

The Emergency Contact

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"Hello? It's not an emergency per se, but I didn't know who else to call. The storm scattered debris everywhere, and now I can't leave."

A high-pitched clattering filled the line. The noise reverberated in her hearing aid, and Mabel jerked away from the phone. She held the receiver farther away and raised her voice. Ben hated when she did that, but Ben wasn't here. That was the problem.

"Hello? Sorry, have I reached the police? I wasn't sure if you had a non-emergency line . . ."

A crackling sound. "Apologies for the delay. This is the police. We were recalibrating."

The sound was at an acceptable level now. Whatever they had done must have worked. Mabel cautiously returned the phone to her ear.

"Right. As I was saying: the storm . . . debris . . . now I'm trapped. Can you send someone to help?"

"The solar storm? Which storm was this?" The voice on the line was male, Mabel guessed, deep in timbre and with an unplaceable accent. That wasn't that uncommon. Lower Glanville, where Mabel had grown up,

was insular. Not so much tucked away as forgotten in the midst of a soy-strewn countryside that major roads had opted to bypass. Lower Glanville shared their public services with the next town over: police, fire department, even the library had a mobile unit that split its time between the two. Mabel had spent her whole life within its bounds.

"Oh." Mabel paused, uncertain. She hadn't taken a science course since middle school. "A wind storm? Yesterday's storm. My son said I shouldn't take off by myself, but he can't get out here until tomorrow, and I've got to refuel and pick up food and . . . supplies . . . and I can't wait around forever for him, can I?"

"Your child is correct. Travel when there is debris should only be undertaken under emergency circumstances."

"But it is an emergency though!"

Mabel was willing to accept her son's help (that was filial piety) and the police's help (she had faithfully paid her taxes every year), but she wasn't willing to divulge to a stranger how much she had slowed down, and that she couldn't always make it to the bathroom in time. There was no embarrassment in that, she reasoned. They made products for it, after

all. Her teenage granddaughter thought it was for her that Mabel kept the house well stocked, and that was an easy illusion to continue. But now Mabel had run out and needed more. But she didn't need to confess any of that to a stranger.

"Understood." The officer sounded polite but bored. He probably fielded calls like this all day.

Mabel stood in her living room, in front of the large bay windows with their yellowing lace curtains. She clenched the receiver in one hand, careful not to tangle herself in the long coils of her reliable landline. A vase filled with tulips from Ben adorned the table. She adjusted one stem and then a second.

The thought of Ben made her realize what the officer's voice reminded her of. His voice wasn't so much accented, Mabel decided, as it was obstructed by too many teeth. Her grandson had been a bit like that, but braces had been a godsend. They had cost a pretty penny though; perhaps the officer hadn't had a Nana willing to chip in. Too bad. He sounded as if he was forced to move his jaw out of the way of the words coming through.

"What does your transport look like?"

"It's a yellow Saturn Outlook."

"Saturn?" The voice sharpened. Mabel imagined the gnashing of teeth. "The gas giant?"

"It doesn't get great gas mileage, but it's not a guzzler." When the humming in the background rose to a clattering again, Mabel grimaced and adjusted the receiver.

"Designation Saturn-42-Zeta?"

"No, the number is, hold on . . ." Mabel twitched the curtain aside. The storm had turned the landscape steel blue and forlorn, and the gnarled tree blocking her driveway reached its broken branches up to the sky in a plea. Fragments of limbs were scattered across her lawn and the road beyond. Her car was tucked in close to the house though, and she could see the license plate from where she stood, the numbers stamped over the slogan *Birthplace of Aviation*. "AA65PP."

"AA—?" There was a pause. "Where are you located?"

"127 Maple."

"I am not familiar with that."

"We're over in the Iron Works section. You turn left at the cemetery and then a right at Johnny Rockets. Can you send someone over?"

I don't know how the rest of the area looks. The power station took a beating last night. We didn't have any lights until 2 A.M."

"Solar winds will do that. One moment."

The voice hummed, deep and reverberating. The clacking returned, climbing in volume until Mabel adjusted her hearing aid. Turned down, the noise sounded more akin to a fevered typewriter or Kennedy, the big African Grey she had had as a child. She hadn't thought of him in years. He would rapidly snap his beak when he wanted attention. She had been too scared of him to touch his body after he died.

The voice interrupted her musings. "We cannot find a record of your area. You said it was a Johnny who built the rockets?"

"Is this a prank?" Her tone took on a sharp edge. She had dialed the police, hadn't she? She had definitely pressed the 9 and then the 1, but then a tremor had run through her hand, and her finger may have slipped a bit. But the call had gone through. . . .

"We take all our calls seriously." The voice lowered, and he ground his jaw. Mabel winced at the thought of his dental bill.

"Look, I'm in Lower Glanville. Are you local?"

That clacking noise again, overlapping with another, higher in pitch despite Mabel's adjustment.

"Lower Glanville, Ohio, United States of America? Earth-A24-Alpha?" The voice drew each word out as if the statement were absurd, and Mabel would suddenly leap in to correct him. When she didn't, he continued. "The Earth system is registered as no contact. How did you get a hold of this number?"

"Well, I dialed it," Mabel said, peeved. "Are you going to help me with my car and the tree or not?"

"A car! A tree!" He sounded delighted now. "I am not supposed to be talking to you—!"

His voice lowered again. "But you called us, and we are also ordered to take all calls for help seriously. Which command supersedes the other? We have had no training on this."

Each question was punctuated by furious clacking, and Mabel realized that he was the cause of the noise. Too many teeth indeed.

"Look, young man. A request for help always takes priority." She stared out at her car again. Smashed branches. Debris like confetti.

Her trusty Saturn squatting in the middle, undamaged, thank goodness, but immobile. Like her. She might not have reached the police she thought she had been dialing, but she had always been one to take life as it came, and it sounded like he had the capacity to help her regardless. That was all she needed. A little help.

“Young man!” A chortle like a cascading of typewriters. “To confirm: 127 Maple, Lower Glanville, past the Johnny Rockets, United States of America?”

“That’s right—”

“I will take care of the ‘tree.’ One moment as I lock position.”

If Mabel hadn’t been looking out of her window right then she would have missed it. The tree shone with a rainbow prism and then folded in on itself like that Japanese paper craft Mabel had always intended on learning before her hands went odd. Now she’d never learn how to do that. Nor, she supposed, would she ever learn to do *that*.

“Well, well.” There was a slight pressure on her eardrums and the scattered branches followed the tree out of existence.

“Well, well!” she repeated. “That’s better service than my son would deliver, that’s for sure. Could I convince you to do that again with the snow in the winter?”

“Would it be an emergency?” The voice asked. He sounded pleased.

“If I get snowed in, I might die.” A bubble of laughter sat in Mabel’s chest, threatening to burst free. She couldn’t help the smile though.

“Then I will see what I might achieve.” The voice chuckled and quick waves of clattering washed over her ears.

When they ended the call, Mabel stood still for a moment, staring out at her unobstructed car and the cleared driveway. She grabbed the flowers from the vase and marched outside, her nightgown flapping in the wind, and laid the bouquet on the pavement. A moment later, the flowers glowed with colors more vibrant than their own and folded, flowers to stems, and then popped out of existence. Mabel wondered if they had flowers where he was from. She hoped they did now.

She turned and waved at the sky, unperturbed by the heavy clouds or what her neighbors might think. The light pattering of droplets started up again. She imagined him somewhere, farther away than she could fathom, watching her and grinning too, with all those many teeth. ■

Arendse Lund is an international award-winning writer whose work has appeared in Mystery Magazine, Shotgun Honey, and The Fabulist. If you enjoyed her first piece of science fiction, you can find her crime writing at arendse.com.