

Unmarked

Cassidy swung the truck back and forth across the two-lane road, ignoring the yellow lines at the center. It was 3 in the morning in the middle of nowhere, and she had been the only person on the road for what felt like hours. Sure, she didn't really know where she was anymore. But she was determined not to mind.

Ever since she got her driver's license a few months ago, cruising like this kept her sane on nights when she needed to get away. Nights like tonight, when Dad sweated beer and told her stepmom that he would blow her goddamn head off the next time she got home late. This was an empty threat because Dad was the kind of scowling, woozy drunk who talked a lot of shit from his recliner but could hardly haul himself out of it. At least, it was an empty threat until tonight...he hadn't had the brains to unlock his gun safe, but he wasn't too drunk to use his fists.

And what was Cassidy supposed to do – make Dad mad at her and get a black eye just for her bitch of a stepmom? No thanks. It was better to just run out of the house, climb in the rickety pickup truck, and drive among the cornfields until her stepmom's hollering was like a sound from a half-forgotten dream, and there was no one around to – wait, when had that car shown up?

Cassidy jerked back into the lane she was actually supposed to be in. Behind her was a pair of headlights, the blue-white kind that are so bright they half-blind you in your rearview mirror. *They're getting pretty close*, she thought – and then more lights joined them, spinning red and blue. *Shit.*

Shakily, she pulled off onto the side of the road. The cornstalks grew so untamed out here that they whispered against her passenger window. *Shit, I can't afford a ticket*, she thought. How many days working at the gas station would be blown on this? She watched through her mirror

as the cop parked behind her. His car was just a beige sedan, which was kind of weird. The man who arrived at her window didn't look that far out of high school, with a strong-jawed, tan face that reminded Cassidy of some of her farmboy classmates. He wore a dark blue cop hat like the kind they wear in movies.

She rolled her window down and couldn't help but say, "That don't look like a cop car."

He smiled blandly. "It's unmarked. You got a license? You look awful young."

"I'm sixteen," she snapped. She handed him her license even though she hated her picture in it; her hair was frizzy and she'd sweated off the only makeup Dad let her wear, so she *did* look like a kid.

The cop had black eyes like buttons, and they flipped leisurely from Cassidy's face to her ID several times. Every time he looked at her he looked a little longer. A strange feeling started to prickle in the back of her brain, just like the few seconds before she accidentally touched an electric fence.

"Unmarked car," she said, wetting her lips. "Is that for, like, being undercover?"

"Something like that."

"Then why are you wearing a uniform, if you're s'posed to be undercover?"

His eyes pinned her, and he said nothing. He was kind of a good-looking guy, and Cassidy tried to calm herself down – she was being paranoid, and sassing a cop wouldn't do her any good.

"Step out of the truck," he said. "You're asking a lot of questions for a girl who was recklessly swerving between lanes a few minutes ago."

Trembling, she did as he said, and the cop stood close to her, so close she barely had room to shut the door. As she looked at him, she realized something else...there was no badge on his black shirt.

Cassidy stared up into his smiling face, her head pounding. "Can I – can I get your badge number, sir? I –"

He laughed at her and clapped two large hands against the truck on either side of her head, and he was suddenly the biggest, scariest thing she'd ever seen, scarier even than her father. "Cassidy, babydoll," he crooned, like a boy at a dance. "You think you're a real smart girl, don't you?"

She knew he was probably about to kiss her, and probably do more than that – she had never been kissed before, but she'd spent so long wondering when it would happen that she felt like the post-kiss existence was on a different plane than the one she was on now. But she didn't *want* to go to that plane like this, and she started to cry, feeling stupid and sweaty and terrified.

"Cassidy," he whispered, looming closer to her.

She screamed, then, but the sound died in the night, eaten by the cornfields. And he laughed at her again, black eyes gleaming, and as he dragged her to the unmarked car Cassidy knew that nobody was coming to save her, nobody at all.

Rationale

This little story is obviously different from the vision of the Gothic with ghosts, decaying mansions, and maidens wandering the halls, but I think it can constitute Southern Gothic, which is a subgenre within the Gothic/Female Gothic. There are many Gothic stories – *Beloved*, for example – that take place in rural, isolated communities, as this one does. This allows for the heroines to be in even greater danger. Furthermore, the defining characteristic of the Female Gothic, in my opinion, is the way it explores specifically female anxieties. These anxieties continue to resonate with female readers of the 19th century and today, anxieties that ultimately come down to fear of patriarchal control. Almost all gothic heroines have to reckon with the loss of their freedom because of a man, whether it's an evil father figure, a dangerous suitor, or often both. The Female Gothic also sees evil come from within the home, an especially frightening concept because, for so much of history, that's been the space where women were confined. In this story, we see that Cassidy is also running, however temporarily, from a site of patriarchal danger. Unfortunately, she runs into an even greater danger in the form of a violent predator, which is another manifestation of the patriarchy and how it harms women. Gothic villains are often somewhat alluring to the heroines, which contributes to another Gothic theme – that heroines may be as anxious about being tempted by men as they are about men themselves. There are hints of that here, where Cassidy recognizes that the “cop” who stops her is reasonably attractive, but ultimately he is a figure to be feared. Her lack of experience with men adds another layer to the horror of the situation, as well. For those reasons, I think this story meets the standards of the Female Gothic tradition although it lacks the traditional tropes and aesthetics associated with it.