

Stories for Lipreading



THE MAN ON THE BUS by Sherri Turner.

[This text is read aloud at the beginning of this video:]
Welcome to Stories for Lipreading. If you haven't used our website before, we suggest you look at our 'How to Use' page before you begin. We hope you enjoy this story, which is called 'The Man on the Bus' by Sherri Turner.

The Man on the Bus by Sherri Turner.

The man sitting opposite on the bus was middle-aged and balding. His blue checked shirt had a white collar and he was chewing gum as though in time to an over-fast heartbeat. His left-hand neighbour was younger, scruffier, and the muffled beat of a music track drifted out from an ill-fitting earpiece.

'It could have been him,' Gemma thought. 'It could have been either of them.' She scanned the aisle, her gaze skipping past the women and children and settling on the men. It could have been any of them.

Gemma wanted to take in all their details, just in case.

"Yes, officer," Gemma wanted to be able to say. "He was medium build with light brown hair and one ear bigger than the other." Or "He was small and wiry, with a scar over his left eyebrow and a blue sweatshirt with a university logo."

"Thank you," the policeman would say. "We'll catch him for sure."

What she had actually said was, "I'm sorry. It was dark. He came at me from behind."

The policeman had looked at her with sympathy, but also an element of resignation.

"That isn't much to go on," he had said.

"Will you catch him?" Gemma had asked.

"It's hard to say, but without a description..." The sentence had tailed off but the meaning was quite clear.

That had been three months ago and this was only the third time that Gemma had left the house on her own. The first time she had got as far as the end of her street, seen a man on the other side of the road and gone straight home and locked the door. The second time she had reached the corner shop and been unable to hand the money to the male assistant, whom she had known for years. Maybe she had smiled at him once too often, she had thought. Maybe he had taken that as encouragement.

The victim support counsellor had told her that it would take time and it would get better eventually. But he was still out there, wasn't he?

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Gemma looked again at the man opposite. ‘Was it you?’ she wanted to ask. Instead, she got off at the next stop and started to run home.

She heard the footsteps behind her, quickening their pace in time with hers, but was too afraid to look back. So much for getting a good description – all she wanted to do was to get home.

Gemma was panting by the time she reached her front door. She fumbled for her keys in her bag. Why hadn’t she got them ready? Why hadn’t she run into a shop or knocked on a neighbour’s door like they told you to? Because it wasn’t safe, she thought, nowhere was safe anymore.

There was someone right behind her now; she could hear their breath, feel their presence. A scream built in her throat and she turned to face the young man from the bus, no more than a boy really.

“What do you want?” she yelled. “Why can’t you leave me alone?”

The boy shuffled back a few steps, looking at his feet.

“Sorry,” he said. “Didn’t mean to startle you. You dropped this. When you got off the bus.”

He held out his hand, clutching a leather purse. All her cards were in that; money, too.

Gemma snatched it from him and checked inside. It was all still there.

The young man had retreated to the end of the path, looking disheartened, and a wave of guilt swept over Gemma.

“Hey, wait,” she called. “Thank you for this. It was kind of you.”

“No problem,” he said.

“Can I give you something? For the trouble?” Gemma asked.

“Nah, thanks. Just doing the right thing.”

And he sauntered off down the road.

Gemma let herself in and locked and bolted the door behind her, her heart still in her throat. But the boy’s words rang in her ears.

He was just doing the right thing, as most people were. You couldn’t live your life in fear and it was time she learned to trust the world again. That would be the right thing for her. Taking a deep breath, she undid the bolt.

It was a start.