

# Lights and Shadows

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## You Should Have Been There

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**You Should Have Been There**  
**Patricia Smith, 2nd Place**  
**Short Story**

Why does disaster always strike when Jim is gone? When he's home the appliances work, the kids behave, and the phone is quiet. But even when he's with me I'm nervous, because I sense catastrophe waiting to catch me alone.

Two weeks ago, on Wednesday—my busiest day—I unsuspectingly pulled the car out of the driveway on my way to pick up Denise from band practice and to take her to her piano lesson. I was only half a block down the street when the inside of the car began filling with an acrid smoke.

I turned off the ignition and jumped out of the car, leaving it standing right in the middle of the street. I wasn't taking any chances. Then I ran back to the house for the fire extinguisher. As I ran past the boys, who were watching television with a friend, I told them to call the fire department and their dad, because the car was on fire.

Let me say right here that I expected them to ask me if they could wait until the next commercial. My boys don't get excited easily.

Anyway, I ran back to the car, praying the whole time that the fire had gone out by itself. No such luck, smoke was pouring out from the open door.

I wasn't sure where the fire was, so I opened the hood. I don't know why I thought that would do any good—I wouldn't recognize a spark plug if it stood up and introduced itself. Nothing there; so choking and drawing on every bit of courage I had, I looked under the dashboard. It was dark under there, but I saw light coming from somewhere. "That must be where the fire is," I thought.

I finally figured out how to get the fire extinguisher to work, and I sprayed the white baking soda powder all over the inside of my car. (I must remember to get the extinguisher recharged, in case I ever need it again.)

Just then Jimmy, my oldest boy, came running out and yelled, "Mom, Dad wants to talk to you."

"Tell him I can't talk now; I hear the sirens. The fire department's coming. Ask him to come home." The big hook-and-ladder came into sight. I hoped they wouldn't be mad because the fire was out.

By then all our neighbors were pouring out of their houses, and gathering around asking questions. I wished the road would open up and swallow me.

A fireman got out of the truck and walked over to the car. I told him what had happened, and that I thought the fire was out. He looked under the dash and said, "It looks like you did a good job, but we'll try to

start it up and see what caused it." He may have been just humoring me, because I saw him shake his head when he saw the baking soda all over the inside of the car.

The car started right up and smoke began pouring out again, this time from under the hood, too. (I know this sounds terrible, but I was glad. I didn't want them to think I was just a hysterical woman.) He yelled for his partner to disconnect the battery cable. Why hadn't I thought of that?

The cable was corroded onto the battery. "Somebody get me a pair of pliers, quick!"

I ran back to the house, hoping that for once I'd be able to find what I needed in Jim's garage. Jimmy yelled out the door, "Mom, Dad said for you to talk to him, right now!"

"Jimmy, tell him I'll talk to him as soon as I can." I ran back to the car with the pliers, and handed them to the fireman. It only took him a minute to disconnect the cable.

Then, out of breath and shaking violently, I went in to talk to Jim. As soon as I touched the receiver I started crying. "I don't know what's the matter with it; the firemen are still working on it. Please come home . . . I can't calm down . . . Jim, I have to get back out there."

Michael, my youngest son, came in. "Mom, they want to talk to you."

I hung up and ran back outside. They told me that the insulation had worn off of some of the wires, and they were touching each other, which caused them to short out. "Did you actually see any flames, lady?"

I told them about the light. Then they told me that light always comes on whenever the door is opened. Funny, I never noticed it before.

I heard a motorcycle and looked up. There was a policeman coming up the street. "What's he doing here?" I asked the fireman. I felt like a criminal, just seeing him.

"Oh, they always come whenever a fire is reported."

They moved my car over to the curb for me, and one of them pulled out a pad and asked me for my name and address for insurance purposes. "You don't report this to our insurance company, do you?" All I could think of was getting a cancellation notice from them in the mail. Besides, maybe Jim would be able to fix the car by himself.

"No, we always have to ask this, in case you have to file a claim." They began to put their equipment away.

A car pulled up, and Denise got out. "Mom, where were you? What happened? I tried to call you, but the line was busy, so Samantha's mother brought me home.

You Should Have Been There (continued)

What about my piano lessons? Are you all right?" Denise never bothers to breathe when she talks.

The fire department left. The policeman left. The neighbors, questions satisfied, went back into their homes, and I went into the house to start dinner. We were having company that night. My pulse rate and blood pressure settled back to normal, but it was two days before I remembered to call the piano teacher to apologize for not bringing Denise for her lesson.

Jim came home early. "O.K. Tell me all about it."

"It was just awful. You should have been there."

"Why didn't you just disconnect the battery cable?" he asked. Sometimes I could kill him.

The next day I saw the fire reports in the newspaper. There was an entry: "2713 Friar Tuck. Auto fire. Slight damage." □