

But for the grace of God and my dogs

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On a beautiful summer's morning, I took time off from writing and drove to Bolton to buy a trunk load of perennials and some bags of earth.

When I got home, a procession of runners in bright coloured running gear were sprinting along the road and so I put my dogs inside a small fenced kennel a few hundred feet away, so they wouldn't be tempted to follow suit. Both dogs lay down, turned their backs to me and watched with their noses pushed to the fence.

Happy to finally get to planting, I took out the first flat of flowers from my trunk, put on my garden gloves and lost in thought, knelt down and began to dig. From out of nowhere, directly behind me, an unfamiliar voice said, 'Get in the house.'

It was surreal. My husband was at work and our property was a good hike from the road and I would have heard a car or even footsteps come up our gravel driveway. As I stood up and turned about, I was shocked to see a very tall, dark haired, heavy-set man in jeans, wearing a huge, old maroon T-shirt lift up his arms and stare at me threateningly. He had come up stealthily from the road on an adjacent property, stood 10 feet away from me and growled, 'Don't make a noise and get in the house.'

I froze and with terrifying thoughts racing through my head answered. 'The house is locked and the keys are in the car.'

'Get the keys from the car and get inside the house,' he said in a low foreboding tone. He stepped closer to me, and stretched out his arms in warning.

I knew that I had opened the front door when I got home. I put my purse away and went out and moved the car closer to unload, but I also knew that I was not going into the house with him. In those terrifying seconds I thought I would start the car and try to get away, but when I slid into the front seat my heart constricted. The keys were not in the ignition. They were on the trunk floor beside the flats of plants.

'Don't move quickly. Don't scream out. Get the keys, open the door and get inside,' he said in a low tone that now sounded agitated. Instinctively, I felt that he was going to kill me, and an overwhelming feeling of foreboding flooded me. I glared into his eyes, and suddenly with every ounce of strength in me, I turned and ran down the long grassy slope towards my dogs. I wanted to die near someone who loved me. I could hear his heavy breathing and his footsteps thumping right behind me, but when I reached the gate just ahead of him, I struggled madly, but could not open it. As I thrashed at the metal latches, my beloved Bouvier, Soliel jumped over past my shoulder almost knocking me down, and attacked him. Our huge poodle joined the attack and in those few moments I raced back up the hill, ran inside and with trembling fingers dialed 9-1-1. I wanted to call my husband right after, but the 9-1-1 operator would not let me hang up until the officers arrived. Within minutes, two cruisers were on our property. A third cruiser drove up and the officer spoke with me at length, took down detailed notes and tried to calm me. Within moments, OPP cruisers had sealed off the road to the north and the south of us, and created a net.

An hour later or more, a shadow cruiser drove up and an officer knocked on the door. I gave him a second report. Before he left, he informed me that they had found the man walking up a neighbour's very long drive-way across the road from us, and that they had him in custody. The back of his shirt and jeans were ripped. He also quietly informed me that this was a far more 'serious' situation, and more dangerous than I was led to believe earlier.

'You were very lucky,' he added. 'He had a roll of duck-tape hidden on his upper arm beneath his sleeve.'

After I got off the phone with the 9-1-1 operator earlier, and before I called my husband, I quickly called two women who lived on country properties on either side of us and were at-home wives. The first neighbour was home and all was well, but the second who lived directly across the street from us, just north of our property, said that the same man had come to her door half an hour ago and had asked to use the phone for an emergency he'd muttered about, but she refused to let him. When I asked why she didn't call the police, thus endangering myself and others, she told me that she did day care for three children, and that if they told their parents police had been called, she could have lost them as customers. I was stunned. He could have gone to the back of her unfenced home, and God only knows what he could have done to her and to the children.

Every one of us has a responsibility to watch out for the safety of our children, our elders, our neighbours and our community. If you see something is amiss, or potentially unsafe, call 9-1-1 and report it, rather than risking endangerment.

Years ago, while I was researching a policing and safety project for my Criminology course, I learned that a dog is the best alarm system a home can have. Little did I know that I would one day learn that lesson on my own.