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Panic

By Walter Levis



ou're a mom. You buy a smartphone. Your teenage daughter shows you how it works. Then you receive— from God knows where—an e-mail with the subject line: PANIC, THE ULTIMATE APP FOR WORRIERS.

You think, I'm not a "worrier," but—well... every mom worries... it's part of the job, with a daughter and a four-year-old son, worrying is...

required. Isn't it?

So you click, then click again, and a video begins. Sitting on the couch in your living room, you watch the video show a suburban home much like your own. Manicured lawn, two-car garage, a child's bicycle in the driveway. A voice-over starts.

"Most accidents can be avoided," the narrator says, deep voice booming. "Most dangers, defeated. Most problems, solved. But only if you have the right information."

You think, well, of course, information makes all the difference! That's why you've always read the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and have been a regular subscriber to the *Harvard Health Liter* and—now, of course, with the Internet...

But you lose your train of thought as the video shows the house's front door, a door much like your own. The camera zooms in; the door flashes red. Animated graphics begin: geometric shapes spinning into hideous monsters, faces full of teeth, eyes of fire. The flames spread across your phone's screen until—a crashing sound, a scream, and your cell phone screen goes blank. Then a sentence appears in deep red letters as a single violin plays a high-pitched tremolo, and the narrator says in a calm voice: "Find out what you should fear—because what you don't know *can* hurt you."

You repeat the phrase, surprised at your urge to argue with the narrator. What you don't know *can* hurt you? That's not right!

Meanwhile, the video cuts to the interior of a tidy kitchen: new appliances, granite countertops. The countertops are much like your own. The camera pauses over a set of matching knives, then the stove. In the background the violin plays a three-note melody that you vaguely recognize. A children's song? Quick cut to a bedroom: stuffed animals on the beds, a slow pan of shelves filled with children's books, a ceiling fan, a humidifier in the corner. The violin plays softly, very softly. The narrator whispers: "Do you know how many children have been crushed to death by bookshelves that were improperly installed? Are you aware of the fact that faulty ceiling fans can send a loose blade flying through the air? Have you ever wondered if humidifiers—left unattended—can overheat and explode?"

Exploding humidifiers? Hmm, you wonder about this as the video cuts to a family room much like your own. An attractive forty-something woman much like yourself sits hunched over a computer surrounded by piles of newspapers and magazines and reference books. The narrator, his voice growing more forceful, continues: "The answers are out there—somewhere."

Close-up of the frustrated woman's face: a deep frown, an ugly crease in her forehead, eyes red and tired, face puffy. She begins breathing heavily, growing more and more agitated. Voice-over continues: "PANIC. If you own the app, you will be free from the feeling. Get the most important piece of software in America, and never panic again."

The violin finally stops its haunting, childlike, three-note melody, and instead a trumpet plays an up-tempo marching song. The woman is seen standing with her arm outstretched, her cell phone pointed at the wall, then the ceiling, then the floor. The narrator continues, his voice brighter: "Based on the same Preemptive Action Technology (PAT) developed by the Department of Homeland Security to keep America safe from terrorists, our PANIC mobile app is the first of its kind to sense problems in the home before they occur. Just download, point, and relax. Our app tells you what's wrong—before there's a problem."

The video moves into a montage sequence: the woman talks to a well-groomed construction worker who gazes up at the fan; then a team of engineers examine the roof; next a squad of firemen crowd into the kitchen and look closely at the knives on the counter, then turn to the stove; a moment later, the living room comes into view. It's a wide shot showing almost all of the furniture covered in bubble wrap as a little boy, maybe four years old, about the same age as your own son, comes running into the room and bumps his head on the bubble-wrapped edge of the couch; unhurt, he looks at the camera, and smiles.

The woman reappears, trumpets swelling. Rested, relaxed, she smooths the pleats of a tight-fitting skirt as she sits on a padded chair, her arms comfortably crossed. Her husband enters. He wears a dark blue suit and carries a briefcase. He also carries a helmet. They kiss. He puts on his helmet. As he starts toward the door, a chunk of plaster falls from the ceiling. It crashes onto his helmet. He turns and smiles. The video ends. A blue-lettered sentence appears: [click here to download](#).

You click, wait, glancing at the living room walls. Is that paint peeling? Or is the wall cracking? And the edges of the coffee table—they seem... *sharp*.

Suddenly your phone vibrates. The PANIC app has downloaded. A red icon flashes. You're not sure what the icon represents. A box, a door with handles—oh, yes, the refrigerator! The app wants you to start with the refrigerator!

You step quickly into the kitchen, thinking that your daughter would be proud of how you figured out the icon. You point your phone at the fridge. A soft beeping starts. You wonder what it means. You look at the screen. The icon... what is the icon trying to say now? The shape of the box is... Open the door! The app wants you to open the refrigerator door!

Twenty minutes later you have thrown out three-quarters of the food in your refrigerator, and you are deeply impressed by the app's ability to read the bar code on food items, calculate nutritional content, and cross-reference the values with research on life expectancy in Scandinavian countries. Of course you want to live as long as those people in Sweden and Norway and Denmark!

Now, a small toilet-looking icon flashes. Danger in the bathroom—of course, those crazy cleaning supplies. You wonder which bathroom to do first, upstairs or downstairs? Is there a way to ask the app? You turn the phone sideways and tap the screen. Another icon appears. That's not what you want. What happened to the toilet? You want to get rid of the dangerous things in your bathroom, not this... what is it? A man. The icon is a man. You tap it and—unbelievable! Your husband's name. How did the app know your husband's name? You think, ah, the phone bill, it's in his name and somehow...

But your husband—why does the app think your husband... You suddenly recall the narrator's deep voice saying, "Find out what you should fear—because what you don't know *can* hurt you."

Your husband has been acting strangely. And his business trips! You rush upstairs to the bedroom where you throw open his closet, searching for evidence of infidelity. Meanwhile, your phone flashes another icon: a nose? What is the app telling you now? A nose stands for—smell his clothes! Yes! Yes!

You stumble over a pair of shoes and fall into the closet, grabbing at a handful of suits and shirts, pulling them off the hanger as you fall on your ass and press your face into the fabric of his clothes and—the horror!—you smell something sweet and flowery that must—oh, no!—must be the scent of another woman's perfume!

You burst into tears, and that's how your daughter finds you—crying, curled up on the floor of the closet, your phone in hand, your husband's clothes in a pile all around you. Unable to speak, you point to your phone, shaking your head, sniffing. Finally, you whisper, "This app... this app." Your daughter, obviously frightened and in a panic about finding you like this, grabs the phone out of your hand.

She looks at the screen. Her eyes focus. Her mouth twists. "It's a demo, Mom. Just a demo."