

LOWELL JAEGER

GETTING WHERE WE NEED TO GO

I've given them sixty seconds to ponder, and Taz is first to raise her hand. Think of an instance, I'd said, when a stranger delivered unto you an unexpected kindness. Eight "troubled teens" and I are sitting in a circle on metal folding chairs; we've just finished reading a poem about a woman in an airport who risks lending companionship to calm a panicked Palestinian grandmother. The grandmother is lost and alone, on the verge of causing a scene.

"I know how that old woman feels," Taz says. "Once I was stuck all by myself in a truck stop. I'd been driving for hours, the gas gauge said empty, and I discovered I'd left my purse at home." She tells us how she'd parked at the pumps and sat sobbing, her head braced against the steering wheel . . .

And she tells us how this old guy, a Good Samaritan pumping gas nearby, notices her distress, fills her tank, and hands her a twenty for good measure. Then he says, "Hope that gets you where you need to go, Sweetheart." Or something like that. Taz can't remember exactly what he'd said, but he was really, really nice, she says. She's "like amazed" at how nice the old guy was; it was "like awesome."

We all nod.

"He even stopped on the highway to offer help after the cops had pulled me over," Taz continues, rakes her hair back out of her eyes and looks around the circle.

Cops? I'm the only one in the circle who doesn't get it.

When finally I do comprehend, I want to laugh out loud, but the group's hushed, sympathetic faces cause me to rally restraint. Turns out Taz had stolen the car. Turns out the Good Samaritan was unwittingly aiding and abetting a runaway teenager crossing state lines. How ironic, I'm thinking, how absurd. How beside the point of the poem. But as I continue to listen to Taz and her compatriots, I begin to glimpse complexities I'd scarcely considered before.