was already sitting beside her. “Thanks for waiting with me,” she whispered when she noticed Robin looking at her. “It always feels strange to be alone in a place you’re not familiar with.”

Robin mindlessly nodded. “Yeah--yeah, no problem at all.” She didn’t know what to say to start a conversation with her, since the last attempt failed miserably.

Instead, she considered her abnormal situation. A few questions were still on her mind, like, *Why did it look like the building was closed?* and, *How did the man and the receptionist get here if they didn’t drive?*

The last question she pondered for a while. She considered that they may have gotten there by bus, but most buses don’t stop at strange buildings in the middle of the woods.

Robin turned to the man a couple of chairs down, who looked a lot older than Kay. “Excuse me, sir, but how did you, uh, get here?”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he seemed almost petrified. His eyes were bugged out, focused on a spot of wall ahead of him.

“S-Sir?” Robin started again, waving a hand in front of his face. “Are you ok?”

He blinked and shot his eyes towards Robin without moving his head. “Don’t you hear it?” He started to pick at his nails anxiously.

Robin sat still for a moment, hearing nothing. “No, nothing at all... what do you mean?”

“The screaming,” he spat out, “coming from that door.” He stuck a bony finger towards the maroon door.

Robin shook her head slowly. “No, I don’t--I don’t hear anything.”

Perturbed by how unusual the man’s response was, she wanted to end the conversation quickly. “I’m sorry to have bothered you...” She stared at his tense face for a second before turning back towards Kay.

But Kay seemed about as terrified as the man was. She reached out and grasped the fabric of Robin’s cardigan tightly.

“Do you hear that--that awful noise?” Her frail voice shook along with her hand. “I--I think it’s coming from that door over there.” Much like the man, she pointed at the maroon door.

Robin gaped down at Kay, her heart filling with pity. *Either I’m deaf*, she thought, *or these people have a good reason to be here*. Even still, Robin felt that something was very off in this place.

Robin placed a comforting hand over Kay’s. “No, I don’t hear anything. I’m--I’m sure it’s just your overactive imagination.” She rubbed her thumb over the top of Kay’s veiny hand reassuringly. “As you said earlier, being in a new place can be very scary. I’m sure everything will be--”

“Catherine Garner?” The receptionist called out. “Your appointment is ready.”

Kay spun her head around, her eyes pleading to the receptionist from across the room. “I--I don’t think I’m ready f-for my appointment!” Her nails dug into Robin’s arm. “C-Can’t I take it another time?”

The receptionist didn’t react. With a wave of her hand, the maroon door shot open. Heat filled the entire room in a wave, like a tsunami. From Robin’s perspective, it looked like there was nothing behind the door except a wall of black.

The man and Kay obviously saw something different. Both of them let out blood-curdling screams. “No--!” Kay cried, pushing herself farther into the chair, willing herself to get away from whatever she saw behind the door. “No, I--!”

Suddenly, Kay and the chair were thrust through the door by some unseeable force, her body limp as it flew past the doorframe, followed by her screams.

The maroon door slammed shut loudly behind her, dragging the heat along with it.

Robin shot up from out of her chair, looking wildly around the room, more confused and terrified than ever. Her breath was ragged. The man had stopped screaming, curled up into a ball in his chair, whimpering quietly.

Her eyes landed on the receptionist, who had her head resting on her palm, casually chewing a piece of gum and flipping through a stack of papers.

“What--What the hell was that!” Robin shouted, weakly walking towards her. She pointed back at the maroon door. “What happened to her?”

The receptionist acted like Robin wasn't even there, blowing a bubble and letting it pop.

“Are--Are you deaf!” Robin seethed, setting a balled-up fist on the counter and pointing at the red door. “What just happened?”

The receptionist looked up at her boredly. After a second, she looked back down at the stack of papers in front of her, seeming to actually take time to read what was printed.

Her eyebrows furrowed. “You're not supposed to be here,” she muttered. She pointed at a box on one of the forms and nodded to herself.

She looked up at Robin, her smile a little too wide. “It's not time for your appointment yet.”