

# **NIGHTMARE SHIFT**

By

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Jane Smith was having the time of her life. She was on a working holiday in New York with her best friend Elaine Gibbs. The two girls were as close as sisters. Some said that they even looked alike, so much so that could have been twins. The two girls had recently finished school in Ireland and had decided to take some time for themselves before going to college. First stop for them was New York city where they had managed to find an affordable flat together just a few blocks from O'Reilly's Irish bar where they had been employed.

The first week passed in a blur of beer, cigarette smoke, drunken chat-up lines and laughter. They were only working at nights so they had the daylight hours to tour the city and see the sights. They had taken dozens of photographs of the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and the spot where the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre had stood until the terrorist attack of September 11 2001.

At night the girls worked in shifts that overlapped most nights. They each had one night a week off and this was used for dating. Sometimes they would swap shifts depending on the night that the other's date had requested to meet. Tonight, Jane was covering Elaine's shift while she went to a Broadway play with "Corvette Carl". The girls had taken to nicknaming their dates by the cars they drove, such as "Lexus Luke", "Honda Drew" or "Johnny Ford". Their private joke was also a protective measure, as they each knew the make, model, colour and registration number of the other's date's car before they went out at night. These could be reported to the police if anything happened or if one of them failed to either telephone or send a text message to the other.

The night had started just like any other. Jane arrived for work a few minutes early and helped herself to a cup of coffee before starting. She knew it was going to be a busy night because there was a football game on the television and the bar was packed to capacity with supporters of both teams. Jane wasn't into the American Football game between the Washington Redskins and the New York Giants, she much preferred watching her favourite soccer team, Liverpool, play in the English premiership. When she took her place behind the bar for her shift she was immediately deluged with orders for pitchers of beer. She never noticed the heavily lidded eyes watching her intently from the opposite side of the bar room. She did however notice a growing feeling of unease as the night progressed.

Eventually the game finished, Jane was amazed at how it could take sometimes as long as two hours to play the prescribed hour of actual play of American Football. The victors savoured their rival's defeat and the losers drowned their sorrows in pitchers of Budweiser. Finally closing time arrived, none too soon for Jane's aching feet, and the last of the patrons was ushered out the door. After a quick coffee break to rest their weary feet, Jane and the rest of the staff cleaned up the bar, washed the used glasses and pitchers, swept up the spills and cigarette butts from the floor, counted up the cash in the tills and got ready to go home.

The last thing that Jane had to do was to take the trash out to the dumpster in the alleyway behind the bar. She hated doing this because the light covering the alley had been broken for some time and the shadows that inhabited the area seemed as deep and impenetrable as black holes. Jane propped the bar's back door open with a box while she went to the dumpster. This cast a paltry light out into the night that barely reached beyond the door. As she tied the tops of the trash bags to prevent the contents from spilling out while she carried them, Jane's mind began to flash a Red Alert danger sign at her. Looking down the alleyway she saw nothing that would cause her instincts to flare like that. Twice before in her life she had listened to her instincts and they had saved her life on both occasions. Now though, looking around this empty alley she couldn't understand why her instincts should be screaming at her. She nevertheless decided to be on her guard as she went to the dumpster.

Walking as nonchalantly as she could make it appear, Jane approached the foul-smelling, mouldy green, overflowing dumpster with not a little trepidation. Having a large rubbish bag in each hand she had nothing with which to defend herself should she be attacked. She walked warily in a straight line to the large bin, eyes scanning from side to side as far as her vision would allow. She dreaded meeting again the strange homeless wino that had scared her badly the previous week when he emerged from the dumpster like a volcanic sea mouth erupting in the Pacific ocean, rubbish flowing from him like superheated lava. Jane had been in the process of throwing the bags she had carried from the bar into the dumpster when the hideous apparition had arose before her. She had recoiled in terror and had ended up on her butt, struggling to push herself away from the bin and back to her feet. Later, in their apartment, Elaine had howled with laughter when Jane told her what happened. Jane now wished that the wino was here, just so that she wouldn't feel so alone in the deserted alley.

The alleyway looked as it always did, and yet something had definitely changed. She couldn't put her finger on it, but she instinctively knew there was something amiss. Although it was still only July, Jane felt a cold chill even as sweat trickled down her brow and obscured her vision. As she blinked away the sweat drops that veiled her sight Jane caught a shadowy movement out of the corner of her right eye. When she stopped and stared directly at it, there was nothing there but a brick wall with a carpet of cardboard boxes interspersed with weeds. Silently rebuking herself for her overactive imagination, Jane turned and headed on to the bin where with a laugh at her silliness heaved the rubbish into the dumpster. But as she closed the lid on the awful smelling refuse something caught her eye. A grey shape separated itself from the shadows climbing the wall and moved to the centre of the alley between Jane and the safety of the bar.

Her heart was beating so hard that she heard it as a drum solo from a rock band in her ears that blotted out all other sounds. The shape resolved itself into the shape of a tall, muscular man, but the features were indistinct, wreathed as they were in grey shadows. The mouth worked but Jane heard no sound as her drumming heart continued apace. Jane made a conscious effort to slow her racing heart and calm her breathing. She was in danger of hyperventilating. The man-shape before her smile, its teeth gleaming white in the darkness. Some of them even appeared to be sharply pointed, like an animal's.

Nonsense, she told herself, you're letting your imagination get the better of you again. But as much as her mind told her she was being overly silly, her instincts blared and yelled that she was in the greatest danger of her young life. She reached into a back pocket of her jeans and withdrew her mobile phone. Taking of the key lock without taking her eyes off the strange man ahead of her Jane punched in 911, the emergency number in America, and thumbed the send button.

The weight of the phone in her hand steeled her resolve. She began walking back towards the propped-open door of the bar while keeping the phone hidden from view behind her back. Jane pleaded with God that the 911 operator would realise that the call she was monitoring was not a prank call but a cry for help. When she got within a few feet of the man she heard him speak.

"I like your smell," he said, speaking in a low voice that Jane struggled to hear.

"Oh, thanks. It's Beverly Hills. My boyfriend bought it for me," she replied trying to make it sound as though her boyfriend was one of the beer-drinking, sports watching, musclemen that had filled the bar earlier and would be

wondering why she wasn't back yet. Personally she thought she stank of sweat, cigarettes and garbage (being so close to the dumpster).

"Not the perfume."

The words chilled Jane to the bone. What was he talking about?

"I like the smell of your fear Elaine!"

Jane was panicking. The phone forgotten in a hand that hung limply by her side.

"Who are you? How do you know my name?"

"I know everything about you Elaine. I also know that this will be of no further use to you!" he answered smugly, venom dripping from his lips almost visibly. He raised his hand and showed it to Jane. Lying there in the palm of his hand was Jane's mobile phone, the screen still alight with 911 displayed on it.

Jane looked down at her hand and with surprise registered that the phone had disappeared. When she looked back up the man was standing no more than a foot before her. Screaming in shock and fear she staggered backwards. The man had made no sounds whatsoever when he moved.

Jane stared into the eyes of the man before her and swore that the eyes that returned her gaze were tinted red. When she tried to tear them away from him to see the rest of him so she could describe him to the first New York Police Department officer that she met, she found that she wasn't able. His eyes held her mesmerised. She had no defence against him. Smiling wickedly he released her from his gaze and Jane took several steps backward, shaking her head to clear the cobwebs. Every step taken moved her further and further from the safety of the bar. Through a force of will Jane found her voice once more.

"What...what do you want with me?" she stammered.

"I want your fear!"

The hairs on the nape of her neck went rigid with fear at the way he spoke to her. Jane did the only thing she could. She turned and ran. As she ran, the rush of adrenaline flooding her system blew aside the fog in her mind like a strong breeze. He had said Elaine, not Jane. Oh God, he thinks I'm Elaine! Unknown to Jane her plea to the Almighty had been answered. The 911 operator was already dispatching cruisers to the location identified on her system by tracing the phone call. The operator's blood ran cold when she heard the male voice speak. She said her own silent prayer that the young woman would still be alive when the cruisers showed up.

Jane's fear was absolutely palpable.

She could do nothing but run. And that was what she had been doing for what seemed like an eternity. She knew her pursuer was close behind but she could not over-ride her fear and will herself to turn her head around and see what size of a lead she had. It took everything she had just to keep running.

Running on the verge of exhaustion she was bumping into walls and almost lost her balance several times. It was just the fear of being caught by whoever it was that was chasing her that spurred her on. She picked up her pace again as she thought she felt hot breath on the back of her neck and raced across the road dodging and weaving between the passing cars that swerved, with a squeal of protesting rubber and tyre smoke, to avoid her.

She dove down an alleyway, knocking over bins left out by the business owners for disposal the following morning as she passed as possible barriers to this pursuer. One alleyway led to another then to another and soon she found herself lost in this urban maze. She sensed, rather than felt, her pursuer gain on her with every step he took and, with a mighty effort of will, she forced herself to turn her head to see how far behind her the pursuer was, and indeed to find out who he was. But when she turned her head around she saw that she was alone in the alley. She let out a deep sigh of relief -

And ran straight into the brick wall at the end of the alley.

She picked herself up slowly from the ground, head reeling from the impact with the wall. She brought her hand up to her nose, which ached mightily, and when she brought it back down it was covered in blood. It took her stunned mind a moment to realise what had happened and then she began to look at the wall he had run into. It was about ten foot high and stretched from one side of the alley right across to the far side, completely blocking it off.

'Aw hell!' she said as she realised that she would not be able to climb the wall to get away. It was only then that she remembered why she was here. She turned slowly, as her fear stole back over her body, to check the alleyway for her pursuer.

But the alley was empty except for the bins she had knocked over during her flight. It was then that she heard the sound behind her. She turned slowly, her blood moving like a glacier through her veins, and found herself facing the wall again. But this time there was something else there. Her vision had tunnelled during her flight, looking at only what was before her that could help or hinder her escape. A foul-smelling, dirt encrusted dumpster hove into view as her eyes readjusted.

Checking the alley behind her and finding it still empty she made the only choice she could - she jumped into the dumpster and proceeded to cover herself with its contents. Jane's protective sense began to run at hyper-fast speed. She sensed that her call for help had been received and that the police were already on the way. It was only a matter of time now before she was rescued. She had to remain undetected until they found her. She realised now that leaving the alley behind the bar had been a mistake but she was also confident that the police could follow the route she had taken with little difficulty because of the mayhem she had caused. So she buried herself as far under the trash as she could squirm her body. Even though she couldn't see the alley from where she lay in the dumpster, she knew that the man had followed her into the alley and was now moving slowly towards the dumpster at the far end, checking each and every hiding place as he moved.

Jane tried to control her breathing and her stampeding heart. The last thing she wanted to do now was to start vomiting from the God-awful smell that she was

immersed in, so she began breathing through her mouth. She knew that what was happening was extraordinary and that she should be afraid, considering that she had run into this alley in fear of her life, but strangely she wasn't. Her fear tank was running on empty and would take a while to refill.

She could hear the man's quiet footsteps slowly approach her hiding place. Knowing it was a dead end, her pursuer was taking his time making sure he searched all of the possible hiding places and also because he knew that the more time that passed before he finally found her, the greater her terror would be, making her death all the sweeter.

While Jane remained concealed beneath the trash, hoping beyond hope that the police would arrive in time, she let her mind wander back over the encounter with the man behind the bar. She tried to figure out firstly, why he had thought that she was Elaine, and secondly, why he would want to hurt her.

It was then that the hand reached into the dumpster, gripped her arm in a vice-like grip and lifted her out. Jane screamed in terror. She had thought that he was further up the alleyway by following his soft footfalls. The man grinned his wicked grin again and dropped her to the ground. Jane noted, with a rising hope, that he was breathing a little harder than he had been earlier. As terrifying as he might be, he was still only human. Looking up at him from where she had been dumped on the ground, Jane saw that he still held her mobile phone in his hand and that it was still active. She smiled inwardly as her hope rose to a new level. She knew that she had to delay him only a few more minutes. The rising wail of the approaching police sirens proved that to her.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Jane screamed at the still grinning man, knowing the 911 dispatcher would also be listening. "What did I ever do to you?"

"You know exactly what you did to me Elaine!" he sneered, a sudden angry look crossed his face. Gathering his thoughts again, his features re-formed into the maniacal smile once again. "You shouldn't have left me! I love you, Elaine!"

"I'm not Elaine!" she shouted back at him, "I'm Jane. Her friend!"

This statement had the desired effect. A confused look passed across his features as his troubled mind processed the possibility that she was telling the truth. This alley had more light than the one behind the bar and he weaved from one foot to the other to study her features. Jane held her breath. Any sudden movement would be fatal. She had to find a way to prolong his confusion to allow the police to get closer. Trawling the depths of her memory for any clues as to this guy's identity Jane suddenly recalled her and Elaine's first weekend in America. They had gone out for the night to the bar that they were going to be working in to get a feel for the atmosphere there and to celebrate their freedom. There were finished with school and they were living (and working) away from home for the first time in their young lives.

Being new faces in the bar that night, word had quickly spread that they were Irish girls and they had been chatted up by every guy there. One guy in particular had hovered around Elaine all night. He had seemed to Jane, a little peculiar. He seemed to have fixated on Elaine and had even started a fight with a guy he had earlier warned away. Elaine had taken him to the dance floor to break up the fight and because she was secretly thrilled that she had been fought over. As bright as a supernova, his name flashed into her consciousness.

"Adam," Jane said as the name registered in her mind.

Taken aback, as much as Rumpelstiltskin, by the mentioning of his name, Adam recoiled from Jane as if she had struck him. Seeing that she had rattled him, Jane went on the offensive.

"Elaine only danced with you to stop you from beating up that other guy. She never liked you! She thought that you were a creep!" Jane stepped closer to Adam

as she pressed home her verbal attack. "She even called you a freak!"

"No, no she didn't! She loves me!" he stammered back.

Jane found a new inner strength surge through her as the first of almost a dozen police cars skidded to a screeching halt at the mouth of the alley, disgorging their armed occupants that immediately ordered Adam to the ground and proceeded to hand-cuff him.

Sitting safely in the back of a police cruiser five minutes later, wrapped in a blanket given to her by a paramedic and sipping coffee from a polystyrene cup, Jane's exhaustion finally crumbled the defences of her newly found strength. She realised how close she had come to death. The police had found and removed a large hunting style knife from the waistband of Adam's pants. They had been convinced that had they not arrived when they did, he would have used it on Jane, as he had previously used it on several other women, two of which had later died of their injuries.

Jane buried her head into the blanket and cried. The tears took Jane's tiredness with them as they flowed down her cheeks and, thanking God for sparing her, she felt more alive than she had ever felt before.

**The End**