

I Wish I Had Listened...

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'Please don't go,' my mother begged me, 'the weather forecast is terrible and I really don't think it's a good idea for the four of you to head off without any parents in these conditions.' I assured her I would be fine. She always worried too much, I thought. I had been looking forward to this trip for ages, and I was not about to be put off because of my mother's fussing. After all, what could go wrong? All we were doing was driving to a hostel in the next county and spending the weekend hillwalking and surfing. It would be fabulous.

There was a beep from outside. It was my friend, John. He was at the wheel of his mother's car, revving impatiently. I grabbed my rucksack, ran out and jumped into the backseat, beside my friend Cathy. Another friend, Ann, turned around from the front passenger seat and we began chatting excitedly about all we were planning to do at the beach.

Perhaps it was because we were talking so loudly that we didn't hear the first, ominous roll of thunder. Before long, however, the thunder was followed by bolts of lightning and a sudden downpour of sleety rain. The winding forest road which had looked so picturesque and inviting only moments before suddenly took on a more menacing aspect. Trees swayed and bent in the rising wind, and twigs and small branches bounced off the windscreen. John hunched forward over the wheel, trying desperately to see his way. We all fell silent and hoped against hope that all would be well. Then the worst happened. A heavy branch fell on the road in front of us and John turned the wheel desperately in an effort to avoid it. His efforts were in vain. The car slid off the road and into a ditch in a flash. Fortunately, none of us were hurt, just shaken and a bit shocked. The car did not get off so lightly. The front wheels were punctured and steam rose from the crumpled bonnet. We were stranded. Cathy tried to ring her parents, but couldn't get a signal. None of us could. We were too far off the beaten track. Our only option was to walk along the narrow road until we reached a house. John fished a torch from the glove box and we set off in the gathering darkness.

As we walked along the quiet road, I could feel the muddy water oozing through my light summer shoes. Rain trickled down past the collar of my anorak and my clothes were soon soaked through. We needed to find shelter, and soon. Just at that moment, Ann gave a cry. She pointed towards a low shed almost hidden behind a clump of trees. It didn't exactly look inviting, but beggars can't be choosers. We hurried towards it, praying that it would be open.

The door of the shed was bolted and padlocked. My heart sank and I felt like crying. John wasn't so easily put off, however. He ran around the back of the shed and reappeared a few minutes later, beckoning excitedly. He had found a way in. The storm had blown down a tree and it had ripped a hole in the side of the shed. Without worrying about trespass, we climbed in through the gap and took stock of our surroundings. John shone his torch around and as he did so, our relief turned to puzzlement. There, against the wall, were stacks of boxes filled with all sorts of statues, paintings and what looked like jewellery. Cathy went over and pulled a thick, flat, golden collar from the top of the nearest box. What was going on? Why would anyone store valuables like this in the middle of the forest? Then it dawned on me. The robbery at the National Museum had taken place only a few weeks previously. Nothing had ever been found and the gardaí had no leads. We had stumbled upon the treasure trove of a lifetime, and we were completely at a loss as to what we should do next. Again, I tried my mobile phone. There was a faint signal, but not enough to make a call.

As we stood there in the gloom, staring at the piles of boxes, we saw a beam of light through the hole in the wall. The light grew closer and we realised there was a car approaching. We were no detectives, but we knew enough to hide as quickly as we could. Cathy and I scrambled in behind a huge wooden box of paintings in the corner, while Ann and John crawled under some discarded sacking nearby.

Heart pounding, I listened as the car pulled up and doors slammed. Several men – I couldn't tell how many from where I was hidden – opened the front door of the shed. There was a shout of dismay when they noticed the hole in the side wall. Footsteps drew nearer as they surveyed the damage. There was a silence, then one of the men said, 'There's nothing for it, lads. We'll have to move the lot, now. We'll start with the paintings because they won't last long in this weather.'

I was trembling so violently that I was sure the box I was leaning against must have been shaking too. What could we do? Sure, in children's cartoons, four teenagers always win against the criminals, but this was real life and I knew we hadn't a chance. I closed my eyes and whispered to myself, 'Sorry, Mum. You were right. I wish I had listened.'

There was a scraping sound, a rush of cold air and the box which hid me and John was pulled away. I kept my eyes shut tight. I couldn't look. I couldn't. There was a brief silence and then a voice said, 'Sarge, it's kids. Two kids. What's going on?'

I opened my eyes, scarcely daring to hope. The relief that flooded through me when I saw the puzzled faces of two gardaí peering down at us was immense. I burst into noisy tears and jumped to my feet. 'Thank you, thank you,' I managed to say, between sobs.

In the squad car on the way back to town, the guards explained that they had received a tip-off that the museum thieves had a hideout in the forest. The informant hadn't known exactly where, but it was our crashed car that had led them to this spot. They didn't know if there was a connection between it and the robbery, but they decided to search the surrounding area, just in case.

The guards dropped us all home and told our parents exactly what had happened. Their reactions were not as bad as I had feared. They were so happy that we were safe that they didn't even mention the crashed car. Still, I did feel that I should admit to my Mum that she had been right all along. And I can tell you one thing: I'll listen to her the next time. That much is certain.