



The gift

Abraham H. Sniderman



It was a dark and snowy night. I was weary of my shift in the emergency department of Nowhere General Hospital, even though I'd made the choice to work on this particular night, to give my coworkers a chance to spend time with their families. Call it interfaith guilt. Typically, night shifts during the holidays are quiet — until seasonal revelry tempts the gods to challenge human notions of invincibility and immunity from harm.

I decided to eat something while I could and headed to the hospital cafeteria on the main floor. Far from being empty, as I had expected, the place was full. Families mostly, caught by the snowstorm while visiting sick relatives in the middle of Nowhere.

I stood in line, pondering what to order, when the door crashed open, followed by the unmistakable stench of alcohol, neglect and decay.

Everyone turned to look at the man who stood, swaying, in the doorway.

A dirty, unkempt white beard hid most of his wrinkled face. A raincoat that had seen its share of sidewalks and park benches covered his obese body. His old baseball cap, once red, had faded to a miserable colour. His shoes were too big and he wore no socks.

He had peculiarly bright blue eyes that he used like searchlights to scan the place. He rocked from side to side, involuntarily, in the rapid fashion of the neurologically ill.

I felt threatened. Not by his appearance or his odour; I had seen many men and women like him during my night shifts in emergency. It was his smile that unnerved me.

His teeth were white and relatively well aligned; none were missing as far as I could tell. They did not fit the stereotype. His mouth, thin lipped, curved up gently in the type of smile one sees in religious paintings or the works of Raphael. He moved suddenly from the door toward the back of the cafeteria and sat at the orphan table reserved for the old and the lonely.

He was studying us.

The employees did nothing. I assumed they knew him and considered him harmless.

It was then that his left hand moved swiftly into his raincoat pocket and pulled out an object. I didn't recognize it at first. It was out of place.

The green and red lights that adorned the windows gave the black object a pretty hue. It was straight and long, then turned at a sharp angle downward, where his hand held its black body. A .45 automatic, I thought. Like the one I used in the army years ago.

The man stood up slowly.

His smile vanished. His eyes became predatory. A muted rumbling came from his throat, but I could not understand it.

He pointed the gun at me, then aimed it at a woman standing behind me. His next target was the teenage cafeteria worker, who ducked behind the counter.

Lucky bastard, I thought. We have nowhere to go.

The man moved slowly to the front of the cafeteria and back again, like a shark seeking its prey.

People tell you that in situations like this time slows down. It is true.

The man opened the door to the restrooms and peeked inside. He jumped back unexpectedly and loudly, as if something had startled him. The door closed again, slowed by the hydraulic brake at its top.

He pushed it back and smiled mischievously at us, his captive audience. Reaching inside, he pulled out a boy.

The child, no more than 4 years old, was accompanied by his older brother, who was trying to hold him back.

The man yelled something. Terrified, the brother let go of the younger boy.

The woman behind me — their mother — gasped.

She tried talking to the man, but he pointed the gun at her son and put his right index finger to his mouth, silencing her.

I wish I could tell you I had plans to jump at the man and rescue the boy, that I felt it my duty to sacrifice myself and change places with him.

But no. I was terrified, immobile.

The man grabbed the boy by his small shoulder and pulled him — gently — toward him. He leaned sideways, looking at the puzzled child, and caressed his head.



“You smell bad,” the young boy said.

The mother fainted.

While we were distracted by her fall, the man and the boy advanced to the exit.

He was whispering something to the boy while he walked.

The boy laughed and applauded merrily.

The man smiled again and gave the boy the gun.

The child yelled happily, the way only small children can when they receive an unexpected gift.

The man leaned again to the boy’s ear and whispered something.

The boy nodded. He walked gingerly forward, pointing the gun straight at me.

He came closer and aimed it at my face.

I tried to say something, but failed.

The smiling boy came within 2 metres of me, pointed the gun at my crotch and pulled the trigger.

A loud noise was heard by all ... except me. The doctor, the captain, the active reservist, had blessedly fainted.

The next thing I recall is lying on the floor next to an unconscious woman, with a terrible headache and a cherubic young face looking at me from above laughing and

yelling “*Bang! Bang! Bang!*” 4 octaves higher than a gunshot would sound.

I am told the boy was thrilled by my “realistic impression” of collapse and was continuing the game to finish me off.

When the boy grew tired of it, he left the dark shiny gun balancing on the counter. The gun slipped and fell. Those of us not yet horizontal or behind the counter quickly lost altitude waiting for the deadly discharge.

But nothing happened.

The gun hit the floor, bounced and shattered.

A plastic toy.

A gift.

We were speechless. The only sound was that of the cafeteria door closing and a coarse laugh travelling away from the man’s throat. Through the window, we saw the smile again. Strangely, his eyes were a softer hue of blue now. His beard looked whiter and cleaner under the snow. The red baseball cap contrasted sharply with the milky air. His cheeks turned crimson. The snow bleached his silhouette and in seconds he was gone.

Abraham Snaiderman is a Director at the Neuropsychiatry Clinic, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, Toronto, Ont.

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